

MARRIAGE EQUALS DEATH . . . SERIOUSLY

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Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage

Ryan Conrad, editor

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Marriage and the millions of dollars that follow it continue to dominate the mainstream LGBT rights agenda. Meanwhile, radical activists are silenced and chastised for their opposition to marriage, and those working on other community issues have increasingly found their funding cut, which takes food, shelter, and medicine from the hands of those queer and trans people who need it most. Marriage, then, is not just a distraction; it literally kills our “community,” argues the Against Equality Collective, a radical arts and publishing group and online archive committed to pushing back on the mainstream LGBT agenda that emphasizes marriage, the military, and hate crimes legislation. Founded in 2009 by Ryan Conrad, Against Equality’s first self-published book, cleverly titled *Against Equality*, features writings of prominent and diverse queer and trans activists from the United States who challenge the focus on marriage. Other than Chicago activist Yasmin Nair’s introduction, all the essays have been previously published in blogs, zines, journals, and other venues, but Conrad brings them together to collectively capture the myriad voices speaking against marriage in contemporary times. Pocket-sized and featuring the cover art of Oakland artist Chris Vargas, *Against Equality* is a quick and easy resource that packs a pedagogical punch. Moreover, it reflects some of the diversity among queer perspectives, many outside academia, that want something different from queer politics.

Nair’s introduction sets the platform as she questions the conventional wisdom of the marriage equality movement, which maintains that marriage will provide queers with access to important benefits and promote a culture where queers are no longer subject to violence. Nair argues against such logics, noting that marriage “remains the neoliberal state’s most efficient way to corral the family as a source of revenue and to place upon it the ultimate responsibility for guaranteeing basic benefits like healthcare” (4). She further avers that the suggestion that marriage will lead to more justice actually condones prejudice: “Are we not explicitly

telling queer teens and adults that non-conformity can and should lead to death?” (3). Thus Nair makes an impassioned plea for a radical queer critique that understands how capitalism dictates family structure and how certain gay identities get co-opted in the service of capitalism.

The other ten short essays pick up different dimensions of the antimarriage argument. Two of the most salient dimensions include challenging the state and advocating intersectionality. First, several essays question why the marriage movement calls on the state to provide freedom. Eric Stanley's essay, "Marriage Is Murder," offers a series of answers to common questions that marriage sympathizers might ask a leftist who is against marriage. Stanley advocates for the "abolishment of State sanctioned coupling," since it promotes institutionalized exploitation of some in order to benefit others (16). Kate and Deeg echo this point, remarking that rather than fighting for eleven hundred benefits for *some* people, we should be advocating rights for all people. Highlighting one of the ironies of the marriage movement in relation to the state, John D'Emilio explains how the movement "has created a vast body of *new* antigay law" (37). For others, the critique of calls to the state is more overt. Martha Jane Kaufman and Katie Miles lament, "The US military is continuing its path of destruction, and gays want to be allowed to fight. Cops are killing unarmed black men and bashing queers, and gays want more policing. More and more Americans are suffering and dying because they can't get decent health care, and gays want weddings. What happened to us?" (59).

A second theme within the essays reflects the lack of intersectional thinking within the marriage equality movement. Kenyon Farrow asks, "Is Gay Marriage Anti Black???" Farrow depicts the complex racial politics that underlie the marriage movement. He shows how the Christian Right pits blacks against gays by positioning gays as only upper middle class and white. He then discusses the related problems with the "gay civil rights"/"black civil rights" analogies that organizations like the Human Rights Campaign use, which have similarly placed black people in an awkward position, making them seem automatically homophobic if they reject the simplistic analogy. Both sorts of arguments virtually erase queers of color. In describing the campaign for marriage equality in Maine, Conrad denounces its classism. The campaign raised millions of dollars in this very poor state, even as vital service agencies for marginalized queer and HIV-positive people have shut their doors because of funding shortages. Dean Spade and Craig Willse frame their concerns as a very direct question relating to the passage of Proposition 8 in California: "Why isn't Prop 8's passage framed as evidence of the mainstream gay agenda's failure to ally with people of color on issues that are central to racial and economic justice in the US?" (19).

Each of the short essays in *Against Equality* raises important questions for marriage equality movement sympathizers to consider. While the theoretical contribution of this collection may not surprise the academic queer theorist, its pedagogical and political significance cannot be overstated. Because of the length of the entire collection, and the brevity of the individual contributions, *Against Equality* is ideal for student and nonacademic audiences. The diversity of the writers and the coherence of the collection's perspective create a persuasive argument against the marriage equality movement. When I used the text with graduates and undergraduates in a queer theory class, many who adamantly supported marriage equality expected to be completely put off by the book (and the subsequent invited lecture by Conrad). Instead, students found the *Against Equality* perspective to be inviting, realistic, and important. Conrad's decision to leave the essays in their original form to reflect the time period in which they were written is perhaps the text's only major shortcoming: it led to a lot of repetition of ideas. This quibble aside, *Against Equality* represents a vital voice in the cacophonous contemporary milieu.

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