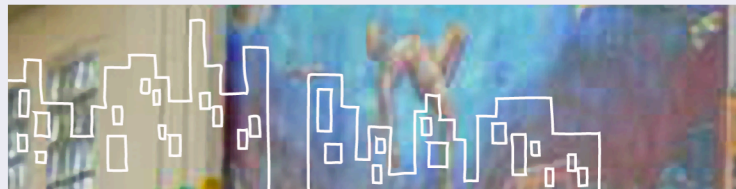


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**“The Silence Itself is Enough of a Statement”:  
Unintended Consequences of Silence  
as an Awareness-Raising Strategy**

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The strategy of silence for voice, as seen in the Day of Silence, deploys silence in order to draw attention to the ways in which an individual or group has been silenced and to establish possibilities for voice. The Day of Silence is a nation-wide day of action aimed at addressing anti-LGBTQ bias and harassment in schools. This ethnographic study of a high school gay-straight alliance (GSA) club examines the unintended consequences of silence as an awareness-raising strategy during events related to the Day of Silence and how students and teachers handle these consequences. Silence makes students more defenseless in the face of verbal harassment, makes it more difficult to engage in discussion with others of opposing views, and makes it more challenging for teachers to lead their classes and for students to learn. What remains unheard at MacArthur High are the institutional silences LGBTQ students experience when they find themselves not represented in the curricula and they find critical discussion of heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity absent from classroom and school discourse. While the Day of Silence calls for students to engage in intentional silences in order to raise awareness about anti-LGBTQ bias, it does not necessarily lead others to take more responsibility for their ignorance or to address silences around gender and sexuality. This study makes suggestions for implementing change regarding silences of LGBTQ issues in the curricula, pedagogy, and schooling practices.

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*It is a quite different process to be silent than it is to be unheard.  
One may speak and simply not be listened to, understood, or taken seriously.  
Thus, even speech is structured by always already existent relations of power.*

- Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence*

## **Introduction**

Every year, in schools across the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students and their allies participate in the National Day of Silence in an effort to raise awareness of anti-LGBTQ bullying, harassment, and bias in their schools, yet the potential impact of and the unintended consequences of their use of silence as a method for raising consciousness remain uncertain. The strategy of silence used in this context might highlight, but cannot address, the institutional silences LGBTQ students experience when they find their lives and experiences not included in class materials and they find critical discussion of heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity and femininity absent from school discourse. This three-year ethnographic study of a high school gay-straight alliance (GSA) club examines the unintended consequences of silence as an awareness-raising strategy during events related to the Day of Silence and how students and teachers handle them. How does engaging in silence, as a strategy to raise awareness of anti-LGBTQ bias on the Day of Silence, impact students' well being, safety, and learning? As I will show, silence makes students more defenseless in the face of verbal harassment, makes it more difficult to engage in discussion with others of opposing views, and makes it more challenging for teachers to lead their classes and for students to learn. Besides silence, what other ways might we envision raising students' and teachers' awareness of homophobia and transphobia, bullying and harassment related to gender and sexuality, and anti-LGBTQ bias? In this paper, I will first discuss ways silence has been theorized, juxtaposed

against voice, and structured in school settings. Next, I will introduce the site and context for this research as well as provide an overview of my methodology. Then, I will offer a discussion of some students' experiences of the Day of Silence and the strategies they use to address anti-LGBTQ bias in their school. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting ways schools can focus on the institutional silences of LGBTQ people's experiences and the epistemologies of ignorance that support heterosexism and homophobia in public high schools.

## **Literature Review**

Silence, and in particular theorizing about silence, takes various meanings and forms. As philosopher of education Nicholas Burbules explains, "Silence can be voluntary and self-imposed, or it can be the result of external pressures and constraints; silence can be expressive, or it can be empty, unreadable; silence can be temporary, situational, or it can represent a consistent, even pathological pattern; silence can signify withdrawal from a conversation, or it can be an indicator of attentive, thoughtful listening" (2004, xxiv). Silence has commonly been thought of as marking an absence—an absence of voice, of votes, and of visibility. In this way, silence can be mistaken for tacit consent when an absence of vocal objections or protest, an absence of opposing votes, or an absence of explicit representation is interpreted as symptomatic of participants' indifference and complacency. Feminist poet and scholar Adrienne Rich counters this trend in her poem *Cartographies of Silence* (1978):

The technology of silence  
 The rituals, etiquette  
 the blurring of terms  
 silence not absence  
 of words or music or even  
 raw sounds  
 Silence can be a plan  
 rigorously executed  
 the blueprint of a life

It is a presence  
 it has a history a form  
 Do not confuse it  
 with any kind of absence

Along these lines, silence has also been theorized as presence—in some cases a scripted presence (Pollock 2004) while in other cases an active presence (Saville-Troike 1985, 10).

Silence as an active presence refers to its role in communication, that is, as it occupies the spaces in between sounds and utterances, in pauses, and in the pragmatics of everyday conversation. On the other hand, silence as a scripted presence—in its relation to race talk and white silence—can work to naturalize racial disparities, as anthropologist of education Mica Pollock argues. Pollock asserts, “Both our silence and our routine *answers* about race-group achievement . . . play a covert role in naturalizing such patterns as American ‘common sense’” (2004, 149). Being silent in certain situations can help reproduce the status quo, avoiding or ignoring the inconvenient realities of social injustice, privilege, and oppression. For example, white teachers and students can be silent about white privilege and racial injustice (Tatum 1994, Case and Hemmings 2005), in effect perpetuating the status quo. Katherine Schultz describes the ways school participants collaborate to produce silence “by avoiding talk about difficult topics and by reaching agreement quickly, masking dissenting opinions” (2003, 131). Such silences work to reproduce what Charles Mills (2007) has called “the epistemology of white ignorance” referring to the privileged social suppression of pertinent knowledge about race, whiteness, and power. As demonstrated in this study, silences about gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues reproduce institutional silences as well as entrenched epistemological ignorance regarding heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity.

Silence can be both a manifestation of domination and an act or practice of resistance (Robinson 1997, Katz 1999, Roberts 2000, Motsemme 2004). Silence can operate as resistance

when someone refuses to confess or expose oneself, protests an injustice by taking a vow of silence, or chooses not to respond to a teacher's or other authority figure's question. By refusing to share valuable information with others, by bringing awareness to one's silence, and by refraining from participating in speech or verbal communication, one can engage in silence as a strategy of resistance. Critical and feminist anthropologists recognize that common forms of silence – refusals to speak, avoidances of topics, and gaps in information – in research participants' narratives may be silences of strategic resistance (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Moore 1988, Behar and Gordon 1995). As Carmen Luke has illustrated, refusals to speak are strategic silences and a powerful political means of resistance and affirmation of identity (1994, 224).

Silence has often been juxtaposed against voice and in particular, voice as a means of empowerment. Voice as a means of empowerment has been a key part of feminist theory and practice as well as historical movements for civil rights in the United States—such as the gay liberation and the women's liberation movements of the 1960's and 1970's. Voice has been fundamental to practices of consciousness-raising and to theory building based on speaking from experiences (Luke 1994, 211). Part of this conceptualization relies on the notion of voice as the counterpart to silence—the oppressive force working against the liberation of voices. Being silenced is taken to be evidence of workings of power. Strategies of resistance include listening for, amplifying, and reclaiming marginalized and silenced voices as well as naming one's identity, location or position, and experience.

Another such strategy, silence for voice, is seen in the Day of Silence and deploys silence in order to draw attention to the ways in which an individual or group has been silenced and to establish possibilities for voice. As this study shows, addressing anti-LGBTQ bias and harassment in schools is not as easy as granting LGBTQ students voice. *Their voices and their*

*silences need to be heard*. Teachers and schooling practices more generally need to construct discursive spaces to address institutional silences regarding gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues.

This examination of the various meanings of silence is not intended to reinforce false dichotomies like speech/silence, voice/silence, resistance/silence, or action/silence. As Foucault ([1978] 1990) has shown us, silence is a part of discourse, and arguably, silence is also a part of speech, voice, resistance, and action. Foucault's theorization of the confession as the transformation of desire into spoken words and discourse illustrates the complex interrelatedness of sex, desire, and notions of sin with silence and discourse—both authorized and unauthorized. Foucault writes, “There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” ([1978] 1990, 27). Drawing on this perspective, I ask: Who can and cannot speak? Which discourses are authorized? Who can and cannot silence others? What are the topics about which one can and cannot be silent?

To address such questions, a useful methodological approach is the ethnography of communication, as named by sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1964) and shaped by generations of scholars who have followed him (Gumperz and Hymes [1972] 1986, Bauman and Sherzer 1975, Saville-Troike 1982, Heath 1983). Such an approach asks: What can be said when, where, by whom, to whom, in what manner, and in what particular circumstance? This line of inquiry considers who may not speak about what and in what situations. While institutional silences, or

what Deborah Youdell (2010, 87) calls “the silenced familiar”—silences in the formal discourses of schooling, become naturalized and taken as normal, this methodological approach affords close examination of the effects of such silences as well as the contexts in which such silences are generated, maintained, and sometimes even critically addressed. Attending to the contexts, participants, and practices of silence allows us to address Megan Boler’s argument that “different voices carry different weight; some voices are heard better than others; some voices are foreclosed before even speaking” (2005, 11). This study takes the ethnography of communication as a methodological starting point and further examines how certain voices and silences are rendered unheard, unrecognizable, and unspeakable by relations of power endemic to schooling processes and practices.

Social-structural features of schooling limit and enable voices (Luke 1994). Moreover, “there is a loud silence in curricula that indicates to all students that there are some people in the school who do not deserve to be spoken about” (Mayo 2004, 40). Reflective of public silencing (Fine and Weis 1993), institutional silences on heterosexism, homophobia, and hegemonic masculinity and femininity make schools hostile places for LGBTQ youth as they are simultaneously harmed by official silence and harassing talk. Cris Mayo has shown that policies and conduct codes aimed at regulating individual speakers of words are ineffective in generating considerable change regarding homophobia in schools because they focus on reactive rules targeting individual actions rather than large-scale changes in curricular or social practices, or by encouraging learning and fostering community based on respect for difference (2004, 34). MacArthur High,<sup>1</sup> the site for this study, further illustrates Mayo’s claim; according to both state law and school policy, the school should regulate hate speech and discrimination, yet LGBTQ students experience anti-LGBTQ bias and harassment regularly. While the Day of Silence calls

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the school and all participants have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of those involved.

for students to engage in intentional silences in order to raise awareness about anti-LGBTQ bias, it does not necessarily call on others to take more responsibility for their ignorance or to address silences around gender and sexuality. Cris Mayo writes about the Day of Silence, “I worry that the lack of speech allows for a queer-sanctioned ‘homophobia as usual’ and allows too many people to dodge behind silence as if nothing were happening” (2004, 45). Indeed, the data presented in the present study demonstrate that rather than highlighting such epistemologies of ignorance, silence as a strategy allows teachers and students to remain ignorant of the heterosexism and homophobia structuring their classroom and school discourse.

The Day of Silence, in the case of MacArthur High, reflects a methodological problem of addressing epistemological silences through literal silences (Van Manen 1990). That is, the Day of Silence represents an attempt to raise awareness of the unspeakable—the things one must not utter and the things one may choose to remain ignorant of: sex, sexuality, and gender—through the absence of speaking, or taking vows of silence for one eight-hour school day. As this study shows, engaging in silence at MacArthur High on the Day of Silence worked to reproduce these institutional silences while opening LGBTQ students up to more verbal harassment. What remains *unheard* at MacArthur High are the institutional silences LGBTQ students and teachers experience when they find themselves not represented in the curricula and they find critical discussion of heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity and femininity absent from classroom and school discourse. This result warns us of Audre Lorde’s ([1979] 1981) call that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” That is, using silence—one of many tools of oppression—to draw awareness to institutional silences will not dismantle the deeply entrenched system of heterosexism or bring about genuine change in schools. For bell hooks, the

struggle is “to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (1989, 6). Indeed, the LGBTQ youth at MacArthur High School also face this struggle.

## **Research Questions**

This study asks: How does engaging in silence, as a strategy to raise awareness of anti-LGBTQ bias on the Day of Silence, impact students’ safety, well-being, and learning? Besides using silence as our method, what other ways might we approach school-wide activities to educate students and teachers about homophobia and transphobia, bullying and harassment related to gender and sexuality, and anti-LGBTQ bias?

## **Context**

The site for this study is a public urban high school that I call MacArthur High located in California’s San Francisco Bay Area. MacArthur High has a total enrollment of approximately 3,500 students in grades 9 through 12. The school’s racial demographics are approximately 30% White, 30% African American, 15% Latino, 10% Asian and Asian Pacific Islander, 14% Mixed, and less than 1% Native American<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, 30% of the students at MacArthur High qualify for free or reduced price meals<sup>3</sup>, which indicates low household income or socio-economic status.

My broader research project includes the examination of the ways classroom discourses frame gender, sex, and sexuality as personal and private and the classroom as public, thus shaping notions and contestations of binary gender and sexuality norms. Both the form and

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics taken from the school’s website.

<sup>3</sup> California Department of Education website, October 2007 School Level Free and Reduced Price Meal Eligibility Data File. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/cw/filesafdc.asp>

content of classroom interactions, teacher instructions, and curricular materials work to reproduce binary gender and sexuality while concurrently opening up generative possibilities for learning in reconfigurations of norms and in ambivalences. My dissertation explores how language is used to convey norms and boundaries regarding gender and sexuality and how students and teachers negotiate their identities, unequal power relations, and moments of breaches in everyday social interactions at school. This paper focuses on the unintended consequences of the use of silence by LGBTQ students and teachers during the Day of Silence at MacArthur High.

The socio-political context and location of this site in the San Francisco Bay Area, a region known for its liberal politics, its history of activism, as well as its visible LGBTQ community, are arguably more LGBTQ-friendly than other places in the United States. California state law and this particular district's policies aim to protect LGBTQ students. California Assembly Bill 537, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, protects students from discrimination and harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. This school district also has an anti-slur policy that includes protections from inappropriate language, slurs, and insults against one's sex, actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, and gender identity. For LGBTQ youth at MacArthur High, state and district policy as well as the administration and school board are largely supportive of their rights to learn in a safe environment at school. The conditions for having a 'queer-friendly school,' or a school where homophobia and transphobia could be addressed in a critical way, appear to be present. Yet students' experiences paint a different picture.

Students at MacArthur High still report significant amounts of bullying and harassment related to gender expression and sexuality, as well as along other lines of difference. The

California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) (2008) found that at this high school 16% of male and 10% of female ninth grade students had been harassed or bullied two or more times during the past twelve months for being gay or because someone thought they were<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, 13% of eleventh grade females responding to the CHKS (2008) reported they had been harassed two or more times during the past twelve months because of their gender.

Similarly, the students I interviewed and talked with over the years shared numerous stories of abuse that span a range of experiences like backhanded joking comments, isolated incidents of harassment, and recurring forms of bullying and name-calling. LGBTQ students at this school suffer what one described as “endless harassment, never-ending ridicule, and non-stop verbal abuse.” Students in the gay-straight alliance have also experienced forms of intimidation including threats of corrective rape, that is, threats that they will be raped in order to turn them straight. Some have heard their classmates make comments about gay bashing, while others have been specifically told they are not welcome at this school. Two boys who identify as gay had water bottles thrown at them, were shoved to the ground, and were stalked by a group of boys threatening to beat them up at a school dance. Students report being called names like “faggot” and “dyke” and hearing “that’s so gay” or “no homo” at least once every class period.

In the case of MacArthur High School, current state laws and school policies that seek to protect LGBTQ youth are ineffective in creating a safe school environment for LGBTQ youth to learn and develop, much less acquire the skills they need to graduate. Schools are often not supportive environments for *all* students’ social and emotional development as gendered and sexual young adults. Students’ experiences of symbolic and physical violence at school – a place where they must acquire the skills necessary to graduate and possibly to continue onto higher

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<sup>4</sup> This statistic is higher than the California Safe Schools Coalition’s estimate that “7.5 percent of California students report being harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation” (2004).

education – show that there are endemic social and structural practices embedded in the daily lives of schooled children that reproduce forms of violence and marginalization.

Students and teachers at MacArthur High work to change school climate and challenge homophobia through multiple strategies. There is a student club, the gay-straight alliance (GSA) which works to implement many of the strategies and provide a safe space for students. From 2007 to 2010, the gay-straight alliance at MacArthur High consisted of approximately twenty to forty students with varying degrees of involvement. Typically, anywhere from two to twelve students make up its core group, which includes members who regularly attend meetings as well as plan and participate in GSA-sponsored activities. An additional dozen students show up to events and meetings occasionally throughout the year, while a total of forty students belong to the club's Facebook group and are on the email listserv. The gay-straight alliance makes up a small portion (1%) of the student population at MacArthur High, and the visibility and presence of the GSA club in this school is limited. For the gay-straight alliance, some important days for raising visibility and awareness of LGBTQ students' experiences include National Coming Out Day and the National Day of Silence. Among other activities, the GSA has held events in the courtyard at lunch, set up tables and signs with information, put up a Coming Out wall with students' and teachers' coming out stories, and taken vows of silence to increase awareness of LGBTQ issues at MacArthur High School.

During the Day of Silence, students and teachers take vows of silence to raise awareness of anti-LGBTQ bias in their school. The Day of Silence is a national day of action sponsored by GLSEN—the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. As GLSEN explains in their *Day of Silence Organizing Manual*, “Silence is used as a tactic to provide a space for personal reflections about the consequences of being silent and silenced. The Day of Silence is an effort

that can raise awareness on this issue, prompting people to talk and think about it” (2009, 2).

This study examines what happens when these silences are *not heard* and when methods such as dialogue and voice are missing from efforts to raise awareness of anti-LGBTQ bias.

## **Methodology**

Over the course of three school years, from fall 2007 through spring 2010, I conducted an ethnographic study with the GSA at MacArthur High School. I chose to work with the gay-straight alliance at MacArthur High because I was interested in the larger student-led social movement to address anti-LGBTQ bias in schools. The GSA at this high school is led primarily by students and offers community and support for youth who are questioning their gender or sexual identity; for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, or queer; for gender non-conforming, genderqueer, intersex, and transgender students; for straight allies and friends; for children with LGBTQ parents; and for any students who are concerned about LGBTQ issues, homophobia, and transphobia in their school.

During the first year of my fieldwork, there was a teacher who was actively involved in leading the club and supporting the GSA’s student-leaders. She left MacArthur High School after that year, and the following two years the GSA had minimal teacher involvement. During these last two years, the students in the GSA were largely on their own as far as leadership and direction were concerned, and they started to draw on me more as a resource and to ask for my support in various tasks and projects. From 2008 to 2010, I was typically the only adult present at GSA meetings and activities, but there were a few supportive teachers who would sign forms, advise the student-leaders on club matters, and help the students address issues related to homophobia and transphobia in their school.

The students in the GSA allowed me to sit in on their lunchtime meetings, invited me to their events, utilized me as a resource in education and in LGBTQ organizing as well as an adult chaperone for field trips, included me and my help in their publicity campaigns and outreach efforts, participated in interviews with me, and answered my questions and engaged me in ongoing conversations about their experiences at school. I engaged in participant-observation during gay-straight alliance meetings, activities, and all-school events. Some events included assemblies put on by the GSA, bake sales at lunch to raise money, film festivals, classroom panels where students from the GSA were invited to speak throughout the school, and extracurricular student club fairs. Weekly meetings for the GSA were held during lunchtime and consisted of tackling business matters, planning upcoming events, bringing in guest speakers, designing logos and visibility materials, sharing information learned at conferences and local resources for LGBTQ youth, and generally just chatting and hanging out.

The data set for this study consists of fieldnotes of my observations, interview audio-recordings and transcripts, and artifacts of visibility materials and logos designed by the GSA. I collected artifacts such as signs, t-shirts and sweatshirts, placards, and fliers that offered information about the GSA, that addressed homophobia and bias, and that were intended to designate safe spaces and allies for LGBTQ students. Sometimes during the class period after lunch, I walked around the school with students putting up fliers for the GSA. These walks provided an opportunity to talk with the students more individually about their experiences in school as well as to note the location and status of the GSA's visibility materials (*i.e.*, still posted, ripped down, posted over, etc.). More often than not, the fliers we posted were torn down within the same hour, which contributed to the institutional silence of LGBTQ clubs and people at MacArthur High that echoed with each rip of paper.

I conducted one-on-one and group interviews with twenty students involved in the GSA; interviews usually took the length of a forty-minute lunch hour. I developed open-ended interview protocols, audio recorded, and transcribed each interview. Interview participants included a group of students who identified across a range of sexualities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, straight, and pansexual or omnisexual<sup>5</sup>, and a spectrum of gender identities including boy, girl, transgender<sup>6</sup>, and genderqueer<sup>7</sup>. They also represented a group of students who were questioning and out to varying degrees with their families, friends, and schoolmates concerning their gender identities and sexualities. The racial and ethnic makeup of the interview sample reflected that of the GSA, that is, primarily white, with some of Jewish ethnicity, as well as a number of youth of mixed Asian, Black, Latino, and white heritage. Some students identified themselves as Brazilian<sup>8</sup>, Black and Puerto Rican, and Japanese Latina.

I conducted both formal and informal interviews: formal interviews were audio recorded and participants were given a list of questions they might be asked, while informal interviews occurred as we walked around school putting up fliers and as we chatted during lunch. Informal interviews were not audio recorded, but I took notes and wrote down the majority of the

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<sup>5</sup> The terms “pansexual” and “omnisexual” are used interchangeably to refer to sexual orientation characterized by attraction to people regardless of their gender identity or biological sex. The prefixes “pan” and “omni” are intended to get past the essentializing and dichotomizing prefix of “bi” as in “bisexual” which indicates an attraction to both men and women. One pansexual student explains, “Pansexuality is when you don’t judge someone based on gender binaries. A lot of pansexuals base their attraction off of personality rather than biological sex. A lot of pansexuals refer to themselves as gender-blind, because they don’t care if you’re transsexual, transvestite, hermaphrodite, intersex, genderqueer, or male or female. Pansexuality acknowledges that range of gender identities and says, ‘yeah, I’m attracted to those people too. It doesn’t actually matter where you fit on the gender spectrum.’”

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the term “transgender” when the informants identify themselves as such. “Transgender” is an umbrella term to refer to a range of identities and practices that cross over, cut across, and move between socially constructed sex/gender boundaries of male/female. This is not to be confused with the term “transsexual,” which refers to a “culturally and historically specific transgender practice/identity through which a transgendered subject enters into a relationship with medical, psychotherapeutic, and juridical institutions in order to gain access to certain hormonal and surgical technologies for enacting and embodying itself” (Stryker [1994] 2006, 255, note 2).

<sup>7</sup> I use the term “genderqueer” as the students do to refer to their genders as fluid phenomena, experienced and expressed differently day to day and across a lifespan; as having both feminine and masculine qualities; as entirely outside of the binary gender system, that is, neither male nor female; and as “queer” implies, an intentional blurring and thwarting of boundaries, in this case, concerning gender.

<sup>8</sup> The student who identifies as Brazilian strongly insists on the Portuguese spelling of her home country and ethnicity with an ‘s’ as opposed to an Anglicized ‘z.’

conversation immediately afterward. In total, I did twelve one-on-one interviews: six formal and six informal. I also conducted two group interviews: one that was formal and one that was informal and spontaneously emerged during a meeting when the agenda items were sparse and we moved onto a conversation regarding my research and my questions. At this particular meeting a dozen students were present and participated in this group interview. The other group interview consisted of four students and one teacher. Some students participated in both an individual interview and a group interview, which meant that the total number of students who participated in these fourteen interviews was twenty.

Lastly, I conducted individual interviews with four teachers who have been involved with the GSA to varying degrees. The first teacher I interviewed was directly involved in leading the club during the first year of my fieldwork, while the other three teachers were more loosely affiliated with the GSA, the students in the club, and efforts to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues within MacArthur High. These teachers supported the GSA's activities by putting up visibility posters, helping to silk-screen GSA t-shirts, buying and wearing GSA t-shirts and sweatshirts, and serving as allies to the LGBTQ youth.

In addition to my observations in the GSA, I also regularly observed three freshman social studies classes at MacArthur High during the 2009-2010 school year. These courses specifically focused on issues of identity, community, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, and social justice more broadly speaking. The curricula for these freshman seminars also addressed issues related to adolescence, included sex education, and sought to empower youth to make informed decisions for themselves. These courses represent the majority of this high school's curricular and pedagogical approach to the study of gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues. The courses I observed were required in three of the smaller sections of the school,

which meant that approximately 20% of the total student body took one of these three courses during their freshman year. That is, approximately 170 freshmen enrolled in each of these three courses each year, bringing the total number of students who have taken a freshman social studies course focusing on gender and sexuality to about 700. Eighty percent of the student body at MacArthur High is not required to take a course that addresses gender, sexuality, or LGBTQ issues. Based on my ethnographic observations, these three courses differed in their pedagogical approaches to the study of gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ-related material and in the amount of class time they dedicated to these topics. One teacher squeezed in three days of discussion about LGBTQ-related current events toward the end of the spring semester, another teacher ended the sexuality and LGBTQ unit two weeks before she had originally planned because she thought her students were not mature enough to handle discussing the topic, while a third teacher, Ms. Feinberg, stuck to her twelve-week gender, sex, sexuality, and LGBTQ curriculum despite students' and parents' protests.

From my ethnographic fieldwork in these freshman social studies courses, one teacher I got to know well was Ms. Feinberg. I interviewed her and observed her teach two to four hours a day two or three times a week for the course of the 2009-2010 school year, and I video and audio recorded her class for a combined total of forty-four hours. As I mentioned above, she dedicated twelve weeks of the spring semester of to an extensive gender, sex, and sexuality unit, which brought in guest speakers, drew from a range of texts, and incorporated various modes of classroom learning activities. Ms. Feinberg also served as the GSA's faculty sponsor during the last year of my study. Additionally, I collected samples of students' class-work and assignments, and for this paper I draw on students' written notes, questions, and responses to the GSA panels that took place in their freshman social studies course.

My positionality as a researcher in this setting was that of an outsider, in that I was not part of the school community in any way except as a graduate student conducting research. I have taught and tutored students for over a decade, so my position as an educator is always at the forefront of what I do, yet I made a deliberate effort not to intervene in students' work, academic or otherwise. As a queer woman, my involvement with the GSA was a political move, and the students knew I had started a GSA in college and remained politically active in local and national LGBTQ rights efforts. My status as a white, upper middle-class, able-bodied, and native English speaking academic from the nearby university marked my undeniable privilege. From my perspective, my age represented the largest social distance between me and the youth. I started this research at the age of thirty, and I intentionally dressed down, wearing casual clothing like cargo pants, t-shirts, and hooded sweatshirts, so as to minimize my age and not to be mistaken as a teacher or authority figure. Nevertheless, no efforts to 'blend in' would have been successful, and thus, I embraced the awkwardness and discomfort that sometimes accompanies participant-observation in communities from which we, as researchers, do not come.

## **Discussion**

### **An Introduction to the Day of Silence**

For gay-straight alliances across the United States, the National Day of Silence marks a special day during April when students and teachers take vows of silence to bring attention to anti-LGBTQ name-calling, bullying, and harassment in schools. In 2008, over 8,000 middle schools, high schools, colleges, and universities participated in the Day of Silence<sup>9</sup>. The Day of

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.dayofsilence.org/content/getinformation\\_faq.html](http://www.dayofsilence.org/content/getinformation_faq.html)

Silence in April of 2010 marked the fifteenth year that this annual event had been held since its founding in 1996 at the University of Virginia.

At MacArthur High School, the Day of Silence has included a number of different events and activities aimed at raising awareness of homophobia and transphobia, the experiences of LGBTQ youth, and bullying and harassment related to sexuality and gender. Some years the GSA has held a large event in the school courtyard during lunchtime and open to the whole school. During such events, students in the GSA set up tables and visibility posters, wear many different rainbow items of clothing and jewelry, decorate their faces and bodies with rainbow makeup, sell t-shirts and baked goods that they have made to raise money, give out buttons asking their fellow students to refrain from saying “that’s so gay” to mean that something is stupid, and quietly hand out information about the Day of Silence. During these events, students communicate with each other by writing on paper, dry erase boards, or their arms; by texting on their cell phones; as well as by using exaggerated gestures, facial expressions, and American Sign Language. In 2010, the students in the GSA opted not to hold such a large-scale event at lunch, but to have a Breaking the Silence event with any students who wanted to come at the end of the school day. This event provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their experiences and to share with each other as they broke their vows of silence together after a long day of silence and the isolation often associated with it. The Breaking the Silence event consisted of a small gathering of a dozen students who shared in a collective scream, told stories about their experiences that day, and hung out together in the nearby park after school.

Every year, in the weeks before and after the Day of Silence, students in the GSA put together brief classroom announcements and full-class educational panels. Done before the actual Day of Silence, classroom announcements are intended to get the word out about the

upcoming day, about taking vows of silence, and about how others can participate. Such announcements usually take about five minutes and are carried out by students in the GSA in classrooms across the school. The full-class educational panels, on the other hand, usually last the entire fifty-minute class period and are led by four or five students from the GSA. During these panels, students in the GSA lead their peers in various awareness-raising activities, present information such as statistics on bullying and name-calling as well as on incidents of suicide and murder related to anti-LGBTQ bias in schools, and sometimes offer more personal accounts such as their coming-out stories and their experiences with homophobia and transphobia. The students ask their teachers if they would be interested in having the GSA come speak to their class, and teachers contact the GSA leaders to make arrangements for classroom announcements or educational panels. Usually the GSA makes about a dozen classroom announcements and puts together about a half a dozen educational panels during April.

These announcements and panels represent important advocacy and awareness-raising efforts carried out by LGBTQ youth and in some cases may be the only time issues related to gender and sexuality are broached and discussed in depth in those particular classes. Because the school does not require all students to take courses that address gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues, the majority of this education and advocacy work is done by the LGBTQ youth in the GSA. The students from the GSA have extended their outreach to their teachers by offering suggestions for silence-friendly Day of Silence activities, by conducting panels for teachers and administrators about LGBTQ students' experiences at MacArthur High, and by recommending texts and resources for classroom discussion about these topics. The youth in MacArthur High's GSA share with their teachers and administrators the weight of bringing attention to LGBTQ issues and trying to shatter institutional silences in their school.

## Unintended Consequences of Silence

While the students engaged in considerable outreach intended to raise awareness about issues of homophobia and transphobia in their school, silence during the Day of Silence led to a handful of unintended, but important, consequences. For some students, the strategy of silence opened them up to even more verbal harassment than usual on this day. In 2009, one girl was followed around by a group of boys and called “faggot” over and over again all day long, but she wanted to stay silent for the duration of the school day, so she did not respond to her harassers and her teachers never intervened. Later when she told her teachers what had happened, they seemed to doubt her story. Fani exclaimed with a somewhat desperate tone in her voice, “The teachers treat it like it’s *objectionable!* They treat me like I’m lying!” In this case, the student’s vow of silence left her reeling, stung by her classmates’ words, yet unable to respond verbally to the insults. A boy who faced a similar situation broke his vow of silence in order to respond to students who were ridiculing him, because the adults who were present did not notice or interrupt the students. These experiences during the Day of Silence highlight that teachers—and by extension, school security officers and administrators—are not keeping students safe from homophobic language and harassment. The students have to speak up for themselves and were surprised by the inaction of their teachers to interrupt such forms of abuse. The school’s and the teachers’ inaction regarding intervention in students’ anti-LGBTQ language and bias represents an institutional silence that reflects everyday reality at MacArthur High.

The following school year, the student leader of the GSA made a point to tell others to intervene when they heard homophobic remarks or when they were the targets of any form of harassment. Kathryn said, “If you hear any slurs or anything on that day, or if you are being

harassed, please *speak up!* We had a lot of trouble last year. Don't take the Day of Silence so seriously that if you feel like you are being harassed in any way that you should stay silent. Say something to the student and to your teacher immediately." The strategy of silence as a means to raise awareness of anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment had made students in the GSA defenseless in the face of abuse and name-calling. The strategy of silence took away the valuable weapon of their voices to defend themselves and to educate others, thus failing to provide a critical platform on which to address the issue of homophobic language and bullying.

Moreover, in 2009, engaging in silence meant missing out on an opportunity to have a fruitful dialogue with another student club, Youth for Christ, who staged a counter-demonstration directly across from the GSA's Day of Silence event. The Youth for Christ students played their guitars and sang, and a D.J. spun records to keep the music going for the duration of the lunchtime. The Christian rock that the Youth for Christ students blasted drowned out any silence that could potentially be heard. The learning that could have taken place between these two student groups was cut short, as silence barred the GSA's students' participation in any vocal conversation. Antagonism between the two clubs grew as students from the GSA waved rainbow ribbon and pointed to their signs and t-shirts as if to say, "Don't you see this?!" Some students from both sides half playfully raised fists as if to signify intentions to fight, two girls slow danced together in each other's arms to the music the Youth for Christ club played, and one girl wrote on dry erase board, "If Christian rock is all about loving Jesus, isn't that kinda gay?" Toward the end of the lunch period, as students packed up and got ready to go to class, a student passed by and yelled, "Fuck the Day of Silence!" In this situation, silence foreclosed the possibility of the students engaging in dialogue with individuals who hold differing views, and silence limited their ways of responding to an epithet thrown their way. It is possible that

without their silence they could have engaged in thoughtful dialogue, but we do not know what could have happened. What is certain is that an opportunity for learning and understanding was passed over and missed by both groups of students.

### **A Day of Loud and the Strategy of Voice**

Early in the spring 2010 semester, strategizing and brainstorming what to do for their upcoming Day of Silence, Kathryn asked the GSA, “For the Day of Silence, should we have a bake sale? Sell t-shirts? Last year we made t-shirts, but it wasn’t that helpful. It was like a bake sale.”

Jesse pointed out, “Bake sales don’t do anything. They’re not political. They don’t get across a message. Somehow we have to convey a message.”

Elyse commented, “*The silence itself is enough of a statement* [my emphasis].”

Fani replied, “We should do something a little more political. We’re here, we’re queer, we’re not going anywhere... except quietly...”

Here, Fani points out the conundrum of being silent for educational and political purposes and of missing opportunities to have a dialogue about the experiences of LGBTQ students in their school and about forms of bias related to gender and sexuality because of their silence. Is *the silence itself enough of a statement* if it makes students more vulnerable to verbal harassment without reproach, makes it more difficult to engage in dialogue with others of opposing views, and, as I will discuss below, makes it more challenging for teachers to teach their classes and for students to learn? I argue that the message of acceptance, awareness, and solidarity is not successfully conveyed through silence.

Some students and teachers also question the effectiveness of the Day of Silence at MacArthur High. During the last two years, articles written by non-GSA students have been published in the school newspaper shortly following the Day of Silence discussing how the “Day of Silence fails to accomplish its goals” and how the students’ silence was “imperceptible.” These statements have frustrated the students in the GSA because every year they work hard to make the Day of Silence and all the educational panels they do around it informative, meaningful, and successful. When the school newspaper routinely publishes articles about how the GSA fails to carry off successful Days of Silence, the students feel disappointed that their outreach and advocacy efforts were not received and heard as they had hoped.

One student leader explained to me, “I honestly don’t think it’s a very good idea for a day. Of course, I’m going to do it because it’s a national thing and it’s like our day, but I *really* think it’s not a good idea as a raising awareness activity because it’s *silence*. You can plan as much as you like beforehand, but on the Day of Silence itself, it is just silence. That’s confusing to people.” Both the students in the GSA and the most recent article written in the school newspaper about the Day of Silence pointed out that many people break their vows of silence about halfway through the day because “this isn’t working or I’m tired of trying this.”

Later during the spring of 2010, the GSA considered other ways to approach the Day of Silence. Jacqueline commented, “I don’t know. I think for a lot of people the Day of Silence seemed... A lot of people say, ‘Oh, you shouldn’t be silent, you should be....’”

Her friend finished her thought, “*loud*.”

Jacqueline continued, “*loud*, because that’s how you’re actually going to accomplish things.”

Building on this idea, Kathryn added, “We did Day of Silence, and now we need to have a contrasting *loud* day.”

Angel exclaimed, “Day of Loud!”

Another student agreed, “Day of Loud! Or Day of Pride!”

The students in the GSA recognize that the strategy of voice might prove to be a more useful strategy than silence for raising awareness of anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment in their school. Using one’s voice to examine issues related to homophobia and transphobia, to discuss differing views on gender and sexuality, and to interrupt forms of harassment and bullying offers a more comprehensive and accessible approach than silence in targeting anti-LGBTQ bias. Even this year’s school newspaper article about the Day of Silence, while problematic in some of its claims, astutely pointed out that “the real challenge is vocalizing this issue.” Additionally, Ms. Feinberg offered this suggestion, “I’ve always thought it should be the day when straight people and homophobes should be silent and have to listen to what LGBTQ people have to say.”

For Ms. Feinberg, the Day of Silence in April 2010 was particularly challenging, and she had to break her silence in order to redirect her students’ attention and energy, to facilitate the class discussion, and to monitor students’ behavior. She found her students to be too undisciplined for her to allow them to lead themselves. Ms. Feinberg explains, “The problem is when I don’t talk and lead the class, they don’t learn.” Usually able to make it through an entire Day of Silence without speaking, Ms. Feinberg struggled to lead her class while keeping her vow of silence through three fifty-minute class periods. In Ms. Feinberg’s classes, I witnessed breakdown of classroom management, widespread frustration felt by both the students and the teacher, and missed opportunities for learning. Whereas Ms. Feinberg’s silence hindered her

ability to conduct her lesson and direct her class, the students in the GSA found the strategy of voice to be an effective means of reaching the very same students when they conducted educational panels in Ms. Feinberg's freshman classes.

The educational panels that the GSA students put on are informative, work to dispel misconceptions and stereotypes about queer people, and help put a face and personal experience to the larger somewhat abstract issues of homophobia and transphobia. The panels also represent important advocacy, outreach, and peer education work being done by these creative and smart youth. Both the students listening to the panels and those participating in the panels seem to enjoy the discussions and to learn a considerable amount regarding the experiences of LGBTQ people, even if some students might not be paying attention or paying respect to their class visitors at all times. This peer educational component to anti-LGBTQ awareness-raising proves to be generative. Students in Ms. Feinberg's freshman social studies class indicated that they had found the student panels inspiring, as the LGBTQ students discussed their struggles in working through how they identify themselves in this world, in coming out to their families and friends, and in combating homophobia and transphobia in their everyday lives. Upon hearing their peers' stories, some students in Ms. Feinberg's freshman course expressed their stances that the abuse and discrimination the LGBTQ panelists had experienced was wrong and that there needs to be further efforts to end homophobia and transphobia. One girl of Latina and Middle Eastern descent wrote, "At first I thought the panels weren't going to be that interesting because we live in [the San Francisco Bay Area] and it's one of the most accepting cities. I had no idea homophobia was such a problem [here]. I had no idea there were so many parents who were so un-accepting. How can history repeat itself like that so many times? How is it humans still haven't learned that discrimination is all bad and it doesn't do any good for anybody?"

While such educational panels are fruitful learning experiences for both students and teachers, they also represent the onus teachers and administrators put on LGBTQ youth to educate their peers about these issues rather than the school taking responsibility. The administration and teachers at MacArthur High do not have to observe the Day of Silence, but they should actively change their practices toward monitoring and intervening in hurtful speech. There is nothing in the state standards or the school's curriculum that mandates teachers must teach about forms of bias and discrimination or about ways to address it in our communities. In this case, the work of making their school a safer place for LGBTQ people falls to the most vulnerable population there – the LGBTQ youth who are visibly and vocally out about their gender and sexuality. One student in the GSA explained to me, “The teachers would rather the GSA do this kind of education. A lot of teachers say they can't and don't feel comfortable doing it. It would be too awkward of a subject to discuss with their students. So, they would rather the GSA do it.”

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps a more large scale, all-encompassing educational component could be implemented at MacArthur High—one that utilizes participants' voices, experiences, and perspectives—to address forms of anti-LGBTQ bias. One student suggested a school-wide, week-long series of panels and sensitivity trainings that mixed up populations at this large school and made people from different backgrounds and communities work together toward understanding. Another student suggested the school set aside a week or a month, like Black History Month, dedicated to educating students about LGBTQ history and issues. Some students felt that *all* students, rather than just 20% of the school, should be required to take courses that

specifically address issues of identity, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, sex, adolescence, LGBTQ experiences, and social justice. Other students suggested that some classes should have a unit or section in the curriculum devoted to gender and sexuality as societal constructs, to issues related to bias and discrimination, and to the inclusion of LGBTQ historical and literary figures. Yet another suggestion the students had was to conduct panels for future teachers, principals, and administrators that focus on how to react to and call out occurrences of homophobia and transphobia when they see it, how to make their classes and schools safer for LGBTQ students, and how to address LGBTQ issues in their pedagogy and curricula.

The students in the GSA at MacArthur High participate in the difficult work of addressing anti-LGBTQ bias in their school by using their voices to interrupt homophobic language, to educate their peers about the harmfulness of anti-LGBTQ bullying and name-calling, and to address the silences on LGBTQ issues. In events like the Day of Silence, they use silence to raise awareness of their presence and to draw attention to the institutional silences shaped by the absence of LGBTQ figures and concerns in the curricula and class discussion. These LGBTQ youth use visibility resources and tactics to raise awareness and build a visible queer presence in their school, despite their classmates' defacement of GSA posters and fliers. These students carry the weight of bringing attention to institutional silences on LGBTQ issues in their school through their considerable outreach to fellow students as well as teachers. Through these strategies, students in MacArthur High's GSA contest these silences and try to make change in their school community.

Critically discussing systems of oppression and privilege that operate along lines of difference, including how oppression can manifest in practices of anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment, requires that schools provide the discursive space for all students to speak, listen,

and engage in dialogue about sexuality, gender, and power. This practice would involve inquiring into silence as a source of pedagogical knowledge and examining uncomfortable and too comfortable silences. Moreover, engaging in a critical pedagogy that *listens for silences* would “include listening to know particular students; listening for the rhythm and balance of a classroom; listening for the social, cultural, and community contexts of students’ lives; and listening for silence and acts of silencing in classrooms and social institutions” (Schultz 2003, 16). In this regard, the Day of Silence could be reconceived as a day to focus on *listening for silences*—on the voices not heard, on the absences in institutional and structural forms, and on how we are silenced and how we silence others. While both speech and silence are structured by relations of power, explicit dialogue about privilege, oppression, and processes of differentiation—and how these processes manifest in institutional and epistemological silences—allows participants to reflect on their own positions and complicity in these systems. Without this critical engagement, schooling will continue to run the risk of reproducing the status quo, the institutional silences of LGBTQ people’s experiences, and the epistemologies of ignorance that support heterosexism and homophobia in public high schools.

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