

I AM GAY—BUT I WASN'T BORN THIS WAY

BRANDON AMBROSINO

"You can't be gay."
She was on top of me.

It wasn't a command—it was a challenge. You so obviously cannot be gay, was her implication, because this is good sex.

It was 2006, a full five years before Lady Gaga would set the Born This Way argument atop its unassailable cultural perch, but even then, the popular understanding of [sexual] orientation was that it was something you were born with, something you couldn't change. If you happened to engage in activity that ran counter to your sexual identity, then you had two options: you were lying to yourself and everyone else, or you were just experimenting. The sexual categories were rigid. Fixed. They weren't subject to human imagination or experimentation—to the frustration of many sociologists, and kids, like myself, who found themselves inexplicably in bed with a player from the other team.

My sexual journey through college was anything but run-of-the-mill. I came out at a conservative Christian college in the U.S. and was in a gay relationship for around two years with a basketball player who ended up marrying a woman. During that time, we both pal'd around with girls on the side. I even went so far as to fall in love with one. To this day, she and I joke about how she was the only girl I was ever in love with, and how I would've been quite happy marrying her. As a writer, this kind of complicated story is incredibly interesting to me—mostly because it shows that my own personal history resists the kind of easy classifications that have come to dominate discussions of

sexuality. Well, you must have been gay the whole time, some might think, and because of some religious shame, you decided to lie to yourself and experiment with a girl. But that was nothing more than a blip in the road. After all, most kids experiment with heterosexuality in college, don't they? If so, that "blip in the road" has always been a thorn in my flesh. How do I explain that I was honestly in love with a woman? Some people might argue that I am innately bisexual, with the capacity to love both women and men. But that doesn't feel like an accurate description of my sexual history; either, I'm only speaking for myself here. But what feels most accurate to say is that I'm gay—but I wasn't born this way.

In 1977, just over 10% of Americans thought gayness was something you were born with, according to Gallup. That number has steadily risen over time and is currently somewhere between 42% and 50%, depending on the poll. Throughout the same period, the number of Americans who believe homosexuality is "due to someone's upbringing/environment" fell from just under 60% to 37%. These ideas reached critical mass in pop culture, first with Lady Gaga's 2011 *Born This Way* and one year later with Macklemore's *Same Love*, the chorus of which has a gay person singing, "I can't change even if I tried, even if I wanted to." Videos started circulating on the internet featuring gay people asking straight people "when they chose to be straight." Around the same time, the Human Rights Campaign

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As Jane Ward notes in *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*, what's interesting about many of these claims is how transparent their speakers are with their political motivations. "Such statements," she writes, "infuse biological accounts with an obligatory and nearly coercive force, suggesting that anyone who describes homosexual desire as a choice or social construction is playing into the hands of the enemy." People who challenge the Born

This Way narrative are often cast as homophobic, and their thinking is considered backward—even if they are themselves gay. Take, for example, Cynthia Nixon of *Sex and the City* fame. In a 2012 interview with *New York Times Magazine*, the actress casually mentioned that homosexuality was, for her, a choice. "I understand that for many people it's not, but for me it's a choice, and you don't get to define my gayness for me." The blogger John Aravosis was one of many critics who pounced on Nixon. "Every religious right hatemonger is now going to quote this woman every single time they want to deny us our civil rights," Aravosis leveled the same accusations against me in 2014 when I wrote a piece for *The New Republic* discussing my own complicated sexual history. Calling me "idiotic" and "patently absurd," Aravosis wrote, "The gay haters at the religious right couldn't have written it any better." For Aravosis, and many gay activists like him, the public will only accept and affirm gay people if they think they were born gay. And yet the available research does not support this view. Patrick Grzanka, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee, for instance, has shown that some people who believe that homosexuality is innate still hold negative views of gays. In fact, the homophobic and non-homophobic respondents he studied declared unequivocally that "being gay is not a choice," and to claim that it is "gives unwarranted credence to roundly disproven practices such as conversion or reparative therapy."

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shared similar levels of belief in a Born This Way ideology.

As Samantha Allen notes at *The Daily Beast*, the growing public support for gays and lesbians has grown out of proportion with the rise in the number of people who believe homosexuality is fixed at birth: it would be unlikely that this small change in opinion could explain the spike in support for gay marriage, for instance. Instead, she suggests it hinges on the fact that far more people are now personally acquainted with someone who is gay. In 1985, only 24% of American respondents said they had a gay friend, relative, or co-worker—in 2013, that number was at 75%. "It doesn't seem to matter as much whether or not people believe that gay people are born that way as it does that they simply know someone who is currently gay," Allen concludes. In spite of these studies, those who push against Born This Way narratives have been heavily criticized by gay activists. "They tell me my own homo-negativity is being manifested in my work," says Grzanka. Similarly, Ward has received her own hate mail for pushing against the ruling LGB narratives. . . . And when I published my essay on choosing to be gay, an irate American lesbian activist wrote me that it had "just been confirmed" to her that my writing was "directly responsible for four gay deaths in Russia."

While I can understand why some contemporary activists (and the journalists who seem beholden to their agendas) might chalk up recent gains in LGB acceptance to Born This Way's cultural infiltration, activism must be founded upon facts and truths, or the whole program will eventually turn out to be a sham. Drowning out every voice that dares to question dominant cultural narratives is not the same thing as invalidating the arguments those voices are making. As Ward says, "Just because an argument is politically expedient doesn't make it true." So what does the science say about Born This Way?

Let's first be clear that whatever the origins of our sexual orientation, there is a unanimous opinion that gay "conversion therapy" should be rejected. These efforts are potentially harmful, according to the APA, "because they present the view that the sexual orientation of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth is a mental illness or disorder, and they often frame the inability to change one's sexual orientation as a personal and moral failure." Little wonder these therapies have been shown to provoke anxiety, depression and even suicide. In other words, the question of the efficacy of conversion therapies is a non-issue. We condemn these efforts not just because we don't think they work—perhaps anyone could be tortured into liking or disliking anything?—but because they're immoral. The question of what leads to homosexuality in the first place, however, is obscure, even to the experts. The APA, for example, while noting that most people *experience* little to no choice over their orientations, says this of homosexuality's origins: "Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors." Similarly, the American Psychiatric Association writes in a 2013 statement that while the causes of heterosexuality and homosexuality are currently unknown, they are likely "multifactorial including biological and behavioral roots which may vary between different individuals and may even vary over time."

True, various eye-grabbing headlines over the years have claimed that some scientists have found something like The Gay Gene. In 1991, for example, neuroscientist Simon LeVay published findings that he claimed suggest that "sexual orientation has a biological substrate." According to LeVay's research, a specific part of the brain, the third interstitial nucleus of the

anterior hypothalamus (INAH-3), is smaller in homosexual men than it is in heterosexual men. You can spot the problem with this study a mile away: were the gay brains LeVay studied born that way, or did they become that way? LeVay himself pointed this out to *Discover* magazine in 1994: "Since I looked at adult brains, we don't know if the differences I found were there at birth or if they appeared later." Further, the brains LeVay studied belonged to AIDS victims, so he couldn't even be sure if what he was seeing had something to do with the disease.

Another landmark paper on the origins of homosexuality was published in 1993 by a geneticist named Dean Hamer, who was interested to learn whether homosexuality could be inherited. Beginning from his observation that there are more gay relatives on a mother's side than a father's, Hamer turned his attention to the X chromosome (which is passed on by the mother). He then recruited 40 pairs of gay brothers and got to work. What he found was that 33 of those brothers shared matching DNA in the Xq28, a region in the X chromosome. Hamer's conclusion? He believes there's about "99.5% certainty that there is a gene (or genes) in this area of the X chromosome that predisposes a male to become a heterosexual." A 2015 study sought to confirm Hamer's findings, this time with a much larger sample: 409 pairs of gay brothers. Researchers were pleased with their findings, which they claimed "support the existence of genes on . . . Xq28 influencing development of male sexual orientation." But not everyone finds the results convincing, according to *Science*. For one thing, the study relied on a technique called linkage, which has been widely replaced by genome-wide association studies. It's also noteworthy that Sanders himself urged his study to be viewed with a certain caution. "We don't think genetics is the whole story," he said. "It's not." And as Allen points out, there have also been studies that found no "X-linked gene

underlying male homosexuality." Perhaps predictably, these studies haven't received as much media coverage. Besides the individual critiques leveled against each new study announcing some gay gene discovery, there are major methodological criticisms to make about the entire enterprise in general, as Grzanka points out: "If we look at the ravenous pursuit, particularly among American scientists, to find a gay gene, what we see is that the conclusion has already been arrived at. All science is doing is waiting to find the proof."

The other problem with Born This Way science is summed up nicely by Simon Copland: "Scientists are asking whether homosexuality is natural when we can't even agree exactly what homosexuality is." Grzanka agrees. "If you know anything about social constructionism, then you know these sexual categories are very recent. How then could they be rooted in our genome?" Our desires may express themselves in many different ways that do not all conform to existing notions of "gay," "straight" or "bisexual." This is one of the best takeaways of Ward's *Not Gay*, a penetrating analysis of sex between straight white men. Gay men make up only a fraction of the U.S. population—yet Ward says that there are many men not included in that number who engage in homosexual behavior. Why, then, do some men who have sex with men identify as gay, and others identify as heterosexual? This question interests her far more than "how were they born?" Ward stresses that not all straight-identifying men who have sex with men are bisexual or closeted, and we do a disservice if we force those words on them. That's because terms like "heterosexual" and "straight" and "bisexual" and "gay" come with all sorts of cultural baggage attached. Crucially, she argues, "whether or not this baggage is appealing is a separate matter altogether from the appeal of homosexual or heterosexual sex." Even if you accept that sexual desire may exist on a kind of spectrum, the predominant idea is still immutable—we know all our desires are our experience of the straight book's content. But Ward's text, which that sparks a debate, is different. But Ward's text, which that sparks a debate, is different. But Ward's text, which that sparks a debate, is different. But Ward's text, which that sparks a debate, is different.

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idea is still that these desires are innate and immutable—but this runs counter to what we know about human taste, says Ward. "Our desires are oriented and re-oriented based on our experiences throughout our lives." In fact, the straight-identified men Ward studied for her book sometimes found themselves in situations that sparked the desire for homosexual sex: fraternities, deployments, public restroom, etc. But Ward doesn't conclude these are somehow repressed or latent gay men. Rather, she argues that they—like all of us—have come to desire bodies and genitals within specific social contexts pregnant with "significant cultural and erotically charged meanings." In other words, what they want isn't the "raw fact" of a man's body, but what it represents in a certain context. Why might we be uncomfortable asking whether and how much control we each possess over our "full range of erotic possibilities," as Ward calls it? "What would it mean to think about people's capacity to cultivate their own sexual desires, in the same way we might cultivate a taste for food?" she asks. Ward thinks this question is the next frontier of queer thought.

When I first said I chose to be gay, a queer American journalist challenged me to name the time and date of my choice. But this is an absurd way to look at desire. You might as well ask someone to name the exact moment they began liking Chaucer or disliking Hemingway. When did I begin to prefer lilacs to roses? What time did the clock read at the exact moment I fell in love with my partner? All of our desires are continually being shaped throughout our lives, in the very specific contexts in which we discover and release them.

Thinking back to my college romances with women and men, I can begin to understand how my own experiences might have helped me to cultivate my desire for homosexuality. I want to be very clear: I'm not claiming I simply began to "grow into" my homosexuality, or that as I became more comfortable with being

gay. I allowed myself the freedom to express what had always been latent within me. I'm claiming that at some point during college, my sexual and romantic desires became reoriented toward men. These desires suggested to me a queer identity, which I at first reluctantly accepted and then passionately embraced. This new identity in turn helped reinforce and grow new gay desires within me. Granted, none of this means that there were no genetic or prenatal factors that went into the construction of my or any other sexual orientation. It just means that even if those factors exist, many more factors do too. So why not encourage conversations about those other things?

Humans aren't who and what we are because of one gene. We're who and what we are for a variety of reasons, and some of it might have something to do with how our genes randomly interact with our environments. But that's not the whole story, and to engage in discourse that pretends it is—regardless of the nobility of the intentions—could have "profound and very negative consequences" for the LGBT community, says Grzanka. "Limiting our understanding of any complex human experience is always going to be worse than allowing it to be complicated," he says.

So what are we to do with the Born This Way rhetoric? I would suggest that it's time to build a more nuanced argument—regardless of how good a pop song the current one makes. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, and most importantly, it's just not the truth, as we currently understand it. The evidence to date offers no consensus that the Born This Way argument is the beginning and end of the story. We should stop pretending that it does.

Secondly, the entire search for a gay gene is predicated upon the assumption that homosexuality is not the natural or "default" state of a developing human. "Something had to happen to make that man gay!" But why cede such enormous ground to those who believe some-

brains? For that matter, why play their game and pretend the only forms of difference that deserve justice are those we were born with?

"That's a very narrow understanding of what justice looks like," says Ward. What about the concern that homophobes will want to "encourage" gay people to be straight if there's no biological basis for sexuality? Let's turn it around. Is it not equally true that "finding a gay gene" might inspire the same homophobes to "find a cure" for homosexuals? It doesn't take too much creativity to imagine a scenario in which homophobic parents, upon being informed their fetus has "the gay gene," choose what to them may seem the lesser of two evils: abortion.

Finally, I would argue that the Born This Way narrative can actively damage our perceptions of ourselves. In my sophomore year of college, I attended a Gay Student Alliance event at a nearby campus. It was the last meeting before Thanksgiving break, and the theme was coming out to your families. The idea was that the students would rehearse the coming-out speech that they'd deliver while they were home. Student after student, while sobbing hysterically, said something like this: "Mom, you see how much pain this is causing me! Of course I'd want to be straight if it were up to me. This is just who I am! You have to accept that because I can't change that." I wanted to grab each of them and say, "Being gay is not a handicap. It's OK to be queer even if you choose to be queer—and you should want to be queer! Because we are beautiful and fabulous," Ward sees this as a self-hating narrative. "Could you imagine if the dominant narrative of people of color was 'Well, of course I'd want to be white if I could. Wouldn't everyone want to be white?' That's so racist! We'd never accept that story."

Perhaps it is time to look to the beginning of the gay rights movement. "Queer Nation and earlier movements in the U.S. were not fundamentally organized around Born This

QUEER: IDENT

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Fortunately, we have now made enormous strides in understanding and affirming our queer sexualities. Some experts have even started using categories like "mostly straight" and "mostly gay" to try and expand our limited ways of viewing human sexuality. A recent UK poll from J. Walter Thompson Innovation group found that only 48% of Generation Z (ages 18–24) identify as "100% heterosexual." Respondents were asked to rate themselves on a scale from zero (which signified "completely straight" to six ("completely homosexual"). More than 2

Queer: Identity and Praxis

Maura Ryan

You're probably familiar with the word *queer* being used as a catchall term for all gender and sexual minorities (GSMs), and it is often used for brevity in place of listing various LGBT identities. Certainly, some of its appeal is that it can be used as an umbrella term that simply identifies an individual as not heterosexual rather than

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third chose a number between one and five. . . . [T]he Generation Z findings don't signal some evolutionary shift over the last 15 years. Rather, they show that the times—the "nurture" part of the nature/nurture dichotomy—are changing. Homosexuality isn't considered taboo. Heterosexuality isn't (always) considered the compulsory norm. And importantly, each isn't always constructed in opposition to the other.

I'm thankful for a new generation that is capable of imagining sexuality in a way that transcends the gay/straight binary, that couldn't care less about what happened to their bodies and minds to make them who they are today. I'm hopeful that for this generation, sexual histories like mine and Cynthia Nixon's aren't seen as threatening, but liberating. I don't think I was born gay. I don't think I was born straight. I was born the way all of us are born: as a human being with a seemingly infinite capacity to announce myself, to re-announce myself, to try on new identities like spring raincoats, to play with limiting categories, to challenge them and topple them, to cultivate my tastes and preferences, and, most importantly, to love and to receive love.

Queer: Identity and Praxis

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You're probably familiar with the word *queer* being used as a catchall term for all gender and sexual minorities (GSMs), and it is often used for brevity in place of listing various LGBT identities. Certainly, some of its appeal is that it can be used as an umbrella term that simply identifies an individual as not heterosexual rather than

trying them to a particular identity. But in addition to being an umbrella term, *queer* also has its own specific social history, its own unique meaning, and a particular political stance.

The word *queer* was once only a slur the dominant society used to mock nonnormative sexualities and genders, which is why some LGBT

people are still offended by the term. However, for a segment of this community, it became formally reclaimed and redefined following the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s. The government was hostile toward the marginalized communities affected, perceived at first to be only gay men, IV drug users, and sex workers. President Ronald Reagan eschewed discussion of HIV/AIDS while in office and his successor, President George H. W. Bush, remarked that the government had no business helping people who are in their predicament because of their immoral behaviors (Gould, 2009). Politicians, media pundits, and religious figures were either completely silent on the matter or celebratory about the deaths of social "misfits." In short, "AIDS offered the wish fulfillment of a homicidal culture that knows fags have always been, and must always be, already dead" (Stanley, 2012: 159). Rather than allowing the government to rationalize its negligence with the narrative that gay promiscuity caused the outbreak of the illness, a radical direct-action organization called ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) reasoned that it was homophobia itself that was responsible for what they called a genocide of gay people, and that the proper way to fight their inaction was to flaunt their nonconformity unapologetically. They wanted a word that was gender neutral—that could be used to describe gay men or lesbians—and that made it clear they were no longer playing nice. By 1990, this word that had been used against them—*queer*—now meant "to be righteously angry about homophobia and the AIDS crisis, politically militant, free of shame about nonnormative sexualities, and unconcerned about social acceptance" (Gould, 2009: 191). In fact, in 1990 the first specifically queer organization formed: Queer Nation. In their manifesto, "Queers Read This," they defined *queer* this way:

Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means every day fighting oppression, homophobia

and our own self-hatred. (We have been carefully taught to hate ourselves.) And now, of course, it means fighting a virus as well, and all those haters who are using AIDS to wipe us off the face of the earth. Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night. (Anonymous Queers, 1990: 2)

According to Belant and Freeman (1993), Queer Nation "always refus[e]d] closeting strategies of assimilation and [went] for the broadest and most explicit assertion of presence." Their demand to be acknowledged as part of the culture is expressed in their most recognizable protest chant, "We're here! We're Queer! Get used to it!" They reject a "politics of respectability" that would be a faster avenue to legislative change; actually, they often reject legislative change altogether. As opposed to the liberal "add and stir" approach of asking for entry into institutions that have previously excluded them (e.g., marriages, military service), they follow a radical approach that problematizes those very institutions. While gay and lesbian activists would call for same-sex couples to be included in the institution of marriage, a queer politics would assert that marriage is a patriarchal institution by which the state regulates sexuality, relationships, and families. Queer activists would call for the rights associated with marriage to flow through other channels, working on national health care and immigration reform rather than marriage equality.

These different perspectives on social change, one for equality and one for liberation, flow from different perspectives on identity. The mainstream liberal agenda for civil rights is influenced by an identity politics: Gay and lesbian identities are neatly and objectively defined, homophobia is the problem, and gay people deserve the same

The queer radical agenda for cultural transformation is influenced by a deconstructivist politics: gender and sexuality are fluid and believed to be socially constructed labels; heteronormativity (the structuring of social life around heterosexuality and its mores, such as monogamy and gender conformity) is the problem, and all people deserve the right to sexual freedom (Garnson, 1995). According to Shepard (2001), this division between those who believe it's best to assimilate to the dominant culture (the group he calls "the suits") and those who believe full sexual liberation is the only objective (the group he calls "the sluts") has always been present in modern LGBT communities, which in the United States is traceable back to the 1940s, but it was the rise of queer identity and queer politics that cemented this divide.

The queer politics has a "deconstructivist" aim; queer activists want to deconstruct what they believe is a meaningless social construct—the divide between heterosexual and homosexual and between man and woman. Queer offers a new way to conceive of desire that does not conform to the binary of straight and gay; it offers ways of being a person, dressing, and acting that cannot be boxed within the limited framework of man and woman. In fact, queer activists believe that these either/or binaries were only created to control people.

The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those discourses which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality. . . . These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. . . . These discourses deny us every possibility of creating our own categories. (Writig, 1990: 53)

In this view, *homosexual* is a label created by the dominant group to mark a subordinate group. The very language people are given to describe

taught to hate ourselves.) And now, of course, it means fighting a virus as well, and all those homophobes who are using AIDS to wipe us off the face of the earth. Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves, it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night. (Anonymous Queers, 1990: 2)

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These different perspectives on social change, one for equality and one for liberation, flow from different perspectives on identity. The mainstream liberal agenda for civil rights is influenced by an identity politics: Gay and lesbian identities are neatly and objectively defined, homophobia is the problem, and gay people deserve the same access as heterosexuals to society's institutions.

The queer radical agenda for cultural transition is influenced by a deconstructivist politics: gender and sexuality are fluid and believed to be socially constructed labels; heteronormativity (the structuring of social life around heterosexuality and its mores, such as monogamy and gender conformity) is the problem, and all people deserve the right to sexual freedom (Gansson, 1995). According to Shepard (2001), this division between those who believe it's best to assimilate to the dominant culture (the group he calls "the suits") and those who believe full sexual liberation is the only objective (the group he calls "the sluts") has always been present in modern LGBT communities, which in the United States is traceable back to the 1940s, but it was the rise of queer identity and queer politics that cemented this divide.

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In this view, *homosexual* is a label created by the dominant group to mark a subordinate group. The very language people are given to describe themselves is a social control mechanism that

warps their ability to be true to themselves; queer discourse seeks to disrupt the false consciousness that human sexuality or gender can be understood within a binary.

But not all oppressive structures were equally critiqued in the formation of queer identity and politics. Cohen (1997) has argued that the early manifestation of queer politics lacked an intersectional analysis. White queer people created an us/them logic that saw all queers as oppressed and all heterosexuals as oppressing, with no context for how white supremacy, class status, or male privilege may insult someone from queer oppression. It is an astounding testament to the power of privilege that white queer people did not see the problem with their righteous anger over heteronormativity and their silence around how whiteness advantaged them. This is perhaps why some lesbian, gay, and bi people of color still associate queer identity with whiteness and a flawed idealistic radicalism. However, it is also important to note that some people of color see queerness as an ideal conceptual space for POC sexual and gender minorities.

In Ferguson's (2003) call for a "queer of color critique," he argues that queer people of color are ideally positioned to dissolve the oppressive pillars of white supremacy, capitalism, heterosexism, and patriarchy because their lived experiences give them special insight into how power operates. Muñoz (1999) also argues this through his concept of *disidentifications*, that queers of color exist as racial and sexual outsiders who are especially positioned to go against the currents of our oppressive culture. Although it may not have been true for everyone who subscribed to queer identity in the early years of its usage, it is now an obvious and unarguable tenet of queerness that if sexual liberation and bodily autonomy are going to be realized, white supremacy and patriarchy have to fall, too.

Queer stands as the underbelly of everything enforced as a norm; it understands that

sexual liberation requires a cultural overhaul of every shame-inducing tenet of idealized social behavior. In their zine *Toward the Queerest Insurrection*, the Mary Nardini Gang writes, "Queer is the cohesion of everything in conflict with the heterosexual capitalist world. Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal" (2014: 3). Perhaps most straightforwardly, it could be said that queerness is about reverence for difference. As Dean Spade has said:

We have long critiqued powerful shame-inducing norms about sexual practices, family structures, appearance, and behavior. We have celebrated sexual desires, gender expressions, and relationships that are marked as abnormal, criminal, or pathological by our cultures. We have done this despite disapproval from our families, vulnerability, and significant loss of security. We have felt the excitement of entering a queer space where we can see ways of life that are hidden or despised played up and celebrated, where we can exist for a moment in an alternative world, in which the most beautiful people are those reaching most daringly away from norms, even mocking them. (Spade, 2010: Para. 8)

It is in this revolutionary valuing of difference that queerness creates an alternative universe, one that encompasses new ways of loving and creating social networks. As Malachi (2017) said:

Queer is asking permission of our lovers, and not asking forgiveness for the ways we don't fit in. Queerness is thinking about the space we occupy and how we move through it because we have had so little space in our own lives and refuse to contribute to minimizing the space of others. Queerness is assuming our friends and lovers have been hurt, because we have been hurt, and know what it feels like when people assume we haven't. Queerness is wanting to know the wounds before we reach them, instead of apologizing after for reopening them. (Para. 4)

For many, queer identity has become synonymous with a radical political agenda. It is not just exploring the potential of sexual and gender

diversity; it's ending white supremacy and capitalist exploitation. Queerness is about finding value in what is not valued and working to undo the harm of social oppression. It is about the possibility of a completely different way of life. The real value of queerness is its openness, that it is not supposed to be defined. Because it is nothing in particular, it is everything. Because it is not one central identity, it can be anything an individual wants it to be.

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BUD-SEX: CONSTRUCTING AMONG RURAL STRAIGHT

TC

Mainstream understandings of heterosexual attractiveness, behaviors, and desires should be oriented exclusively toward women and yet research indicates that some straight-identified men have sex with other men. There are multiple reasons why some men who identify as men (MSM) identify as straight, including internalized heterosexism, participation in other-sex marriage and child rearing, enjoyment of straight privilege and cultural (Ward 2015). Few interview-based studies of straight MSM exist, and previous studies focus on urban, military, or prison contexts. . . . Additionally, there is a widespread urban focus on sexualities and gender literatures (Halberstam 2005), which obscures the role of geography in the construction, maintenance, perception, and experience of gender and sexuality. . . . [T]his study is one of the first to examine how straight MSM themselves understand their own genders and sexualities, and how rurality affects these perceptions.

How do rural, white, straight MSM understand their gender? Through complex interpretive processes, participants rework non-normative sexual practices usually a theoretical to rural masculinities to actually construct normative masculinity. Participants selected male sexual partners on the basis of masculinity, race, and sexual identity. Most chose other masculine, white, and straight-identified bisexual men for secretive sex without romantic involvement. By choosing their partners and having this type of sex, the participants normalized and authenticated their