

# Learning from The Identity Project: Accountability-Based Strategies for Intersectional Analyses in Queer and Feminist Rhetoric

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**Abstract:** *This article forwards a rhetorical methodology based on the concept of accountability, responding to recent calls in rhetoric and composition for more work on activism across differences in positionality. An accountability-based framework for rhetorical analysis shifts the questions researchers of activist rhetorics can ask in order to foster practices that are more responsible to communities facing intersecting oppressions. To demonstrate this methodology, the article engages in an accountability-based rhetorical analysis of an example of queer digital arts activism, The Identity Project. Asking to whom and for what an example of activist rhetoric is accountable, in what ways, and with what effects can offer a productive way for researchers to analyze such rhetorics in a way that moves beyond a limiting oppression/resistance or assimilation/radicalism framework.*

**Keywords:** *Activist rhetorics; digital activism; activism; research methods; feminist rhetorics; intersectionality; queer rhetorics; race; colonialism; social justice*

## Introduction

Recent media coverage has highlighted a specific trend in the use of LGBTQ identifications: a proliferation of creative and remixed terms for describing sexual and gender identifications. For example, Facebook now provides 58 unique options for users to identify their genders, with an additional option to write in their own if none of the pre-provided options fit (Wong). A 2013 *New York Times* article titled “Generation LGBTQIA” claims that younger activists are “forging a political identity all their own, often at odds with mainstream gay culture” by using creative terms to describe their gender and sexuality (Schulman). In 2014, responding to this growing public exigence to complicate understandings of LGBTQ identities, photographer Sarah Deragon started the digital project *The Identity Project*. The project consists of individual portrait photographs taken by Deragon, each paired with a written identity label chosen by the portrait subject to describe their queer identifications. As

Deragon states, the project “seeks to explore the labels we choose to identify with when defining our gender and sexuality” and looks in particular for “participants who are POC [people of color], trans\*, bisexual, youth, elders, disabled, immigrants and otherwise identify outside of the mainstream lesbian and gay culture” (“FAQ”). The identity markers that participants choose often creatively combine identifications, such as “provocateur lesbian dandy,” “sassy switch femmeboi,” or “other queer unicorn,” and the project has become known as a telling example of this trend toward creative remixing in LGBTQ communities. Some of these terms only signify in the context of queer communities, or have different resonances there, while others invent new identifications. *The Identity Project* exists as a website consisting of photographs organized into galleries by the city where they were taken (U.S. cities with the exception of Taipei, Taiwan, and St. Petersburg, Russia, where Deragon was invited as part of an underground QueerFest) ([identityprojectsf.com](http://identityprojectsf.com)). As of this writing, the project has thirteen galleries and over 500 photographs. [See Fig. 1]



Fig. 1. *The Identity Project* website by Sarah Deragon.

The variety of identities represented in *The Identity Project* is framed in liberal media thinkpieces as evidence of a generational shift welcoming an expansive array of genders and sexualities. For instance, in its first year of existence, the project was covered in articles with headlines such as “27 Powerful Portraits Challenging the Definition of What It Means to Be LGBT” (Bennett-Smith); “‘Identity Project’ Portrait Series Redefines What It Means To

Be LGBTQ" (Riley); and "Powerful Photos Fearlessly Redefine What It Means to Be LGBTQIA+" (Everyday Feminism). These moves largely characterize the project as a force of change, "redefining" or "challenging" what it means to be LGBTQ or how these identities are understood in popular discourse. Many commentators deploy specific examples of identity labels in the project to illustrate the wide variety of identifications represented. Marisa Riley of *Bustle* writes, "Whether you're a "queer femme wifey," a "versatile dandy boyfriend," or anyone in between (or even lightyears away from 'between'), the possibilities are endless when it comes to gender and sexual identity." Referencing some of these possibilities, Jessica Nemire of *San Francisco Weekly* comments, "Participants have come up with every phrase from 'Genderweird Queerdo Carebear' to 'Black Gay Queer Feminist Cisgendered Man.'" Meredith Bennett-Smith of *Mic.com* lists: "Unicorn. Bottom. Dandy. These are just some of the many ways members of the LGBT community identify themselves." These commentators, shaping public discourse on *The Identity Project* within its first six months, specifically pull out identifications from the gallery's many labels that they mark as more uncommon than others.

*The Identity Project* presents a rhetorical understanding of queer identity terms as a resource for invention rather than a form of static representation; as Deragon explains, "This project, if anything, is showing the power of the invention of language, and how language, like our identity, is and can be ever changing and fluid" (qtd. in Tsou). Like many of the media commentators above, I was drawn to *The Identity Project* because of this creative, invention-based approach to queer identity labels, in addition to its celebration of queer self-definition as a form of resistance. However, the more I engaged with it, the more I also came to see the project's tensions and telling omissions, especially in terms of advocacy across differences in positionality. If identity terms can be resources for rhetorical invention, as *The Identity Project* conceives of them, then it is also necessary to ask where these resources come from and what they do as they circulate.

In some ways, *The Identity Project* could be framed as a rhetorical success, an instance of a marginalized group critiquing dominant, limiting conceptions of LGBTQ identity. The project has had a wide and overwhelmingly positive uptake in liberal, feminist, and queer digital media. It raised \$10,000 on the crowdfunding site Indiegogo, and it has traveled to numerous U.S. cities and has started to expand internationally. Photographs from the project have been exhibited in public spaces, such as the Russian QueerFest Exhibition and an LGBTQ History Month display at Ohio State University ("Cool"). The participant testimonials included on *The Identity Project* website express feelings of gratitude for a sense of validation ("Testimonials"). The project has also inspired spin-off projects internationally, including a popular version of

the project by photographers in France (“Cool”). If rhetoricians looked at this body of evidence of the project’s reception and diverse impacts, asking how it functions as a form of resistant rhetoric, we might draw conclusions celebrating the project as a queer intervention into dominant approaches to LGBTQ identities. Alternately, pointing perhaps to evidence of commodification such as *The Identity Project’s* collaboration with the vodka brand Smirnoff (“Love”), *The Identity Project* could be framed as ultimately too assimilative, ineffective as a queer rhetorical production because it is limited by a logic of visibility that includes more and more groups under the LGBTQ umbrella but does not change systemic oppressions (see Kopelson; Hennessy; Wingard). However, in this article, I want to consider what other questions scholars of activist rhetorics can ask to read this project and others in ways that do not stop at anti-assimilationist critique but that consider more complex questions of positionality and accountability to multiply marginalized communities.

*The Identity Project* articulates an activist mission to push against the normativization of some LGBTQ identities at the expense of others—specifically, increasing visibility and acceptance for mostly white gay and lesbian U.S. citizens who are able to assimilate into normative structures. For instance, advances in LGBTQ rights such as marriage equality continue to improve circumstances for those already privileged, but do little to improve the lives of populations such as queer and trans women of color. This normativization represents what Lisa Duggan has termed “homonormativity”: “A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions... but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179). By representing LGBTQ identities beyond those usually most visible, *The Identity Project* attempts to resist not just hetero- but also homonormativity. As Deragon says in a media interview, “Because of the marriage equality push [...] I feel like the world is like, ‘OK, gay is OK. We got some people on *Grey’s Anatomy* and all this shit’—but it’s bigger than that. It’s almost like, ‘We’re still here. You think you know us, [but] you really don’t know us.’ I wanted the project to be very queer and provoking a conversation that we’re not done” (qtd in Tsou). This message—“You think you know us, [but] you really don’t know us”—is key to *The Identity Project’s* mission.

*The Identity Project’s* focus on activist goals like challenging homonormativity makes the project an example of what Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre describe as “digital activism.” Sandoval and Latorre frame such work as “a convergence between ‘activism’ and digital ‘artistic’ production” that is “created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism” (81-2). As Ana Milena Ribero and Adela C. Licona write, “The potential of digital art to create social change has garnered much attention from those who are

interested in the power of visual rhetorics in digital contexts" (160). Thus, as an example of digital art with activist goals, *The Identity Project* offers an interesting site for rhetorical analysis. In particular, *The Identity Project* raises generative questions about intersectionality in rhetorical production and analysis not only due to the wide variety of identities represented in its digital galleries, but also because of its white queer photographer's stated goal of advocating across differences in positionality.

*The Identity Project* attempts to counter homonormativity by representing LGBTQ identities beyond those commonly considered most normative, but it is limited in its ability to challenge dominant heteronormative *and* homonormative assumptions because both sets of assumptions are also inextricably connected to race, class, and other axes of identity and oppression. The project demonstrates the limits of some recovery projects: in the pressure to recover and celebrate some less visible gender- and sexuality-related identities, it is boxed into a mission of celebrating these identities and is structurally unable to critique any uses of identity terms. However, my purpose here is not to tear down *The Identity Project* through critique, or to celebrate it through recovery, but instead to ask what questions emerge from an intersectional reading of this project and what such a reading can tell rhetoricians about studying and producing activist rhetorics. In order to study complex activist productions in ways that enact social justice rather than reinforcing oppressions, rhetoricians need new methodological frameworks and tools for activist-oriented rhetorical analysis that help us work across differences in positionality. In this article, I offer a methodological framework for rhetorical analysis grounded in the concept of accountability.

## **Intersectionality and Accountability in Queer and Feminist Rhetorics**

Intersectionality, a concept rooted in Black Feminist traditions, is crucial to accountability. Intersectionality aims to understand and critique how multiple axes of power interact to shape lived experiences of oppression (see Combahee; Collins; Crenshaw; Davis). In the decades since Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to understand Black women's experiences in the legal system, it has become a widely mobilized term in feminist discourse but also a buzzword in popular culture. Especially since the 2016 presidential election, intersectionality has often been referenced in popular media in a limiting way that focuses only on representing overlapping identities but not on developing critical interventions into power structures. As women and gender studies scholar Vivian May writes about the concept of intersectionality, "being

widely talked about does not necessarily signal changed social, philosophical, or institutional relations" (94).

In rhetoric and composition, recent conversations about cross-community work have focused on how rhetoricians can develop better tools for intersectional analyses. For example, from a queer rhetorics perspective, Eric Darnell Pritchard argues that "disrupting hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity cannot be fully accomplished if we only reinforce normative power by treating heteronormativity as an exclusively sexuality-based phenomenon, ignoring the way in which it remakes itself through race, ethnic, gender, class, ability, or national hierarchies in the moving target of power and privilege along identity lines" (43). David Wallace asks how rhetoricians can engage in "responsible cross-boundary discourse" given "that very few of us are disenfranchised or privileged in all situations" (547). Adela Licona and Karma R. Chávez foreground the importance of relationality and "rhetorical processes within and for coalition building" across axes of embodied difference (104). In the study of digital rhetorical productions, Jennifer Sano-Franchini argues that rhetoricians need more strategies to "not only do analysis but also build a heuristic for a more culturally reflexive approach to analyzing, producing, and organizing bodies in digital texts" (55), and Leah DiNatale Gutenson and Michelle Bachelor Robinson argue that those who study digital spaces need ways to "become race-cognizant multimodal scholars" (87). As these scholars show, rhetoric and composition is engaging in conversations about how to become more inclusive, build coalitions, work across axes of difference, and become more aware of how differences interact, all with the goal of developing concrete actions out of this awareness. There is a clear need for more explicit methodologies designed for analyzing activist rhetorics, especially across differences in positionality.

I am a white, queer, able-bodied, cisgender woman and a United States citizen who has benefited from colonialism. I must remain actively engaged in examining my own positionality and how I live in relationality with others with differing backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, and other axes of identity. Further, I am committed not just to an examination or summary of my own positions and privileges, but also to finding ways to advocate for oppressed communities across differences in positionality. One place I can start is in the academic context of my own daily life. I acknowledge and disrupt the academy's complicity in oppression as a colonialist structure, and do not pretend that this deeply entrenched oppression can change through any one scholarly practice. However, the difficulty of change, intensified by the weight of oppressive histories, does not excuse scholars from developing ways to intervene and imagine more equitable futures. In this article, I attempt

to use my position as a scholar of activist rhetoric to develop one such intervention into the academic study of cross-community advocacy.

Rhetorical scholarship needs more work on how communities advocate for each other in the context of intersecting power dynamics—and how they sometimes miss opportunities to do so. Even within groups united by resistance to a particular form of oppression (e.g., heteronormativity), there are complex dynamics at play that raise questions of how rhetors can advocate not only for themselves but also as allies to others. As Victor Del Hierro, Daisy Levy, and Margaret Price explain from a cultural rhetorics perspective, being allies means “understanding—and feeling—what it means to interact in a space where every person is coming from multiple, overlapping communities and identities; where no one occupies the center or the margin all the time; and where privilege and oppression overlay one another like stitches in a knitted shawl” (5-6). Dynamics of positionality change according to the context, including who is present, what the purposes and goals of the group are, and other factors. In the study of activist rhetorics, rhetoricians are in a position to intervene in complex discussions about advocacy and positionality as they unfold in the contexts of our own research sites and other spaces, but we also need to be better equipped to work across differences in a way that aims not only for more inclusion, but more accountability.

*The Identity Project* offers an occasion for thought about tensions between inclusion and accountability in activist rhetorics, with implications for intersectional queer and feminist work. As a digital activist production, *The Identity Project* reveals these tensions well: it is a project by a white queer artist that aims to challenge homonormativity by *including* an enormous array of overlapping identities, with attention to how race, class, ability, and other axes intersect with queerness, but the project is also not necessarily structurally equipped to enact *accountability* to marginalized queer populations. However, a critique that ends only by pointing out the limits of inclusion-based activist claims is inadequate. Rather, a methodology of accountability allows rhetoricians to ask more complex questions about activist productions from an intersectional perspective.

## **A Methodology of Accountability: Beyond an Oppression/Resistance and Assimilation/Radicalism Model**

Conversations about activist rhetorics have often scripted such rhetorics into two related sets of binaries: oppression/resistance and assimilation/radicalism. In the oppression/resistance binary, a marginalized population uses rhetorical action to resist a form of top-down oppression, and rhetorical critics

might evaluate the action based on whether or not it is successful in its articulated goal of resistance. In a related binary, activist rhetorics are often evaluated based on whether they are too assimilationist—making inclusion-based claims or assimilating into the dominant, rather than challenging dominating structures—or whether they are successfully radical in terms of disrupting structures. As Pritchard explains, “The dichotomous ‘oppression then resistance’ model is the way that literacy practices of people from oppressed and marginalized groups are generally rendered,” but this model is limited because it scripts marginalized groups’ rhetorical actions into “reductive narratives that show literacy use solely for resistance to or defiance of oppression and marginality,” ignoring a much wider array of purposes (37). Further, an assimilationist/radical model measures rhetorical resistance by the degree to which it is able to counter the dominant, rendering both of these spheres more monolithic than they are and leading to analyses that either celebrate a rhetorical action as radically resistant or critique it for assimilating into the dominant. This binary is itself a product of colonialist logic that ignores the complex webs of relationality behind any rhetorical action (see Powell; Riley-Mukavetz).

Stopping at the critique of a rhetorical production as assimilationist or celebration of such a production as radical misses other questions rhetoricians can ask that more accurately and responsibly explore how those in positions constructed by intersecting oppressions enact resistance, who is centered in that resistance, and with what effects. As Julie A. Bokser argues for feminist rhetoric, it can be especially productive to refuse characterizations of a rhetor or their work as either wholly “subversive iconoclast” or “purveyor of hegemony” (146) and instead engage in readings that examine how resistant and dominant discourses are interwoven in particular contexts. From a queer perspective, Jean Bessette argues that instead of a binary “oppositional, reactionary orientation of queerness against normativity” (150), rhetoricians can contribute a contextual view of queerness that allows us to ask not whether something is queer or normative once and for all, but instead “Queer to whom? When? Where, and how? Normative to whom? When? Where, and how?” (157). This framework of refusing a queer/normative binary pushes us to ask more complex questions about how queerness is contingent and connected at different times—in both marked and unmarked ways—to various discourses, ideologies, and other aspects of identity.

Such a contextual focus is certainly helpful for studying and crafting activist messaging. However, in order to balance the need for rhetoric capable of both widespread systemic critique and improving specific material conditions for those most vulnerable, rhetoricians need not only to ask what is queer and normative to whom across space and time, but also to ask to what degree does an example of activist rhetoric center its most vulnerable communities



and with what impacts. This move helps take rhetorical analyses beyond deconstruction, which tends to ask only what we are tearing down or critiquing and stops there (Powell; Riley-Mukavetz). A move beyond deconstruction requires a commitment to ask what futures can be built after critique, and a social justice approach asks how these futures can center the needs of those who have been oppressed. Such an approach also aligns with a decolonial orientation to activist and academic work, a focus of cultural rhetorics. For example, in “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab draws from Shawn Wilson’s understanding of decolonial practice as “both the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist” (qtd in Powell et al). To move work in rhetorical analysis closer to this future-building orientation toward knowledge, rather than stopping at the practice of critique, rhetoricians need revised methodologies.

The major shift I am advocating here entails not only asking questions typical of rhetorical analysis, such as “what audience(s) is this speaking to?”, “what kinds of appeals are present here, and how does this construct its appeals?”, and “what context(s) is this responding to?”, but supplementing these moves with close attention to questions like “to whom is this accountable?” Foregrounding accountability helps us answer not only questions like “for what audience(s) is this produced, when, and for what purposes?” but also more activist-oriented questions such as “whom does this rhetorical production center, and with what effects?” For instance, as author and activist Mia McKenzie, founder of Black Girl Dangerous Media, asserts, the experiences and perspectives of women of color, especially queer and trans women of color, “push feminist conversations to places where it would never be equipped to go,” and so “to be able to fully benefit from these analyses, they must be *centered*, not simply “included” (“How Can”). Audience, of course, remains vital, but audience also has some troubling assimilationist threads that must be challenged. In asking to whom a rhetorical production appeals, we are often asking to what degree such a production is made hearable or unhearable by the dominant, and to what degree it is resistant. As Kristi McDuffe argues, rhetoricians sometimes evaluate the success of public rhetoric without “question[ing] these measures of success” (77). For instance, McDuffe explains that rhetoricians often focus on how an example of public rhetoric is “effective for a broad, hegemonic audience” but not how it might “affect marginalized populations, such as disenfranchised people of color” (82).

A methodology for rhetorical analysis based on accountability can lead rhetoricians to ask not only in what contexts a rhetorical production is resistant or dominant, assimilationist or radical, but also to whom it is accountable, what it is accountable for, who is positioned at the center, who is positioned

as marginal, and how these dynamics of accountability and positionality are rhetorically constructed and with what effects. The purpose of this strategy is to foster practices that enable rhetoricians not only to study and deconstruct social justice rhetorics, but also to *enact* social justice principles through our research by building accountability to vulnerable communities. In the following section, I develop this framework of accountability and then demonstrate an accountability-based rhetorical analysis of moments of cross-community tension in *The Identity Project*.

## Defining Accountability for Activist Rhetorical Analysis

In rhetoric and composition, a strong body of scholarship in community engagement addresses how to build accountability to groups like community partners (Mathieu; Cushman; Ridolfo; Golblatt). Work in cultural rhetorics has also theorized accountability in community research, especially from a decolonial perspective. For example, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz draws on Wilson's concept of relational accountability as an indigenous research paradigm to develop a cultural rhetorics methodology for intercultural research (112). Here, I listen to and build alongside these cultural rhetorics approaches to researcher accountability through a methodological framework for rhetorical analysis. In rhetorical analysis—where researchers may deal with public texts, archival materials, or other artifacts without a specific community to interact with—researchers have few tools for unpacking how examples of public rhetoric enact or fail to enact accountability to threatened communities. In the case of rapidly changing and widely circulating digital rhetorics, enacting accountability becomes further complicated because communities may not be bounded by place, time, or shared identities and experiences, but may instead be disparate and constantly changing. However, power structures remain and rhetoricians still need ways to maintain accountability to multiply marginalized populations even in complex and ever-changing contexts like rhetorical analyses of digital activism.

Accountability is used as a concept in activist organizing to help facilitate conversations about oppression by foregrounding the experiences of those made most vulnerable by intersecting oppressions in a specific context and asking how other communities can be responsible to those most vulnerable (Johnson). Here, I use the term accountability specifically as it is theorized in transformative justice, an activist framework that develops responses to intra- and inter-community harm in ways that aim to *transform*, rather than *punish*, an individual or group that has engaged in oppressive behavior. Transformative justice a movement ideology that starts from the premise that

even oppressed communities do harm to each other, often through internalized power dynamics. Punitive responses to community harm only reinforce oppression because power works through punishment, in the form of state violence, policing, surveillance, and other mechanisms. In response to this need for creative ways to address harm that move beyond the punitive, transformative justice and trauma-informed activists have developed the concept of community accountability. As the radical feminist of color activist group INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence defines it, community accountability is a process through which a community can “commit to ongoing development of all members of the community, and the community itself, to transform the political conditions that reinforce oppression and violence.” Community members work toward this transformation by holding each other accountable for their actions and for how those actions can reinforce oppressive structures. Importantly, holding each other accountable does not mean making each other feel guilty or inflicting shame, but instead enacting a shared commitment to admitting complicity in oppression and ending oppressive practices.

This particular vision of community accountability emerges from the specific context of abuse and violence, but it has also been applied more broadly. As Chicana studies scholar Clarissa Rojas, co-editor of the INCITE anthology *Color of Violence*, writes: “community accountability is more than an antiviolence project. It is a liberation project that creates the potential and space for autonomous radical transformation in our lives and communities, seeking to transform the roots of violence” (79). Violence is understood here not only as a physical act, but also as psychological and as rhetorical: systemic inequity works insidiously and persuasively to inflict violence on those who are oppressed and to *normalize* this violence through the ways community members interact with each other. As Rojas writes, community accountability can be a pedagogical strategy as well—a way of learning to listen for evidence of violence, center those who have been wounded, and commit to moving forward in transformative ways (77). Such a strategy can also enrich rhetorical analysis and provide a tool for learning how to recognize violence.

Accountability works as a rhetorical methodology in the following ways. For one, it aligns with existing discussions of positionality and reflexivity in rhetorical analysis. For example, Krista Ratcliffe’s work on rhetorical listening includes accountability as one of the “fundamental rhetorical stances” offered through a rhetoric of listening meant to engage difference, building on bell hooks’ insistence that accountability is not meant to cause guilt or blame but rather to unite around a shared commitment to ending racism (“Racism” 158). However, an over-emphasis on listening can also potentially allow researchers to deflect responsibility and avoid action; for example, by placing too much of the burden on communities of color when they are constantly

asked to educate white communities. A deeper focus on accountability builds a way to supplement rhetorical listening with a more active allyship process. Accountability as a rhetorical methodology frames emotional reactions as a rhetorical exigence for self-interrogation, and insists that relations with others across differences in positionality and power are integral to rhetorical action. It also seeks to develop strategies to foster contextual awareness of who is vulnerable and in what ways, and how this shapes any interaction. Further, a focus on the impact on vulnerable communities becomes a key measure of a rhetorical action's efficacy, one that is especially suited to tracking rhetorical circulation. Accountability as a framework is also well suited to rhetorical analysis because practicing accountability is highly context-dependent. As Del Hierro, Levy, and Price explore, "Being conscious of our relationship to a discourse allows us to think about when we should center ourselves or when we should move to the margins" (4-5). In particular, interrogating who is rendered central and who is rendered marginal in a discourse can help ask how this discourse enacts or fails to enact accountability to threatened communities. The role of the researcher shifts beyond just being a critic and into a more responsible advocate.

In terms of rhetorical analysis, asking who is positioned at the center of a discourse invites us to consider how this positioning is constructed and with what effects, including what alternative effects might be possible if others were positioned at the center. For example, a feminist rhetoric that centers women of color deliberately places their experiences at the center of its messaging, leading to very different effects if it had instead centered white women. When struggles do not integrate frameworks that focus on those most vulnerable in a given context, this often leads to the reinforcement of a mainstream model of single-issue liberal politics that assumes what Cherríe Moraga calls a "trickle down effect" from the privileged to the less privileged, which actually only serves to improve circumstances for the privileged few while worsening conditions for all those who are left behind (xviii). Asking questions like *who is positioned at the center?* and *who is rendered marginal?* allow us to conduct more complex, intersectional analyses than those afforded by questions that might stop with "who is included?"

There are two important dimensions of accountability I want to unpack further here: being *accountable to* and being *accountable for*. The idea of being *accountable to* is more audience-oriented, asking to what groups or communities a rhetorical production is directly or indirectly accountable and to what extent a rhetorical production centers those most vulnerable in the context(s) it is working within. The idea of being *accountable for* is more rhetor-oriented and involves the extent to which a rhetor examines their power and privilege in a given context as a way of being accountable for addressing power

differentials in the context within which they are working. Combined, these aspects of accountability can help rhetoricians ask more productive questions about activist rhetorics that move beyond characterizations of dominance/resistance or assimilation/radicalism and into deeper examinations of power and privilege. The following section will demonstrate a rhetorical analysis based in the questions “to whom is this accountable in this context and to what affects?” and “for what is this accountable in this context and to what affects?” through a close reading of specific tensions in *The Identity Project* and its circulation.

## **An Accountability-Based Rhetorical Analysis of *The Identity Project***

Centering accountability in activist rhetoric requires changing the questions rhetoricians ask as a way of seeing dynamics of power and positionality that might otherwise go overlooked. This section applies the questions “accountable to whom?” and “accountable for what?” to an analysis of moments of tensions in *The Identity Project*. This framework offers productive ways for researchers to read moments of tension or difficulty in activist rhetorics that attempt to speak across differences in positionality.

### *Accountable to Whom?*

One aspect of accountability in activist communication involves asking to *whom* a rhetorical production is accountable and with what effects. To determine to whom something is accountable, rhetoricians can ask questions like: What communities are *included* in this, and what communities are *centered* in this, and how do we tell the difference? What audiences is this produced for, and what audiences may still experience its impact despite not being at the center of the messaging?

Starting from and centering the perspectives of those not usually represented in a given context can generate new and more productive questions about intersecting oppressions. From a Black Feminist perspective, bell hooks has clarified how living on a margin can provide “an oppositional world view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors” and that the most transformative feminist theory can emerge from this worldview (9-10). Patricia Hill Collins writes that “those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries” (70). More recently, Brittney Cooper argues that centering black women’s embodied theorizing in knowledge production can help feminist scholarship move beyond the “recovery imperative” (19). As Collins details, centering one group does not mean others cannot participate, but they must do so in ways that are explicitly responsible for furthering social

justice (37-8). As these scholars show, because new knowledge emerges when margins are moved to center, asking who is centered, not only who is included, is one way to access deeper questions about the transformative potential and the limits of rhetorical action in a given context. Rhetorical action that aims to *include* without also *being accountable* to specific communities risks stopping short of enacting this commitment to social justice. To explore the complexities of *being accountable to* in *The Identity Project*, I analyze a specific widely circulated image from its galleries and the circulation to consider what could change if rhetorical critics asked not only “who is included?” but also “to whom is this accountable, who is centered, and why?”

One image in *The Identity Project*'s first gallery, the Bay Area gallery, features a person from the waist up, shirtless, looking at the camera with eyes encircled by heavy black makeup. [See Fig. 2] The person wears a necklace and has placed their hands on the sides of their head. The image is labeled “Three Spirit.” This image was featured as the first image in a series of portraits from the Bay Area gallery in a March 7, 2014 article in the web magazine *PolicyMic* titled “27 Powerful Portraits Challenging the Definition of What It Means to Be LGBT.” Soon afterward, on March 12, 2014, a post began to circulate on the social media site Tumblr by user *shitrichcollegekidssay*, who argues about the use of the term “three spirit”: “I will be blunt. This is *racist*. Definitely and absolutely. The term ‘three spirit’ is an appropriative bastardization of Native Two-Spirit identities, roles which have very specific meaning that cannot be preserved outside of that cultural context” (emphasis in original). The post goes on to explain how the use of this term ties into a long history of appropriation of such terms, implicating the person who uses the identity label “three spirit,” Deragon for including it in the gallery, and *PolicyMic* for featuring it. According to statistics on the Tumblr post's page, as of October 2016 it had been liked, commented on, or reblogged on Tumblr more than six thousand times. Most interactions with the post are a reblog (which re-posts it to a user's own Tumblr site) without additional commentary, although some add a short commentary of their own, reinforcing the argument in the post with elaborations like the existence of many other terms to describe gender fluidity that are not appropriative, or pointing out possible caveats like the fact that without full context there is no way to be sure that the person in the image is white. While this post spread widely through Tumblr, I could not find any direct response from Deragon or *PolicyMic* to this critique. My argument is not that Deragon should be more of a gatekeeper or policer of the identity terms allowed in her project. Instead, I want to focus on the ways in which taking a complex look at this image and its reception as part of *The Identity Project* can reveal to whom this project fails to be accountable and with what effects.



Fig. 2 Photograph by Sarah Deragon.

This widely shared Tumblr post critiquing both the “three spirit” image and media circulation of this image presents an important critique of the queer self-determination celebrated across much commentary on *The Identity Project*. As detailed in the introduction to this article, the reception of the project has focused primarily on the power of visibility for LGBTQ individuals outside the “mainstream,” and the authority to choose one’s own identity labels as a corrective to dominant policing or erasure of LGBTQ identities, framing *The Identity Project’s* forms of visibility and authority as resistant acts. However, this Tumblr post’s critique of the “three spirit” image reveals the danger of celebrating an individualistic conception of authority over self-determination. As hooks insists, this type of liberal individualism is dangerous because of its easy co-optation into oppressive systems (8). While there is a lot of power in queer people naming their own identities against a culture that often refuses the validity of those identities, there is also a danger in celebrating queer self-identification without attention to the larger dynamics of privilege and positionality that allow some to claim any identity labels they want, to re-name themselves with self-invented terms or cherry-pick terms from other contexts, while others are still struggling for the recognition of identities with long histories. Thus, while this one photograph represents only one among a vast array of images and identity labels in *The Identity Project*, it is a telling example of the dangers of purely celebratory orientations toward queer articulations of

identity that do not enact accountability to those whose identities are especially threatened.

Identity terms like “two spirit” come from specific cultural locations that have been colonized, and the appropriation of such identities by white LGBTQ individuals and communities participates in ongoing colonization. Using those terms in a way that divorces them from their histories and cultural contexts constitutes an act known as cultural appropriation. The piecing-together orientation toward identity that *The Identity Project* advocates can inadvertently reinforce colonialist processes of appropriating identities, a process that works against queer aims of challenging dominant power structures. The “three spirit” image and subsequent critique also echoes discourses on the erasure of indigenous people in queer movements and queer theory. Such lack of attention enacts what Malea Powell describes as a willing act of unseeing the contemporary and historical oppression of Native bodies (4). As Qwo-Li Driskill summarizes, “This un-seeing—even if unintentional—perpetuates a master narrative in which Native people are erased from an understanding of racial formations, Native histories are ignored, Native people are thought of as historical rather than contemporary, and our homelands aren’t seen as occupied by colonial powers” (78). In addition, as Scott Lauria Morgenson details in his work on settler homonationalism, “critical reckonings with settler colonialism rarely have arisen in normatively white U.S. queer spaces, where the need for them is dire” (122). Morgenson emphasizes that non-Native queers are particularly accountable for these reckonings: “A first step for non-Native queers thus can be to examine critically and challenge how settler colonialism conditions their lives, as a step toward imagining new and decolonial sexual subjectivities, cultures, and politics” (124). *The Identity Project* is a digital arts activism project by a white queer woman that attempts to reckon with a variety of exclusions and erasures in mainstream queer discourse, but it does not specifically reckon with colonialism—enabling the “three spirit” image to go unchallenged in the project itself. The “three spirit” image, included as one in many of a uniformly designed digital gallery of photographs, at first blends into the pattern, one entry in the project’s argument about complex identities. It is listed in some media commentary as one item in a laundry list of difference; in June 2014, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* describes *The Identity Project’s* gallery “a heady mix of the familiar and the unique, containing lovely twists like ‘Three Spirit,’ ‘Sober Celibate Daddy-Father Punk,’ and ‘Xicanita y Cubanita,’” lumping the “three spirit” image in with others as a “lovely twist,” continuing to divorce these terms from their histories in order to mobilize them instead as part of a broad argument for contemporary explosions of LGBTQ identity terms.



Part of the problem here is that *The Identity Project's* intervention is framed entirely as a response to hetero- and homonormativity, but not as a response to colonization or white supremacy—which are also conditions that shape queerness and queer articulations of resistance. *The Identity Project* lacks any apparatus for interrogating the use of identity terms beyond the mission of celebrating queer self-determination. By trying to include everyone, it does not center anyone. By not specifically building practices to encourage such accountability, the project misses a chance to enact a deeper critique into colonialism and racism. This missed chance at intersectionality reveals the affordances and limitations of discourses of inclusivity versus accountability; instead of asking “Whom are we including here?”, a more productive question for challenging interconnected oppressions is “To whom are we accountable here?” One way to access these larger systemic questions is through asking to whom a rhetorical production is explicitly or implicitly accountable and how this accountability is enacted or not.

More specifically, a strategy to work against the pervasive construction of certain positions as the default (ex. whiteness, straightness, etc.) is by explicitly centering another positionality in activist messaging and examining what positions others present in the messaging occupy in relation to the center. It is important that this centering is explicit and consistently enacted, or else even well-meaning activist projects can slide into the tendency to serve those already privileged while leaving those most vulnerable behind. Further, to explore dynamics of privilege and positionality, activist rhetorics must not only ask to *whom* they are accountable, but also *for what* they are accountable, as the next section details.

### *Accountability for What?*

Another aspect of accountability involves asking *for what* is a rhetor(s) accountable in a specific context. To mobilize this idea in research, rhetorical critics can ask questions like: Is the rhetor working against differential locations of power and privilege, and how do they account for that? To what extent can those from differing social locations than the rhetor interact with and talk back to a rhetorical action? To what degree does the rhetor work to center the voices of those most threatened in the context the rhetorical action is responding to? Is the model only additive (adding more people, more voices, more diversity) or does it build structures for accountability (asking what about the action *changes* if different people are centered in that action's development)?

It is important to frame the idea of *being accountable* for one's privilege in a given context as different from *apologizing* for that privilege. Apology in anti-racist discourse often serves as a form of self-defense in which the privileged insist they did not intend a racist act, which re-centers the privileged in the

discussion and allows for an avoidance of accountability (Ratcliffe 88-9). I want to clarify here that my goal is not to condemn *The Identity Project* or Deragon as a rhetor in a way that assigns blame. My goal is instead to use *The Identity Project* as an occasion to ask how rhetorical critics can engage in more productive readings of cross-community activism.

In a reading strategy for accountability-based rhetorical analysis, one way to move away from assigning blame and toward interrogating accountability is to ask what is marked and what is unmarked in the context under study. As Moraga explains, sometimes asking what is absent can tell us even more than examining what is present: "It is not always a matter of the actual bodies in the room, but of a life dedicated to a growing awareness of who and what is *missing* in that room; and responding to that absence. *What ideas never surface because we imagine we already have all the answers?*" (xix) In the case of *The Identity Project*, whiteness and cisgenderedness are two telling absences in the galleries. As of this writing, in the galleries of photographs and identity labels, the word "white" does not appear at all. Only one photo features the word "cisgender" ("black gay queer feminist cisgendered man"). This leads to instances where, for instance, a white, cisgender individual may be able to identify as just "lesbian" while those who do not occupy these usually invisible subject positions may append other identity labels to the term, such as "trans lesbian" or "lesbian of color"; here, the image of the white, cis lesbian has inadvertently reified conceptions of the white, cis gay subject as universal, an enduring problem in queer theory and activism. As Annette Harris Powell describes, whiteness is "the normative principle that defines the American experience historically, socially, and politically" (21). As a normative principle, whiteness is intricately tied to heteronormativity, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression, meaning that resistant formulations of queerness that only challenge heteronormativity without considering these other systems will inevitably remain limited, and often "haunted" by unmarked whiteness (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe).

Staying conscious of the fact that many *Identity Project* photo subjects are multiply marginalized and trying to work against that marginalization, participant choice cannot be left out here, and I cannot infer anything about the participants based only on their images and chosen text (for instance, a trans woman may choose not to identify as trans in this context, or a person of color may choose to foreground other identity labels for the purposes of this project, choices that are valid just as their opposites are). However, it is telling that the project did not *enable* any participants to identify as white, and only a limited number to identify as cisgender. This lack of white or cisgender identifications is not the specific fault of the participants; it is instead a limitation of the project's messaging and mission, which shape participant actions such

as their choice of identity labels. The overall attitude of the project indicates that participants should choose identity labels they are proud of and want to celebrate. Of course, the celebration of whiteness or cisgenderness would be at odds with the mission of the project and would be deeply troubling in itself, as these are categories already unfairly privileged in society. However, there are other ways to examine privileged categories like whiteness, especially as a mode of critique; for instance, as Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe write, naming whiteness can serve “*not* to reify the category *white* and uphold an oppressive social structure of *whiteness* but, rather, to name the terms and engage them as a means of understanding their operations and collaborating in the dismantlement of their oppressions, being always cognizant of power differentials associated with differing cultural locations” (8). A wholly celebratory orientation toward resistant rhetoric does not allow for a deeper examination of the dynamics behind who gets to choose which identity labels, what they do with them, and what histories of power and oppression are engaged in these choices.

As “The Identity Project Story” on the website explains, “Sarah believes that *The Identity Project* resonates with people because the photo project pushes up against the preconceived notions of what it is to be LGBTQ in today’s society. Not only are the portraits striking, the participants in the project are playing with language, making up entirely new terms (transgenderqueer or inbetween) and showing pride in their complex and ever-changing identities.” These ideas—pushing against homonormative, preconceived notions of LGBTQ identity, playing with language to make up terms, and showing pride in identities—enable certain kinds of action but constrain others. They enable the construction of counter-messages to hetero- and homonormativity, but not interrogations of how these are deeply connected with other systems of oppression. Celebrating an acontextual queer self-determination thus risks reinforcing a discourse of individualism that goes hand in hand with assumptions of white universalism that, as whiteness scholar Robin DiAngelo explains, “allows whites to view themselves as unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages in the culture” (59). *The Identity Project* does not interrogate the racial messages that always intersect with and shape heteronormativity. This lack of connection leads to juxtapositions where a white person may be able to claim a totally invented identity term because of the presumption of being “unique and original,” next to someone claiming a term with a long and complicated history as a way of locating themselves in that history—ideas that are very much an unexplored tension across the photographs. A deeper challenge to hetero- and homonormativity as it shapes queer choices to identify would need to intersect with racism and

other axes of oppression in order to develop a fuller understanding of the power dynamics that enable and constrain certain kinds of identification.

By aiming for inclusivity but not building structures for enacting accountability, *The Identity Project* inadvertently reifies the white queer subject as able to claim an identity as “just” queer, or trans, or anything else they choose, without interrogating these positions and the reasons why they are able to claim them without question. And because these interrogations are not deliberately foregrounded in the project itself, the absences get reproduced in the media circulation of *The Identity Project*. This celebration without interrogation is characteristic of much popular discourses on LGBTQ identity terms that champion individualism, but do not pay close enough attention to the limits of individualism for systemic change. However, interrogating one’s own positionality in relation to others is a key element of an accountability-based activist rhetoric. As Del Hierro, Levy, and Price posit, engaging with others across differences brings to light “the need to make unreflective practices visible, and call[s] for accountability of all present bodies” in the form of “a willingness of all present bodies to mark themselves in public, as part of a larger effort, and in relationship to each other” (8-9). Such “marking” or identifying is not only a celebration of individual bodies, but also a deeper consideration of relationality (Riley-Mukavetz). Pritchard describes unmarked positions as “the slippages around identity, power, and privilege that every scholarly discourse aimed at social justice must confront,” arguing that “such slippages cannot be corrected through silence, present-absence, guilt, or overlooking the calls and models for intervention. Rather, redress means action” (44). *The Identity Project* enables such “slippages” to occur where certain dynamics of power and privilege are left unmarked.

*The Identity Project’s* messaging in part enables participants to participate in an act of resistance against a dominant culture that polices or silences their identities, refusing them the authority to describe their own embodied experiences. However, the messaging also constrains the ability of participants to not only celebrate, but also interrogate their identities. This interrogation would be most useful for those who may not think to identify as something like “white” or “cisgender” because the interrogation itself might reveal that they had been considering those terms invisible defaults that did not need to be marked. For example, participants could be invited to interrogate the idea that cisgender is a universal norm, whereas transgender is represented as a deviation from the norm—as opposed to a view that cisgender and transgender are different ways of relating to the gender one was assigned at birth, or even that assigning gender at birth can be understood as a form of coercion. This interrogation can reveal how the framing of cisgender as a default or

universal is a function of a dominant culture that is oppressive to transgender people—a culture deeply in need of disruption and troubling.

My argument is thus not that whiteness, cisgenderedness, or any other forms of privilege should be named in *The Identity Project* as an end goal. Instead, asking whether forms of privilege are named in a specific context can be one heuristic strategy that encourages participants to ask deeper structural questions, like why might a particular environment be predominately white, cisgender, or made up of other privileged categories; what impediments may there be to changing this dynamic; how it could be different; and what we are seeing and not seeing based on our positions and the fact that privilege can often cause someone to overlook oppressions they do not experience. In short, naming various aspects of positionality and placing them in relation with others present in a given context helps us ask new questions that aim not only to recover the ways in which communities advocate for themselves, but also how communities advocate for each other.

## Conclusion

In the study and production of activist rhetorics, being *accountable* to vulnerable communities in a given context and *accountable for* the positionalities one brings to this context can enable deeper interrogations of societal power structures and more complex questions of advocacy across power differentials. For instance, what would *The Identity Project* look like if its mission were to be specifically accountable to trans women of color? It would be quite different from what it is now. A project like this, perhaps instead of trying to include everyone, could center on and enact accountability to a specific community *and* work in coalition with other projects who are primarily accountable to other communities.<sup>1</sup> Of course, no one activist project can represent all LGBTQ communities or solve all problems related to systemic oppressions. However, coalitional models can get closer to this goal by developing specific tools for acting responsibly to improve conditions for multiply marginalized communities.

As rhetoricians expand our analyses into more sites of activism and continue investigating what changes about rhetorical theories and praxes through the incorporation of more communities, we also need to remain conscious of the fact that all axes of identity and oppression are always in

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1 For additional examples of queer activist photography projects in digital spaces that represent a variety of positionalities, I suggest the following: Meg Allen's *Butch*; Joan Lobis Brown's *New Alternatives*; Toni Latour's *The Femme Project*; Rachel Lee Smith's *Queer Youth in Focus*; Zanele Muholi's *Faces & Phases*; and Berndt Ott and Emily Besa's *All the People*.

dynamic relationship with other identities, histories, and systems of power. To ask more generative questions about cross-community advocacy and relationality, it is necessary to develop methodologies for rhetorical analysis that ask not only what axes of identity and oppression are included, but also what is centered and to what effects. A rhetorical methodology based in the concept of accountability offers one such way to study complex activist rhetorics by not stopping at critique or reinforcing an assimilationist/radical binary, but instead understanding the complex dynamics of relationality and positionality behind any example of activist rhetoric. Most importantly, an accountability-based rhetorical methodology provides generative questions for researching and analyzing activist rhetorics in ways that are responsible to communities made vulnerable through intersecting oppressions.

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