

# 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

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.

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

The role of the ally is to address power, and try to contribute to the making of a space in which the person who is oppressed gets to have their voice heard and listened to. It is not just a matter of being heard; a person's words must matter and not be dismissed. Paulo Freire names this authentic dialogue, which he describes as an act of revolutionary love. If we are replicating oppression we are not in dialogue with each other. Lacey eloquently calls these spaces of justice, which allies contribute to, "the social divine".

### Responding to backlash

In the presence of backlash, creating room for people to speak authentically becomes problematic. As with all anti-oppression work, we anticipate the backlash, which is the cost of speaking truth to power. Backlash refers to responses that support and reinforce the positions of power being questioned. Backlash takes the focus off of the oppression. Anticipating and planning a useful response to backlash, which may or may not show up, is important in terms of having a safe-enough structure and some confidence that paralysis, anger or fear will not silence our responses. Negotiations of who will respond to backlash need to be accountable to the people who are oppressed by it.

Often, a good person to reply to backlash is an ally, as they are most likely to be heard and least likely to be personally oppressed in the moment. Deciding to give voice to allies in addressing backlash is a strategic decision that aims to create more change, but it comes at a cost. A shaming memory I hold close is being listened to as an ally of privilege when marginalised people were silenced.

In instances where I have responded to backlash as an ally, I work to differentiate the person from what is spoken. The person who has brought the backlash position forward is a member of the same group as I am. Here I want to move in solidarity towards this person, and not shame them, while being clear about naming and resisting oppression.

### Collective accountability

We live in a world where many of us, whether we intend to or not, benefit from the oppression of others. Activism teaches us to analyse structures of oppression. Collective accountability requires that we take actions together to change these

underlying structures that create the conditions for abuses of power. Feeling personal guilt about that is not the same as accountability.

As a heterosexual person, I hope to respond to another heterosexual person who is performing homophobia by seeing them as my brother, by locating myself as collectively responsible for the performance of homophobia, and for the fact that it benefits me. In relation to my privilege, I don't have to perform homophobia or racism or transphobia in order for my status to be elevated on the backs of others. This means that I have to be accountable for more than just my personal actions. The seduction of identifying individually at these times is extreme – I want to identify myself as, "not that kind of straight person". As an ally I identify collectively as a heterosexual person in the presence of homophobia, and act to help my straight brother move towards accountability as well. Collective accountability invites us to see another other as a part of us, belonging with us, and declines the invitation of locating ourselves as *not that other*. Collectively addressing any form of oppression is not a heroic act, but a performance of our collective, ordinary respect and dignity.

Individual accountability is a limiting idea, as it constructs the responsibility for social contexts of injustice on the backs of individual allies, and doesn't require us to be responsible for more than our own actions. Injustice requires enormous, collaborative, and resourced social responses from all members of society, reflecting our relational responsibilities. Collective accountability promotes our sustainability by contesting the individuation of responsibility, and offers hope for finding ways forward together.

The true privilege of being an ally is the fact that we get to choose those moments when we are going to be an ally. When you are the queer, two-spirit or transgender person experiencing oppression you don't get to choose to not be in those locations. An ally position is a voluntary thing I can sign up for and I always have the privilege of walking away. This makes it risky to trust allies.

Kiwi Tamasese, a Samoan leader with the Just Therapy Centre in New Zealand, profoundly influenced my stance for being an ally alongside racialised, minoritised and colonised women. Kiwi needs to

know how long allies are going to be in the struggle and the nature of their commitment. She wants to know if I am a tourist, putting my toe in the water to see if I am going to jump in, or if I am in for the long haul. This is important, because an ally position is not static or fixed. As a straight white woman of privilege from the global north, I can choose to act as an ally alongside marginalised women and then choose to leave the struggle. Accountability requires that I make public the particularities of my commitment. When there is trust that I am a committed ally over the long haul, my unavoidable (yet not innocent) mistakes can be held alongside my acts of solidarity. Kiwi might say, "*Vikki has been with me before, she is going to be with me and with my communities into the future. It is worth teaching her about this. Her intentions were probably not to replicate this oppression with me*". Committed relationships that are made public and open to invitations to accountability contribute to ally partnerships across differences.

### A hopeful scepticism

I invite a healthy and hopeful suspicion about whether or not I am acting as an ally in any moment-to-moment interaction. This is informed by Kvale's hermeneutics of suspicion, where we look to our practice to see if we are enacting our ethics. Activists ask, "*Am I walking the talk?*". Holding an anti-oppression framework is fabulous, but theorising is limited, and despite the promises of critical theory we have not delivered on a just society. What matters is that we enact our ethics. I make claims to being an ally and to acting accountably for my access to privilege, but whether or not I actually perform as an ally is best judged by the person I am trying to be an ally to. If a queer person says, "*You helped make space for my voice to be heard, then you got out of the way, and I experienced that as accountable*" then I know that I am in line with my ethics and hope for being an ally in that moment.

Any information a person from an oppressed position gives me in any interaction about my abuses of power or the way that I haven't been an ally are a gift to me. I want to accept this critique with an open heart. I need to be able to withstand the spiritual pain I experience when I transgress against my ethics for being an ally. I don't try to smooth these transgressions over, but hold them close

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 discomforting 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.

If I don't take an overt, intentional, active position against racism and against homophobia I will replicate them

## Conclusion

While I have attempted to offer an understanding of my ethical stance for being an ally it is important for me to acknowledge that this positioning is still and will always be in motion. Naming the fluidity of this position and its incompleteness means more than just being open to critique. My ethical stance cannot be complete because of my limited knowledge and the ever-changing contexts of social justice that inform it. I think of this ethical stance for being an ally as an 'imperfection project'.

I work hard at being an ally, and cannot do my work without this orientation, but I simultaneously work towards a just society. I don't equate our acts of being allies as enough or as the end of our responsibilities. Acting as an ally doesn't end oppression; it's a small piece of a larger response that's required, important, but never enough. Our collective goal is not to be good allies, but to help everyone experience justice, co-creating a society in which allies would not be required. This is ambitious and possibly unlikely but, as Freire says, unapologetically, our project really is to liberate the world!

Despite our failures and our pain as imperfect allies to each other, we continue to lend our privilege to the social project of doing justice, because everyone will benefit from a more socially just world. We take on the hard work of making repair when we transgress as allies because, as Leonard Peltier says, "We are not supposed to be perfect. We're supposed to be useful".

*My straight partner and I are out of town visiting our family of choice. We have stayed connected across borders, and decades, connected by familial love, art, and justice-doing. When I met Jake, he was a self-identified "bull dyke". I stood up as Jake's family when she married the love of her life, a lesbian woman named Carmen. A decade later, Jake has transitioned to his preferred identity as a man. During our present visit, there is much excitement as the happy couple tells us that they have decided to become parents. My heart expands, I'm thrilled for them, and say, "Which one of you is going to have the baby?"*

*There is a profound silence that Jake speaks into saying, "Well, Vikki, I'm a man. So I won't be having a baby". Transgender men can and do have babies, but Jake does not identify as transgender, and that makes my response different and oppressive. This*

*is bigger than the times I didn't get Jake's new name right, or used the wrong gender pronouns. Despite being one of Jake's firmest allies across time, heterosexual normativity has captured me, and I'm the voice of power, obliterating Jake's autonomy in naming and creating his own gender identity.*

*Jake saves us all by accepting my apology and commitment to accountability. He hugs me close, saying he needs me and my partner "to be there for our kids when other folks like you pull this stuff in the future".*

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This article is dedicated to the memory and lifework of Catherine White Holman, whose ally work alongside transgender communities holds people on this planet.

## Exercise: Reflecting on our fluid positions as imperfect allies

- What multiple ally positions do I hold?
- What multiple ally positions have I not taken? Why?

Consider a particular ally position, for example, being an ally to transgender people, to two-spirit people, to queer people:

- What is required of me in terms of being an ally in this context?
- How will I get my locations of oppression out of the centre in order to be an ally?
- What expectations of me and other allies are held by transgender, two-spirit and queer people?
- What practices of accountability will I enact? How can I engage with accountability instead of guilt?
- How can I plan to deal with the discomfort and possible pain that comes from being in this ally position?
- How will I know when I am being an accountable ally?
- How will I be open to knowing when I am not being in line with my ethics and intentions of being an ally?
- What differences has being an ally made in my life? My work?

Consider the fluid ways you have experienced the solidarity of having allies, and the differences having allies has made in your life:

- Who have been my allies in spaces where I am oppressed or subject to structural power?
- What differences have allies made in my life?
- How have I let allies know what I expect? What I appreciate? What is not useful?

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# Down to the wire.....

**Gail Simon**

## **This article arises out of The Pink Practice's experience of working with lesbian and gay asylum seekers and is written with their support and consent**

I am quite an emotional person. But that was, mm, unusual. A first appointment and I'm, well, not exactly 'in tears' but unable to continue. I'm choked, speechless. What happened?

I'll tell you what happened. A young woman came for a first appointment. She had a nice energy.

Late twenties. White, middle American. She sat down. I told her I had just had some difficult news (and I mean 'just' – I was answering the door in a state of shock) and I didn't know if I would be able to concentrate. I felt I might be able to go with her energy, with her story. But then, her story:

"I need to do some therapy. You know how we love therapy in the States! I'm here on a working visa and I have another year and a half to go before I can apply to stay here permanently. Thing is," she continued, "I hate my job. It drives me insane!" she giggled. "But I need to stay in this job till I get residency. So I need to get some therapy so I can cope with going to work for another 18 months!"

Her voice echoed around me in surround sound. I couldn't locate myself in relation to the noise. I heard myself say "That's an excellent reason for wanting to do some therapy". How the hell did I manage to say that? A professional miracle. I was not able to think. I was in the middle of the most violent clash of realities. Here was a young woman, a white woman, a lesbian, a young white lesbian woman who wants to stay in this country. She has a plan. She has a strategy. It's so simple. Why doesn't Yuma have a plan like that? I remind myself of the reality of Yuma's situation. My stomach turns over before I even recall the facts. There is a silence. Can I recover myself? I play for time while I listen for an answer to this question.

"Wow. You cannot imagine the irony of what you are saying..." No, I'm not managing. This has got to, is going to stop very shortly. It's a matter of how I can wind this conversation up with a respectful

explanation and care.... "Um, I feel bad about you coming here for the first time but I am not able to do justice to a conversation with you tonight. I am sorry. I'm too distracted."

The story is pushing itself to the fore. I am wondering if it's going to assert itself on her life too. Real life therapy. RLT. Like a BLT but less palatable. I feel she needs some kind of explanation. "I've just heard that an African lesbian woman I know is going to be deported

back to a lesbian-hostile country because the government does not believe she's a lesbian."

"They can't do that", she says. I recognise that sentiment. I had it too once. "Well, I just

heard that her flight has been booked for the weekend. So I'm a bit shaken and your reason for coming to therapy is too close to what I'm preoccupied by at this moment..." Tears are in my eyes. I am visibly upset. She says "Oh the poor girl! How awful! No, please don't worry. It's fine" and I tell her about a colleague who will be in touch. "But", I say re-remembering my professional self, my voice sounding more even, more playful "at least you go away with a good dinner party story. You can tell people you went for therapy and the therapist was in tears! It's a good story". She smiled and I escorted her to the door.

The next day, I get on a train from St Pancras. Before that I stock up on chocolate for the detainee. Just outside Bedford, the gravel pits remind me that I am passing through brick country. The heart of our Victorian streets. A heron flies over and I strain to identify what birds are on the long stretches of water. Then I start. What the hell am I doing? Birdwatching? My momentary reprieve is over. Is this what happened, I wonder, when people were crammed into the trains going into the concentration camps. Someone found themselves wondering if that was a heron they saw from between the cracks in the wood, or recognised a shape in the landscape and lost, for a cruel second, the torture of the dread of what was to come.....

You'd better brace yourself, someone said to me last night. And I do. But as we draw up to the barrier and are waved through, I see a large building with a giant

**I am quite an emotional person. But that was, mm, unusual.**