

# Fluid and imperfect ally positioning: Some gifts of queer theory

Vikki Reynolds

*You can hear a pin drop in the conference room where we are engaged in a queer, transgender and two-spirit workshop for community workers. A participant has just stolen our breath saying, "We've heard a lot about heterosexism, trans-phobia, and homophobia. When are we going to talk about heterophobia and the way that they hate us?" Although this is a common-enough experience, and the comment is not unexpected, our transgender presenter is visibly shaken. He gestures towards our gay presenter who looks pissed off. He turns towards me, stares me straight in the eye, inviting me to say what either of them could have said.*

*Following their lead, as an ally, I respond. "We're actually not going to talk about the way that you and I are oppressed as straight people. That's like talking about men being raped by women in a workshop addressing men's violence. It's uncomfortable looking at our power and privilege and the ways we participate in the oppression of queer, transgender and two-spirit people. I'm open to talk with you later, as this is our work as heterosexual people to do together. For now we're going to return to the agenda everyone has agreed on, understanding the different and often hidden ways that people who are queer, transgender and two-spirit are oppressed."*

*The presenters exhale, the room of people visibly relaxes. Despite the firm clarity of my voice, I am awash with shame. I have a sick-in-the-belly response to being listened to as an ally because of my heterosexual, white, cisgendered privilege. At the same time, people who are transgender, queer and racialised, who taught me what I know about this, are silenced.*

In activist cultures, an ally is a person who belongs to a group which has particular privileges, and who works alongside people from groups that are oppressed in relation to that privilege. The hope is to create change and increase social justice in relation to this oppression. I will

describe my understandings of ally work alongside queer, two-spirit and transgender communities, and particularly the gifts of queer theory in terms of attending to the fluidity of ally positions. I will outline the analysis of power that invites collective accountability for allies and the possibilities and hope that being imperfect allies offers. Finally, I will describe some of the limitations of ally work, and practices for holding onto hope when we fail to be in line with our commitments to being allies, and our responsibilities to each other to stay alive in our collective ally work.

Queer theory has brought many gifts to ally work, especially the idea that being an ally is a performance, something we do together across the differences of privilege that divide us. Queer theory frees us from taking on being an ally as a static identity, which could require being perfect and always getting it right. Queer theory invites fluidity, movement from the fixed and certain to the confused and unstable. This is exciting for ally work because it acknowledges that we can all be allies to each other in a constant flow depending on our contexts and relationships of power.

I am often situated as an ally in my work alongside queer, transgender and two-spirit people because I am heterosexual and hold cisgendered privilege. At other times, in response to class privilege or the privilege of growing up with money or gender privilege, or holding more power in the organisations we work in, queer, transgender and two-spirit persons may need to serve as allies to me. Categories are useful at times, but problematic, as I am never just a heterosexual person. I am always a white, Canadian-born,

able-bodied, Irish Catholic, working class woman, indivisible from the intersecting domains of privilege and oppression that I carry. Ally positioning must always attend to this fluid intersectionality within the same moments within the same conversations.

Activism has informed me to look for 'groundless solidarity', meaning that our ethics are not always tied to one location of oppression. No location is seen as the organising principle of all oppression in all situations; rather, the intersections and the gaps between our multiple locations in relation to privilege and oppression are tended to in a complex analysis. Sometimes we need to address sexism, sometimes it is more important to attend to racism, and in another interaction money privilege requires our attention. Of course, we can and must attend to more than one domain of power

*“We're actually not going to talk about the way that you and I are oppressed as straight people”*

at a time. 'Infinite responsibility' invites us to always attempt to be 'open to another other', to the multiplicity of ways that I might not be in accord in relation to my ethics; ways that I am not acting as an ally.

When serving in the role of ally it is important that I locate myself in my privilege. I have been respectfully referred to as a "queer-passing

straight girl" by members of queer and transgender communities. Early on, I find ways to publicly position myself in these privileged aspects of my identity. I do this by making reference to my male partner. It is important that I do not pass for a member of queer and transgender communities, as people may experience more affinity and safety than my privileges warrant. Later, people may feel that they have been lied to or that some truth has been withheld.

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to remind myself to be with care and accountability.

Becoming an ally is not a developmental process. I am always *becoming* an ally. I am continually being woken up to my locations of privilege. I didn't know I had gender privilege because I saw the world in the binary of men and women, and only read myself as a potential and actual victim of men's power. And yet all transgender people know that in the domain of gender I hold the privilege of being cisgendered. They know that I am safe going to a public bathroom, that I won't be questioned by other women, or followed in by security guards, that I won't be at risk for being seen as a person who has trespassed.

This unfolding awareness has required me to respond with new ways of being an ally. I am required to unveil more of my privilege and acknowledge that as a person who holds cisgendered privilege I never have to risk coming out to my family or my loved ones. I don't need to tell them, "I am not a woman, I'm a man". Butler speaks about the limits of acceptable speech, meaning the parameters of what can be said before there are repercussions for transgressing across lines backed up by power. With this speaking I would risk potentially losing my relationships of belonging in the world.

### Imperfect allies

In trainings or supervision, people sometimes reflect that what I am proposing in terms of infinite responsibility and groundless solidarity sounds exhausting. Becoming an ally can certainly be painful, uncomfortable and confusing. I try to remember that ally relationships are always more risky for the oppressed person. When we experience oppression we accept allies because we need them, not because it's safe or we have good reasons to trust each other. We invite good-enough allies despite past acts that were not trustworthy, as imperfect allies are required when the stakes are high and risk is near. This fluidity makes more room for imperfect allies, momentary allies, and moment-to-moment alliances, which are flawed and not safe, yet required and of use. Challenging the binary of ally/oppressor, these imperfect alliances bring some trust for some solidarity and for more accountable ally relationships to begin to grow.

If I am not in an ally position I am going to risk replicating oppression. I was

trained up in a racist and homophobic society. If I don't take an overt, intentional, active position against racism and against homophobia I will replicate them. The hard work of trying to be an ally, trying to "do the right thing" as Spike Lee would say, is worth the effort. The risk of transgressing and enacting racism, homophobia, and other oppressions is ever near. I hold close a useful humility that when I have replicated oppression and abused power marginalised people have needed allies against me.

### Limitations of allies

The limitations of allies are enormous and important to hold alongside our willingness to act. As allies, we're not the ones who shoulder the burden. Allies need to stay ever mindful that the potential fall out or backlash for our actions as allies will fall on the oppressed people, not us. This invites a caution to take actions when asked.

Allies who are harmed in this difficult work can begin to identify as the oppressed, which is both seductive and disastrous. Some heterosexual people who hold cisgendered privilege respond to the discomfort of having homophobia and transphobia discussed by claiming that they are being oppressed or attacked for even having to hear these oppressions named. Dealing with this pain and hurt is the work of the ally, to move in and not leave this situation to queer, two-spirit and transgender people. This is difficult and often unsafe work. However, the hardships of the positions of the ally aren't the same as the consequences and real harms to queer, two-spirit and transgender people experiencing this backlash. I hold close this unsettling and discomfiting knowing.

Allies are often accused of being too political by people holding privileges they do not want to be responsible for or accountable to. I am often identified as political, a political therapist, or a political activist. Of course, all helping professionals are political, dealing in

relationships of power. All positions are political, and neutrality often goes uncontested while being a profoundly political position.

Potential allies often share their shaming silences with me: times they did not step up or speak out. While I invite accountability for times we side with neutrality or fear, I discern these times from events in which it is not safe enough to speak out. Being an ally requires strategising, and at times it is more useful to survive events, and help oppressed people get through than to publicly challenge hate. For example, challenging a drunk and angry man on a bus shouting homophobic words may not be the most useful act of the ally. Accompanying the persons attacked, and inviting solidarity from other riders may be a more prudent response. Often members of oppressed groups speak of these moments in which

they remained silent as evidence of internalised homophobia. I invite a wider reading of power. Defending against attack is not siding with hate, and the responsibility again is more easily and safely taken up by allies in these events.

Allies risk siding with oppression and disrespect when fear of being homophobic, transphobic or racist silences them from inviting queer, two-spirit and transgender

people to accountability. I have invited transgender men, gay men and two-spirit men to account for negative judgments of women. This is always hard to do and requires skill and moral courage, but more importantly being in relationships. As allies alongside each other we need to resist oppression on all fronts, even when we are performing it.

As allies, we learn on the backs of others: there is no innocent position. I acknowledge I will never "get it" – never know fully despite queer, transgender and two-spirit people's many efforts to educate me on the realities of their lives. I work to stay humble, willing to learn and open to critique.

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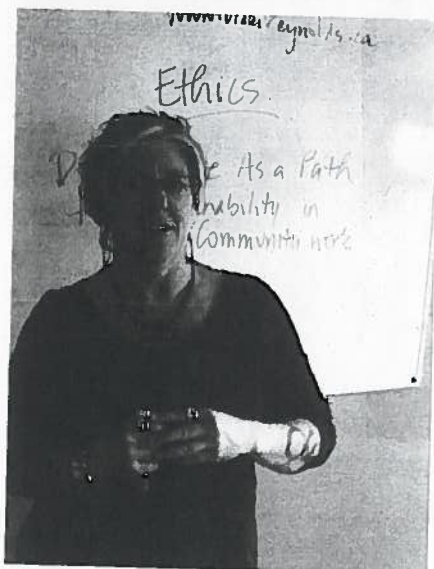
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Vikki Reynolds is a therapist/activist interested in liberating justice, resistance, and solidarity from the margins of our work into the ethical centre. Vikki's therapeutic experience includes work with refugees and survivors of torture, mental health and substance abuse counsellors, and working alongside transgendered and queer communities. She supervises therapy and community worker teams and activists. Vikki teaches at Vancouver Community College, the University of British Columbia and with City University's Masters' Program, and received the Dean's award for Distinguished Instruction. Vikki's PhD dissertation is entitled *Doing Justice as a Path to Sustainability in Community Work* ([www.vikkireynolds.ca](http://www.vikkireynolds.ca)).