

One Gay Day: Heteronormativity in Action

Emma Spruce, a PhD student at the Gender Institute, writes a witty critique of how heteronormativity functions in everyday interactions and how labeling from outside and within the LGBTQI community inhibits identity formation, recognition, and social change. This article has been published collaboratively with [LSE Equality and Diversity](#) and [LSE Engenderings Blog](#) to mark LGBT History Month.

I let the market researcher in by accident. I'd noticed on the careen down the 4 flights of stairs to the front door that, under my PhD students' uniform of a floral dressing gown (V&A sale), I had a Stonewall 'Some people are gay. Get over it!' t-shirt on. Upstairs, I had been lost in the world of pondering and so I was a bit flustered. When the woman stepped towards me I stepped back, and then, with chess-master-like tactics she was in the hallway and I was left clutching my dressing gown closed (unfortunately, it had been such a bargain because the tie had been lost) as I answered questions on my fiscal health. I can tell you, circling a 1-10 score on how much you trust the government with your money when you're trying not to expose your sexuality is quite a challenge.

After a mutually confusing ten minutes (how did I buy food if I didn't work? Was I sure I wasn't a teenager?) the researcher concluded with "Have a good day...you look so young. And you're pretty. God will bless you with a husband soon". Because I was still flustered I replied "You too", smiled, and closed the door on her quite perplexed face. As I walked back up the stairs to my ivory rented terrace I wondered about all the projections that the conversation had included, and the fact that my t-shirt, once a wardrobe staple, is now relegated to under-dressing-gown wear.

Firstly, the projections:

I do not want a husband.



In fact, I have never wanted a husband. In the spirit of honesty I believe I did once want to be a farmer's wife. I'm not certain why but it suspiciously correlated with ownership of some very well-loved wellington-boots which made me feel sturdy and bold. To be clear, I also don't want to be a husband. And I don't want a wife. Those terms do not have general histories that I want to be part of- I'm not a gift and I don't want you to obey me. LGBT lovestories should have legal protection and social recognition but I also want my gay voice to be a voice for keeping possibilities open and making histories plural- I don't want marriage to be the benchmark for 'personal life' success, because as soon as it is that means that most of us will 'fail'; some of us will choose to, some of us will have no option. For all of us though, LGBTQI and straight, the chance to build on an amazing history would be lost if this one institution dominated our future.

I do not want to be 'pretty'.

I like the architecture of my body, I know that there are people who are turned on by my body and my head- its harmonies and its discords, and I like to dress up. But the thing is, I get to choose what kind of hot I want to be. Just because I have breasts and hips doesn't mean I feel best when dressed as a 'feminine hourglass'. Some people rock that look, but it doesn't make me feel right inside. I'm not going to wear black because it slims and I'm not going to wear heels because it elongates my legs. I don't 'dress like a lesbian', (partly because they haven't made that website yet, I just checked) but sometimes when I put on trousers and a shirt and stride down the road on my short legs I remember the people who, throughout history, haven't conformed to gender/sex codes and it makes me feel connected, proud and strong. In a media saturated world I [hope that](#)



LGBTQI communities continue to make spaces possible that allow individuals to play with the ways they walk, talk, dress and live.

‘Been there, got the t-shirt’

I got my Stonewall t-shirt a few years ago when I did some volunteering there. I definitely wore it out. (Although I always thought to bring a jumper for the bus ride home alone.) Over time I started developing a more nuanced understanding of my own sexuality- partly the effects of more exposure to queer theory, trans activism and critiques of how ‘homonormative’ gay rights could be. Suddenly the t-shirt, and this specific campaign, didn’t align with the political part of my attraction to women, lesbianism and soft-buttness. I still support the no-nonsense part of the message that calls you to ‘get over it’ but I wish there was more of a choice for the first part.

This week Cynthia Nixon stated that “I understand that for many people it’s not, but for me [homosexuality is] a choice” and a lot of the responses from gay and lesbian bloggers and commenters have chastised her. These seem to have come from two directions: 1) Even though you mostly refer to yourself as a lesbian, I have decided that you are bisexual. As such you may be able to choose but, as I am ‘fully’ gay, I cannot or 2) Own Goal! No matter how you feel you should shhhh because you’ll fuel those who don’t want to give gays rights!

Neither of these are encouraging responses.

Choosy Bisexual Women

To tell someone that they have misnamed their own sexuality seems to fly entirely in the face of LGBT history. To build from that misnaming to reiterate tired old rhetoric about the flexibility of women’s sexualities does neither men nor women favours. It supports hegemonic masculinity by endowing it with an immovable and ‘ideal’ heterosexuality. For me, this approach also implies that women’s sexuality and pleasure is second rate. This is something which, growing up watching representations of lesbians (and straight women) in the media engage in heavily emotional but decidedly un lusty relationships, feels incredibly patronising. And, fyi, bisexuality can be a choice, I would imagine, but it also might not be. It isn’t a half measure of gay mixed with fickle.

As for the ‘own goal’ argument

At the moment I’m reading a lot on LGBT rights and the law etc. and I see the logic to this. It’s hard to see how rights can be conceptualised without resorting to identity politics, but to me it’s also clear that when identity politics shows up, someone gets left out because they don’t fit the ‘ten ways to recognise a lesbian’ briefing sheet. These exclusionary effects are equally the case for those who argue that gayness is only ‘born’- whilst it might make certain achievements easier for gays, it puts gates in place which keep others’ with non normative preferences or identities which can’t be claimed as immutable ‘out’. At the end of the day I think that LGBTQI history is full of revolutionary ideas; people have fought for their truth(s) when it would have made political ‘sense’ to compromise and keep the less easily consumable things inside the closet. Some of us are born to gayness, some of us feel there was some choice there, but all of us can refuse to be packaged up with our futures foreclosed. We can do our bit to not take our piece of cake and retreat to the corner to eat it, but ask about the ingredients and whether it wouldn’t be better to make a pie.

Emma is a first year PhD candidate at the Gender Institute, tentatively researching lesbian communities and identity formation. Having previously studied at Sheffield University and Sciences-Po (Paris), Emma then taught at the University of Versailles St-Quentin before returning to the UK to do a Masters at LSE. This post was written in bed under the influence of very strong coffee and too much sugar- graduate student life is wild.



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