

# Freedom of Expression

LGBT+

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Another Way: When I Chose to Be Queer (2008–2009)

The Negotiation of Political Identities: Being Queer and an Asian Pacific Islander (2003–2004)

Kathoey: I'm Not a Boy, Not Yet a Woman? (2011–2012)

Each Other (2001–2002)

Living a Whole Life (2002–2003)

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It's difficult to be different. Nonconformity entails going against the norm, bringing additional challenges and obstacles. Still, it's important to be true to ourselves. This is the message shared by the authors of this collection.

Members of the LGBT+ community exist in the blurred lines of reality, where everything isn't black or white, and nothing can be neatly placed into distinct boxes. Historically, we, as a society, have stifled the LGBT+ community, treating them as unnatural rejects. For our convenience, we pushed a simplified view of gender and sexuality, at their expense.

Fortunately, the situation has begun to improve; we have become more welcoming to people who never deserved such unjust and unfounded discrimination in the first place. Nonetheless, many disparities still remain. These essays highlight some of these flaws in our society—inconsistencies with our purported commitment to fairness and equality. For a more open, just society, we must be more empathetic and compassionate. In order to produce meaningful change, listening to the voices of the LGBT+ community is essential.

# Another Way: When I Chose to Be Queer

MO TORRES

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Writing about other people is easy. You can conduct interview after interview, asking invasive questions you yourself will never have to answer, but when it's time to write about yourself—the person you hopefully know best—the dynamics shift. This is especially true when you're writing about something as personal as your sexuality. All of a sudden, you can't say everything you wanted to say. What if this sentence makes me look bad? What if I misrepresent the people in my story? And worst of all: what if people just don't get it? With this essay, the three questions have the same answer: it's possible. This story is written in the form of the testimonio, a genre of literature that uses personal experience as its foundation. Inspired by the testimonios we read in Chicana/o Studies 100 from across Latin America—from Argentina to California—it is my hope that my personal experience as a queer Chicano can make a positive contribution to the conversations we have on human sexuality. Hope it works!*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Mo's essay, "Another Way: When I Chose to be Queer," was originally written for a special Chicana/o Studies course on the testimonio and cultural studies in the Americas in the spring of 2009. After spending the quarter reading and discussing a wide range of (mostly women's) testimonios from Central America, Mexico, and the United States, the students wrote their own personal mini-testimonios as their final projects. Mo's essay immediately stood out to me as a profoundly critical and exceptionally creative piece of writing. "Another Way" reflects Mo's serious engagement with the political project of testimonio production, particularly in the ways that*

*he presents a personal narrative with broad collective implications and poses an epistemological challenge to the conventions of history, theory, and narrative writing. Mo's testimonio is at once deeply moving and sharply political, and his eloquent and elegant prose enables the reader to connect personally with the urgent questions he poses about the need to destabilize patriarchal and colonial constructions of subjectivity.*

—Magalí Rabasa, *Chicana/o Studies and Cultural Studies*

they're looking for the gay gene again.  
taxpayers that don't need better schools,  
paved streets or paid doctor visits,  
but...  
an all-invasive tour into my sex life —

- *how do you have sex?*
- *are you the top or the bottom?*
- *did anyone touch you when you were a baby?*

so the researchers probe,  
they turned our DNA into a google map  
yet they'll never find the directions  
to explain my queerness  
and as i cash another check,  
see the govt hand my earnings over to  
more prisons  
more tax breaks  
fewer teachers

i think:

for me to be queer, it has nothing to do with my genes, or your  
masculinity  
it isn't about your maleness or  
your manhood  
it's about two brown,  
red,  
black,  
yellow bodies

( or three )  
with passion, and love, or without love, and  
i don't care what the dna mapping says  
when i say to my mom,  
"soy... i'm... mom... i'm not gonna be with a woman, mom"  
i'm not saying to her "i'm gay"  
i'm saying,  
" i can't do it "  
to a society that  
wants me to reproduce, and if not that, then  
at least pretend  
i'm saying " fuck you "  
to patriarchy.  
to male-dominated society, to imposed gender norms, to the violence  
we commit against womyn and trans folks, to government agencies that  
make you check the box, to healthcare providers that turn people away  
for wanting different sex organs or for not having papers to prove their  
residency.  
because for me,  
queerness was a coming of consciousness,  
a decision unconscious to me, but  
a choice nonetheless.  
a realization.  
an action.  
the govt might use my money to lock people up for marijuana,  
but my queerness is mine, and no, it wasn't a disease i was born with.

**N**obody really understands what queerness is or where it came from. We can only say for sure that human sexuality has been as varied and diverse as history itself. Different cultures have held different notions of gender and sexuality, some with upwards of five different gender identities, some outlawing all forms of sexual expression altogether. In our current historical moment, when heterosexuality is either assumed or expected for all people, a growing queer community has formed, posing a direct challenge to the heteronormative structure under which we operate. The formation of this community has begged the question: what exactly leads to queerness?

If you were to ask the American Psychological Association just a few decades ago, the answer would have been simple: homosexuality

is a mental disorder easily treated with proper medical attention. The same organization today, while no longer identifying homosexuality as a psychological illness, still claims that transgender people can attribute their transgender identity to gender confusion, and, as was the case with their earlier definition of homosexuality, describe this confusion as a mental disorder.

Stepping away from the negative implications of this psychological diagnosis, the queer community has united with many medical and scientific circles in proclaiming the true explanation for queerness: queer people are simply born that way. Researchers have done their part in promoting the “born gay” theory through their hunt for the gay gene. The gay gene, if discovered, would link queerness to genetics. Public and private monies alike have been pumped into this research, with oftentimes disappointing results. Though no evidence has been found that links queerness to genetic attributes, the queer community has remained steadfast in its proclamation that queer individuals are born queer. Their primary reasoning is simple enough: because queer people are born into a homophobic society and are therefore subjected to discrimination on all levels, who in their right mind would ever choose to be anything but heterosexual?

For my seventh through twelfth grade years, I attended a small performing arts school in Sacramento, just outside the neighborhood in which I lived the first seventeen years of my life. Rather than attend my neighborhood schools during this time—easily some of the worst in Sacramento—my mom looked to other school districts, worrying that college might be out of reach for me if she didn’t. For me, the choice was an easy one: a charter school specializing in the performing and fine arts, where students were required to take classes in visual art, music, drama—all of the subjects I was interested in. But my mom had her reservations about sending her only son into this environment. The school’s culture was too removed from my own—white and upper-middle-class, it seemed like an odd choice for a kid like me. The school would take me away from my community, from the people I grew up with. I would be one of the only men in my family who didn’t play sports in high school; instead, I’d spend my days painting and practicing scales on the saxophone.

To survive in the new environment, I picked friends who were college-bound, and I stopped spending time with elementary school friends. Like Vanessa. Vanessa had been one of my mom’s students—my

mom taught her English, and through the process, became a close friend to her family. By extension, Vanessa and I became friends. She was in the grade below mine, so when she started seventh grade at the same small performing arts school, I already had a year of experience in the white school district under my belt. Rather than welcome her with open arms, I kept my distance.

A few years later, I remember talking to my first boyfriend, Omar, on the phone. He and Vanessa had become best friends and went out dancing for Vanessa's birthday, but I stayed home because I was too shy to dance. Omar told me that Vanessa had felt sick before going to the club. That they had taken her to the hospital. That it didn't look good for her. I told my mom, and she spent the rest of the night scrambling for all the information she could find. She was the supportive mother I would always have expected her to be in that situation.

Omar tried to contact me on the phone a few days later. My mom had decided I was not quite old enough, at sixteen, for my own cell phone, so he had no choice but to call me on my home phone. I was out with friends after a show, so when I didn't answer, he called again—and again. When I got home, my mom called me into her room. Sensing the tone in her voice, I realized Omar had probably tried calling me while I was away. I learned later he had left more than one message on the answering machine, never thinking about who would hear them, or what was appropriate or inappropriate for a home phone answering machine. I told my mom I didn't want to talk to her. *Ya me voy a dormir mamá, ¿no lo puedes dejar para mañana?* But she insisted.

She asked me who Omar was. Then if Omar were gay. Then if I were gay.

Omar's my boyfriend, mom. Then a pause—Yes, he's gay. Then a longer one—Yes, I'm gay.

That was the last conversation my mom and I would have for almost two months. It was during these two months that Vanessa passed away. That my first boyfriend broke up with me. That I almost dropped out of high school. Not a word from my mom. We were the only two people in the household, yet the only dialogue under our roof was me trying to convince her that she needed to talk me through everything, and the noise from the television responding that she wouldn't be talking to me anytime soon.

Days after Vanessa's funeral, my mom listed all the things she did wrong in raising me: She was a single mother. She never remarried. She

never provided me with an adequate father figure. The only examples of relationships she provided me with were those of my family—most of whom were either divorced or dysfunctional. When she took me to McDonalds, she would let me order the girl toy instead of the boy toy. When I wanted to quit Cub Scouts, she didn't try stopping me. She let me go to a school for the performing arts.

She blamed herself for making me queer, and I resented her for that. Reading directly from the talking points from the mainstream queer community, I told her: I was born this way, mom. You can't choose your sexuality. Why would I choose to be this way? Why would I choose to be different from everyone else? Do you really think I would want to be treated this way by my own mother?

Even though I went to a performing arts school, where queerness seemed like the norm rather than the exception, it was not until college that I began making queer friends. I joined an organization called La Familia, a social group, support group, political group for queer Chicanit@s. This organization provided me a space for identity exploration that I had never realized could exist. I once asked a friend I made through the group why he thought some people were queer and others weren't. Expecting the usual well, of course, people are just born that way, I was surprised when he said there could be a lot of reasons. Maybe it's because some people only grew up with one parent. Maybe some people don't trust other sexes. Maybe some people were abused when they were younger. It was the final answer that really shocked me. Struggling with the homophobia that is omnipresent in our society, if I were to accept that sexual abuse could turn someone queer, wouldn't that just add fuel to the fire of homophobia? Wouldn't that mean that queerness was something undesirable, something that should be avoided?

Maybe. But when I turn to my own experiences, queerness seems more like a natural act of resistance than a negative consequence of a bad childhood.

I was raised by a single mother who divorced her husband to escape domestic violence. By court order, I had to visit my dad ever so often, only to see his new wife wake up at four every morning to make sure that breakfast was made, the clothes were clean, and the house was ready for the day. She was not allowed to go to bed until every floor had been swept, mopped, or vacuumed. I grew up seeing the men in my family yell at their wives, sit back watching football while the women cooked and



cleaned and slaved away taking care of their children. When I cried, I was told to stop acting like a girl; when I played with dolls or board games, I was told I needed to do “boy things” and go outside with my cousins. I didn’t want to play sports or sit back while all the women were working in the kitchen or yell at my future wife.

Can you really blame a kid, then, for envisioning a different future?

A future where he wouldn’t be tied down to rigid gender roles, where his relationships didn’t have to look like the ones he grew up seeing? Where he could determine for himself what a man’s role should be, how he should love, what kind of relationships he would create one day?

Gloria Anzaldúa acknowledges the problems inherent in the socialization of men, noting, “I abhor how my culture makes macho caricatures of its men.” She speaks as a Chicana lesbiana, yet from my perspective as a Chicano male, I agree completely. When I reflect on my childhood, I see deliberate challenges to the machista attitude desde que era bien chiquito. Those deliberate attempts would come to be an integral part of my identity. Eventually, I would proudly proclaim to be queer.

Queerness, then, was an exercise in my own agency. It was an act of confronting head-on the homophobic, heterosexist structure under which we all operate. When the mainstream queer community says “we were born this way,” or “never in a million years would I choose such a life of pain and suffering,” they disempower those who see their queerness as a form of resistance to machismo, to patriarchy, to our social norms that, every day, commit violence against us. The American Psychological Association proudly promoted the idea that queer individuals suffered from a mental disorder, and today, we understand that was wrong. But when the queer community claims that queer folk suffer from genetic disposition to queerness, they do no less disservice to queer individuals. What queer folks suffer from, as Anzaldúa points out, is “an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other . . . that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better.”

To claim that queerness is a choice is a political action that automatically puts the individual at odds with the dominant structure. For queer people of color, for poor queer folks, for disenfranchised queer womyn, for trans folks, for people with nothing to lose, this is just another act of resistance against the dominant society. But for the mainstream queer community which privileges gay white males above all else, and that makes invisible all the aforementioned groups, to

make such a loaded claim is dangerous. Cherríe Moraga writes about the privileged position held by gay white males in queer circles in her essay “La Güera.” She argues that in order to hold this position, gay white men have to “forget” what it is like to be oppressed. By forgetting, they are able to oppress others because their privileges go unchecked. By proudly proclaiming that queerness is genetic or inherited, they are able to be both queer and not queer. Queer, by challenging heterosexism through their sexual relationships and gender behaviors, and not queer, by minimizing the political impact of queerness through claims that they are “just like everyone else” and “would of course never choose queerness if offered the chance.”

Looking back, I think maybe my mom was right. Maybe it was all those things that she “did wrong” that helped me become queer. Not because queerness was an unfortunate consequence of an imperfect childhood, but because through my observations of the realities of a homophobic and heterosexist society, I was able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Another way. If I wanted life to be better than what I grew up seeing around me, I had to do things a little differently.

so when i say to you, “ i’m queer “  
i’m not trying to explain my  
sexual preference, psychological disorder, or a natural fact.

that’s just my way of saying,  
“ i can live this life better “

# The Negotiation of Political Identities: Being Queer and an Asian Pacific Islander

MINGZHAO XU

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: When Professor Maira asked each of us to conduct a study of an Asian American subculture, I was at a loss. Sororities, fraternities, sports clubs, and culture-based organizations were the most prominent subcultures, but students had already claimed them. I wanted to study something unique. I wanted my research to reflect the challenges, aspirations, and hopes of an almost invisible and marginalized community. But where would I find this community? I reflected on my interactions, and I realized that some of the most interesting and compassionate people I've met were APIQs (Asian Pacific Islander Queers). Out of respect for the APIQ community, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to bring to light the struggles of APIQs, I decided to research the APIQ subculture. While completing this assignment, I have made new friends, explored queer theories from radical Asian American scholars, and come away with a richer college experience. I hope that this essay will inspire people to sympathize with the struggles of APIQs and appreciate the complexity of their experience.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Mingzhao's essay was written for a course on Asian American Popular Culture, for which I asked students to do a research paper on an Asian American subculture based on an interview or field work. Her essay far exceeded the expectations for this assignment in the astute theoretical insights and interpretive sensitivity she was able to bring to the interview with a queer Vietnamese American woman. What is perhaps most impressive about this paper is how it moves deftly between the interview and research on Asian*

*American queers, using quotes from the interview to support and also rethink theoretical positions on sexuality, race, and culture. Mingzhao explores the idea of multiple marginalities in a way that attends to the subtlety of identity while being empathetic to the experiences of Asian American queers. Her argument is lucid, precise, and politically passionate. In expressing a committed political imagination, Mingzhao understands the stakes of academic writing.*

—Sunaina Maira, *Asian American Studies*

The Asian Pacific Islander Queer (APIQ) association is a unique subculture on campus that is mainly composed of Asian Americans. It provides a forum and community for queer Asian Americans who face issues that are different from the larger Asian American or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) communities. Some queer Asian Americans cannot identify wholly with the Asian communities, which may refuse to accept homosexuality, nor can they submerge into the larger LGBT culture, which they may perceive as racist and insensitive toward the needs of Asian American queers. Drawing on an interview with a Vietnamese American lesbian and critical texts, this paper addresses two questions. How do queer Asian Americans negotiate their desire to express their sexuality and maintain their meaningful relationship with their Asian families and communities? How do they balance and affirm their marginalized status in a heterosexist and racist society? While Asian parents perceive homosexuality as a threat to their attitude toward sexuality, family, and gender, reconciliation between Asian American queers and their families is possible. The APIQ subculture and the way its members acknowledge the complexity of their identities are reactions to racism in the mainstream and LGBT culture.

As a first generation Vietnamese American, my interviewee recognized that one of the main differences between the APIQ subculture and the mainstream, mainly white, LGBT community lies in the unique struggles of its members. She says APIQs are “more focused on family, so it’s harder to come out” (interview). Many first-generation Asian parents do not approve of their children’s queer identities. The silence surrounding sexuality in the home, parents’ expectations for their children, and the importance placed on traditional gender roles make it difficult for Asian Americans to find full acceptance of their homosexuality. The

marginalization of APIQs may differ in quality and severity from that of their white counterparts.

Because “sexuality is an issue rarely or never discussed” in Asian families (Hom 561), it is no wonder that homosexuality itself would be considered a forbidden topic. In Alice Hom’s study, the Asian parents’ recollections of their encounters with gays/lesbians in their communities while growing up highlight the silence surrounding homosexuality and the voicelessness of the queers themselves. For example, a Japanese immigrant mother recalls that lesbians were designated as “S” in her college, while Pilipina mothers described their communities’ name-calling against gays/lesbians (563). These statements testify to the silence surrounding lesbian relationships and vocal opposition to those who identified as queer, while the voices of the queers themselves are absent. The Asian American’s decision to come out transgresses the silence surrounding sexuality in Asian families, making tangible the taboo topic of homosexuality.

Asian parents also have difficulty accepting homosexual children because of the value they attach to the notion of a proper family, which they believe can only be organized according to heterosexual gender roles. My interviewee explains Asian parents’ discomfort with homosexuality in their children; she argues, “Asian culture is a lot about tradition . . . . [The parents] just care about culture, the [reproduction of the] family line. . . . If you’re gay, you’re not doing that. That’s why that’s not acceptable” (interview). Parents equate their tradition or culture with reproduction within a heteronormative space and assume that queers cannot form families. The interviewee says, “Since APIQs cannot marry, it’s like opposing their tradition” (interview). Parents often feel that gays/lesbian relationships betray their idea of a family, which they believe must be heterosexual and an inherent part of Asian culture.

Since children are expected to continue the family line, traditional gender roles are also strongly underscored. According to my interviewee, “I dress, behave the way I want to, not very feminine. Not what you expect from a typical Asian girl—the female Asian girl who is expected to get married, get a husband, and be subordinate to him” (interview). My interviewee not only rejects this construction of Asian femininity, but she is also fascinated by butch, “male-identified” Asian lesbians, who perform masculinity through their appearance and behavior (email). The fact that gays/lesbians do not necessarily assume gender identities based on sex is disconcerting to some Asian parents, who were taught to equate

the defiance of assigned gender roles with immorality (Hom 563). The parents in Hom's study grew up in communities that "associated gender-role reversals with gays and lesbians" (Hom 564). These role reversals were seen as aberrations and served as the basis of the communities' harassment of "tomboys" or "feminine" Asian men—a form of homophobia parents may have "internalized" (Hom 563). By affirming their queer identities, queer Asian Americans, like my interviewee and the children in Hom's study, seem to transgress their parents' norms regarding culture, family, and gender. This perceived transgression shatters the culturally accepted silence regarding sexuality and destabilizes the heterosexist definition of the Asian family and traditional gender roles. Silence regarding sexuality and the social constructions of family and gender constitute the main barriers to the acceptance of Asian American queers by the Asian community. APIQ members must struggle collectively with these issues.

For APIQ members who come out to their parents, the threat of alienation from their families is real. My interviewee expressed this fear of alienation when she describes how butch Asian lesbians, unable to pass as heterosexuals, would be "ostracized by their family" and forced to turn to the LGBT community for a sense of belonging (email). She says, "So in essence, the butch Asian gives up her Asian identity to embrace her sexual identity. This is also a concerning issue to me" (email). My interviewee equates being alienated from the family with losing one's Asian identity; for people in APIQ, membership within the family is synonymous with belonging to an ethnic community, which validates a person's ethnic identity. Alienation from one's Asian parents would undermine the coherency of their being Asian and queer.

Although coming out to the family entails the possibility of ostracism, the process may lead to reconciliation and acceptance. Dana Y. Takagi, a social critic, believes that, "These disparate worlds [of Asia American and gay American] occasionally collide through individuals who manage to move . . . between these spaces. But it is the act of deliberately bringing these worlds closer together that seems unthinkable" (551). However, the actions of Hom's subjects contradict this sentiment; Asian parents spoke to a gathering of gay Asian American men about their son's coming-out story, which led some men to cry (569). The parents were motivated by love for their children to bridge the gap between these "disparate worlds" and their physical and emotional presence in the APIQ community represents the collapse of the boundaries between Asia American and gay

America. Similarly, my interviewee anticipated that in the future, parents would be more accepting (interview). APIQs who come out risk being alienated from their ethnic communities, which threatens the integrity of their identities. However, the process allows the potential reconciliation between parents and their children based on acceptance.

APIQ is significant because it is a haven for the gay and lesbian Asian Americans who believe that racism in mainstream society has filtered into the larger, LGBT culture. The lack of adequate representation of APIQs in the media leads to racists, misperceptions of APIQs, such as stereotyping APIQ males as “exotic” or “emasculated.” The lack of representation is evident in the fact that even texts that attempt to provide a diverse picture of queers fail to mention APIQs and their struggles with family acceptance (Hom 562) and that one of APIQ’s main goals is to “make themselves more visible” (interview) to society. The sexual identities of Asian Americans have been circumscribed by a variety of oppressive stereotypes, which has informed white gay men’s attitude toward gay Asian American men. For example, my interviewee feels that some gay Asian American men “feel exoticized by white men” and must confront the stereotype that they are effeminate (interview). The lack of any tolerable APIQ representation can turn the LGBT community, a potentially safe space, into an oppressive one. Despite accusations from the LGBT community of being “exclusive,” (interview) which only demonstrates insensitivity toward the wants of Asian American queers, APIQs exist as a form of resistance against the racism directed toward Asian Americans and a response to their need for a safe space.

APIQ provides a space for self-definition—an environment where queer Asian Americans can fully claim both their Asian and gay identities. Yet APIQs must constantly contend with ideas that threaten to polarize their identities. For example, APIQs feel the need to counteract the attitude that homosexuality is synonymous with acculturation, which is compounded by the mainstream’s idea that “Asians can’t be gay” (interview). My interviewee expressed her parents’ fear that homosexuality is mutually exclusive from Asian culture; she says, “My parents thought that Asian people can’t be gay and that being gay is a white culture thing. They’re afraid that I’ll lose my culture” (interview). Not all parents believe this myth, especially those who have been exposed to homosexuals in their native countries (Hom 563). The myth that queerness is a sign of assimilation implicitly forces APIQs to assert their loyalty to either

the Asian family or homosexuality, as if a person's ethnic identity can be dissociated from his/her sexual identity. The absence of APIQs in the mainstream only affirms this myth. This conflict, like Asian parents' negative attitude toward their children's homosexuality, may subside in the future as more Asian Americans come out and force their parents and communities to confront previous prejudices regarding homosexuality. As APIQs gain more recognition as a part of American society in the future, the representation of APIQs in the mainstream may improve. By offering a space where queer Asian Americans can affirm both their homosexuality and ethnic heritage, APIQ is an important catalyst for creating a society that affirms a comprehensive queer Asian American identity.

The APIQ members experience marginality in a unique way; they recognize that they may occupy a multitude of oppressed spaces simultaneously, and this recognition is a source of empowerment. When speaking about APIQ women's motivation for entering politics, my interviewee explains that it is "because we're a triple minority . . . we're Asian, women, and gay" (interview). Although Takagi rejects the "triple jeopardy" approach to understanding queer Asian American identity because she does not believe oppression can be separated into discrete categories (548), my interviewee does see herself as a "triple minority" based on race, gender, and orientation. This reflects her recognition that different forms of oppression exist on one body rather than the belief that these oppressions are separate. This integration of spaces is empowering and serves as the basis of an alliance with other people of color. My interviewee says, "As APIQ women, they identify with women of color who are feminists and very active in getting those civil rights" (interview). As marginalized beings whose race, gender, and orientation may be marked as subordinate, APIQ men and women can utilize their viewpoints and experiences to fight for political freedom.

APIQ draws its members from, and shares commonalities with, the larger LGBT and Asian American communities. APIQ is similar to LGBT in that its members may share common language and codes, such as using "butch" and "femme" to denote masculine or feminine lesbians, respectively. APIQ is composed of Asian Americans who engage with other aspects of Asian or Asian American popular culture through dress, behavior, attitude, or aspirations. However, APIQs are unique and different from these overarching communities in that they share the



struggle to gain acceptance within the Asian family and community as queers and in the mainstream as Asian Americans. APIQs must cope with the notion that homosexuality threatens Asian culture and family, the possibility of losing ties to their ethnic communities, and racism within society and the LGBT community. APIQ acknowledges these issues, and its members constantly work to balance multiple identities, which, when done successfully, can be a source of empowerment.

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# Kathoey: I'm Not a Boy, Not Yet a Woman?

FIONA NG

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: As a neurology, physiology, and behavior (NPB) major, I seldom get an opportunity like this UWP 18 assignment to explore topics beyond the sciences. After talking to my housemate about how Thai transgender beauty pageants were the highlight of her trip to Thailand, I wondered, are Thais really as accepting towards transgenders as their media portrays? Or, are pageants only glamorizing and covering up the discriminations that some Thai transgenders experience? Even though my paper focused on Thai transgenders, some of these anecdotes are definitely analogous to those of transgenders anywhere. But, it was after working on this project that I began to appreciate the Davis Student Community Center for advocating transgender's bathrooms and to appreciate Bath & Body for hiring a transgender cashier. I must thank Dr. Scherr for guiding me through this incredible adventure, in which I learned to care for a community that was once unfamiliar to me. So, please accept my invitations and join me on this educational (yes, I know) journey!*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In this essay, Fiona Ng responds to an assignment in which I ask students to write a definitional argument about a controversial word, concept, or cultural practice that arouses their curiosity. Fiona's ideas for essays, whether reflective or research-oriented, were always captivating. This one was no different. In her essay "Kathoey: I'm Not a Boy, Not Yet a Woman?" Fiona reveals the subtle and intriguing lives of, and attitudes towards, the kathoey, or third gender, in Thailand. When Fiona approached me with the idea of writing about the kathoey, who challenge classification or defini-*

tion altogether, I was immediately fascinated. Her observation that young Thai women often fear that kathoeyes might outperform women in fulfilling their own sexual roles as females especially intrigued me. Her essay promised to provide both a captivating perspective of Thai culture and to show how the kathoey unmask gender roles altogether. Indeed, the essay astutely fulfills these promises and more; Fiona unravels the legal and personal complexities of the lives of kathoeyes (and all “third genders”) and argues forcefully that, until laws recognize the transgender sex category, and until kathoeyes and other transgender individuals tell their stories, we will be the poorer for it. Fiona Ng’s recognition in *Prized Writing* is well-deserved.

—Raquel Scherr, University Writing Program

Ping, born and raised in Thailand, identifies *khao* as a *kathoey*<sup>1</sup>. As a child, Ping wore high-heels and flamboyant makeup when competing against *khao* four older sisters in make-believe beauty pageants. Despite the strong sibling relationship, Ping’s family was far from harmonious. In the narrative collection entitled, *Male Bodies Women’s Souls*, Ping writes:

Every time my father came home, he would argue with my mother. This made me sick of my father’s behavior. I thought that my father was the kind of man who is no good and vowed not to take him as a role model. This is probably one reason that caused me to behave in the way I did (that is, not like other boys), because I admire my mother very much (“Ping” 73).

Furthermore, Ping’s kindergarten classmates teased *khao* for being a *kathoey* who did not act “like other boys” (“Ping” 73). Even as an adult, Ping experiences discrimination; for example, a restaurant manager once rejected *khao* job application after showing discomfort regarding

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1 Unlike in English, the third-person pronoun in Thai is gender neutral; *khao* means “he, she, him, or her” (Shulich 433). To avoid assigning a gendered pronoun to *kathoey*, I will use *khao* as the third-person pronoun when referencing to *kathoey*.

Ping's gender-ambiguous appearance ("Ping" 75). Ping says, "My sexual deviance was a thing about which I...felt very guilty [for]" because that has disappointed *khao* parents, and to compensate, Ping thrived in academics and eventually attended the academically acclaimed Chiang Mai University ("Ping" 74).

Along with Ping, many university students, corporate workers, street vendors, national athletes, singers, movie stars, beauty queens, show girls, bartenders, and prostitutes make up the 10,000 to 100,000 *kathoey* in Thailand (Armbrecht; Matzner 72). Peter A. Jackson, a prominent researcher on Thailand transgenderism, defines *kathoey* as "hermaphrodite persons as well as effeminate, cross-dressing, or transsexual males" ("Tolerant But Unaccepting" 229). To elaborate, Andrew Matzner, researcher on Southeast Asian/Pacific Transgenderism, adds that *kathoey* also refers to effeminate males who have had or not had sex-reassignment surgeries and cross-dressing males who take female hormones (74). Because of the growing *kathoey* population, scholars and Thais recognize *kathoey* as "*phet thee sam*" or the "third gender" (Boney).

Despite informally labeling *kathoey* as the third gender, Thais' acceptance of *kathoey* remains inhomogeneous. About a decade ago, Peter A. Jackson coined the phrase "Tolerant yet Unaccepting" to generalize how Thais acknowledge, yet criticize, the prevalent *kathoey* subculture ("Tolerant But Unaccepting" 239). This attitude traces back to Buddhist beliefs that predominate in Thailand. Buddhist teachings encourage Thais to tolerate individual differences, including sexual deviance (Armbrecht). However, Buddhism also highlights karma and reincarnation, which lead Thais to believe that *kathoey* are repaying a debt for having been players and heartbreakers in their previous lives; hence, in this life, "*kathoey* are woman trapped in a man's body, forever doomed to unrequited love" (Armbrecht). Since the *kathoey* are technically paying off sins accumulated from their previous lives, Thais feel less obligated to permit *kathoey* equal human rights (Armbrecht). Some Thais even purposefully discriminate against or harass *kathoey* to preserve the rights of gender-normative individuals. For example, many employers, like the restaurant manager in Ping's story, have been discarding *kathoey*'s applications to reserve job vacancies for a "normal person" (Armbrecht). Fortunately, not every *kathoey* experiences the same degree of negativity and hostility.

When compared with ordinary *kathoey* individuals, some public *kathoey* figures receive tremendous praise and support from the Thais. For

example, in the blockbuster documentary *Satree Lek (The Iron Ladies)*, filmmakers portrayed the national champion *kathoey* volleyball team as individuals who shared the Thai values of group-centrism and endurance of hardship (Unaldi 65-66). More recently, Bell Nunita, finalist of the 2011 *Thailand's Got Talent* competition, was popular for *khao* talent of using both tenor and soprano voices when singing love duets. Furthermore, while Ping's appearance led to employer discrimination, in venues such as beauty contests, *kathoey's* appearance can garner them respect, recognition, and rewards. Some winners of local *kathoey* beauty pageants even represent Thailand in international beauty pageants (Wong 6). In some cases, Thais not only praise *kathoey* for their talent and beauty; *kathoey's* courage to present themselves as public figures also earns them the Thais' admiration (Boney).

However, not every instance of media portrayal glamorizes *kathoey*. Even though the media plays the important role of broadcasting these beauty pageants and glorifying *kathoey's* talents (e.g. sports, singing, and acting), mainstream television often portray *kathoey* as loud-mouthed jokers, who Thais call "*sanuk*." According to Peter A. Jackson, the Thai media likes to use *sanuk* characters in dramas and shows because the audiences laugh at the *sanuk* as a means to express their suppressed distress and hatred for *kathoey* (Unaldi 70). Although the entertainment industry does offer a stage for these actors to show their talent in humor, it also perpetuates negative *kathoey* stereotypes.

While workforce discrimination and media glamorization bring out the discrepancies between two extreme attitudes, interviews with Thai young adults revealed that acceptance of *kathoey* is more circumstantial. According to a survey that researcher Andrew Matzner conducted at the Chiang Mai University, the degree to which students accepted *kathoey* depended on the relationship (i.e. family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers) that the student shared with the *kathoey* (76-77). But more importantly, how a *kathoey* socially interacts greatly influences others' impressions of *khao*. Many students reported they enjoyed befriending socially engaging *kathoey*; some enjoyed listening to *kathoey* give relationship advice and make sexual jokes that applied to both genders (Matzner 83-84). Yet, some students at Chiang Mai University disliked *kathoey* who openly flirted with male classmates; female students perceived this flirting as competition, whereas male students felt uneasy because the flirtation challenged their masculinity and heterosexual

identity (Matzner 84). Even though *kathoey* experience antagonistic treatments, these students' responses suggest that Thais do categorize *kathoey* as a *third gender*. However, does the current *third gender* label actually translate into Thais treating *kathoey* with the same respect that normative genders receive? Is the present denotation of the *third gender* masking Thais' demands for *kathoey* to assimilate with normative gender standards?

In fact, the present definition of the *third gender* strips away *kathoey* identity, and denotes *kathoey* as lesser beings compared to females and males. Even normative gender structure relies on establishing differences between masculine and feminine standards to maintain the male-female dichotomy. According to Judith Lorber, professor of Sociology and Women Studies at Brooklyn College, society ranks genders based on a *stratification* system, which defines female as simply “[not] male” (66). However, this definition implies that deviants—females—are inferior because they lack masculine characteristics and qualities (Lorber 66). Thailand's gender trichotomy—male, female, and *kathoey*—exhibits a gender hierarchy analogous to that mentioned in *The Social Construction of Gender* by Professor Lorber; just as females are “not males” under the normative stratification system, Thais define *kathoey* as “not man or woman.” Megan J. Sinnott, professor of Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University, quoted a middle-aged *kathoey*: “If somebody calls me third sex/gender, I won't agree with that...’Third sex/gender’ means you are neither man nor woman, maybe some kind of monster. So there isn't any third sex/gender for me” (6). The *kathoey* thinks *khao* resembles a monster only because *khao* lacks pivotal masculine and feminine qualities, regardless of what other qualities *khao* may have; this implies that Thais place *kathoey* at the bottom of their gender hierarchy, inferior to both males and females.

Specifically, the *kathoey* gender acts as a measurement of what Jackson called “unmasculinity.” Despite having a masculine physique, effeminate males do not display traditional masculine behaviors (e.g. aggression and domination). Furthermore, to sustain the dominant masculine perceptions of “male,” Thais exclude unmasculine/effeminate males from being “men” (Boney). This idea is embedded within the common belief that effeminate males must self-define as *kathoey*. For example, many Chiang Mai University students claimed that society would only accept the effeminate male as a person if he becomes a true

*kathoe* (Matzner 88); even then, *kathoe* are placed below the males in the gender hierarchy.

In more severe cases, some Thais target *kathoe* “unmasculinity” through violence. According to Linda Malam, a professor at the University of Otago, if a *kathoe* dances outside the designated *kathoe* zones in a straight bar, heterosexual male bartenders “would pull their hair, or grab their breast/or crotch” (586). She observed that physically harassing the *kathoe* boosted the bartenders’ sense of masculinity (Malam 587); bartenders established masculine dominance by victimizing *kathoe*—the “unmasculine” beings. However, if the *kathoe* goes to the bar with a tourist, bartenders tend not to harass *khao*; instead, they find it amusing and ego-boosting to watch foreigners fail at distinguishing a “real woman” from a *kathoe* (Malam 587). In this phenomenon, even though bartenders acknowledge *kathoe*’s rights to party within their restricted zones, the bartenders’ need to reaffirm masculinity trumps their respect for *kathoe*’s rights. Additionally, these designated “zones” physically represent the gender stratification system at work: a zone for “man and woman” versus a marginalized *kathoe* zone for “not man and not woman.”

Even though the stratification system defines *kathoe* as “not females,” Thais attempt to mask *kathoe* identity by expecting *kathoe* to adhere to female gender norms. In particular, Thais evaluate *kathoe*’s beauty by traditional femininity standards (e.g. fair skin and sharp facial features), driving *kathoe* into mimicking their female counterparts. For some *kathoe*, the hope of winning the beauty pageant title motivates them to morph themselves into someone who is indistinguishable from, and sometimes even more feminine than, a real woman. Aside from adopting soft-spoken speech patterns and small delicate gestures, and wearing makeup and woman’s clothing, many *kathoe* contestants go through extreme medical procedures (e.g. sex-reassignment surgery, breast implantation, Adam’s apple reduction, and hormone injections) to make themselves appear more feminine (Boney).

Unfortunately, even at beauty pageants—a major opportunity by which *kathoe* receive recognition and praise—*kathoe* are only acceptable to Thais if they successfully suppress signs of masculinity and adequately perform femininity. Wong Ying Wuen, from the National University of Singapore’s Southeast Asian Studies department, stated that beauty pageants allow *kathoe* to build an “identity...based on transformations

and the successful performances of femininity, in the face of biological masculinity...not...upon their ability to perform transsexuality” (5-10). For instance, some *kathoey* try to minimize the appearance of their anatomic masculine characteristics, such as the Adam’s apple, to perform as a woman. As Wong argued, instead of performing the third gender/transsexuality, *kathoey* are occupied with suppressing their innate masculine traits and enhancing artificial feminine traits. Instead of having normatively gendered individuals (e.g. heterosexual bartenders) reinforce the traditional gender dichotomy, *kathoey* passively reaffirm the gender dichotomy by adhering to traditional feminine beauty standards.

In addition to adopting feminine appearance and manner, *kathoey* are also expected to perform the subordinate female sex role. Jackson compared the social attitudes regarding *kathoey* and *gays*, claiming that while both are associated with homoeroticism, Thais are less “disturbed” by *kathoey*-and-straight-man eroticism. However, this is true only if the male partner plays the dominant sex role while the *kathoey* plays the submissive female (“Tolerant Yet Unaccepting” 238). Likewise, in the interviews that Matzner conducted, Chiang Mai University students also evaluated *kathoey* based on the modesty of their sexual behaviors. Female students found it only acceptable when *kathoey* act as gossiping and partying buddies, but they disliked *kathoey* who openly competed for male students’ affection (Matzner 84). Female students seem to fear that *kathoey* can outperform them in fulfilling expected feminine sex roles, which makes female students feel insecure about their sex appeal. Male students also avoid *kathoey* who openly flirt because they think flirtation challenges their heterosexuality (Matzner 84).

While *kathoey* value Thais’ tolerance for their sexual orientation, the criteria that Thais use to legitimize such eroticism force *kathoey* into performing female norms over performing a transsexual role. These criteria undermine the expression of *kathoey* identity. Specially, Thais expect *kathoey* to subject to male dominance by having them act as submissive sex objects for men. While some individuals would only accept *kathoey* who flawlessly perform female sex roles, others would only accept those who do not challenge their gender role performance. Regardless, both concepts are grounded in how well the *kathoey* conforms to normative gender expectations but not how well the *kathoey* expresses *khao* sexual desires. Therefore, *kathoey*, who Thais unofficially label as the *third gender*, are those who are neither “true males” nor “true females” but perform as females.



Paradoxically, even though Thais presently recognize *kathoey* as the *third gender* (or *phet thee sam*), Thais have not translated this recognition into providing equal rights to *kathoey*. In a 2008 poll hosted by the Ramkhamhaeng University Public Opinion Center, 70% of the participants actually refused to grant *kathoey* the right to declare “*kathoey*” as their gender in legal documents (Armbrecht). As of 2012, the Thai government still hasn’t legalized *kathoey* as an official gender on identification cards, birth certificates, and passports (Martin). Despite national acknowledgement of certain *kathoey* at beauty contests, the lack of legal recognition debunks the *third gender* myth that Thais and scholars created. While it is inevitable that *kathoey* are neither women nor men, this does not permit Thais to identify *kathoey* solely by whom they *aren’t* instead of by who they *are*; specifically, *kathoey* should not have to manipulate their masculinity and fabricate their femininity to gain acceptance. Therefore, as a first step to re-recognizing the *kathoey* gender, Thais should legalize *kathoey* gender status on official documentations.

Thais should follow the examples of Netherland, Belgium, Nepal, and, more recently, Australia to add a “transgender status” in legal identification documents. Australian lawmakers believe this will be a first step to providing equal rights to the third gender (The Guardian). Presently, *kathoey* must report their birth gender in legal documents. There were many incidences of *kathoey* detainment at the borders because their documented gender did not match their apparent gender (Armbrecht). In fact, according to Jackson, many *kathoey* have voiced that the government should legalize their gender status (“Bangkok” 36). However, some may argue, even if the government legalizes *kathoey* gender, Thais would not necessarily treat *kathoey* as an equal and independent gender; only pragmatic approaches and their elicited structural changes would lead Thais to accept *kathoey* as a separate gender. For example, in 1920, the act of legalizing women suffrage (through the Nineteenth Amendment) alone did not trigger American social acceptance of women’s equality. Instead, some may claim that its pragmatic aftermath—having women vote next to men at voting booths—accelerated the diminishing gap between women’s rights and men’s rights.

Even though pragmatic approaches might be more efficient at directly inducing structural changes, in some cases, legal recognition initiates pragmatic solutions and structural changes. If women’s suffrage was not implemented, women would not be voting; more importantly,

the United States's society would not have progressed to the point where women are not only allowed to vote, but are also allowed to be voted for (e.g. Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, and Nancy Pelosi). Similarly, even though legal recognition of the *kathoey* status might not induce 100% of social acceptance, the Thai government should not deprive *kathoey* of their right to identify as a gender that is independent of women and men.

Legal documentation of *kathoey* gender will signify the falling of the first domino in a chain of social and legal movements to promote *kathoey* rights. In 2002, Thailand's Department of Mental Health officially recognized that homosexuality is not an official mental disorder; following that, in 2008, the Thai military officially categorized *kathoey*/third gender separately from gays when setting draft dismissal criteria (Armbrecht)<sup>2</sup>. This chain of events shows that once Thai authorities officially recategorize a certain subgroup of people, other prominent figures will follow. To support *kathoey* as an independent gender, the Thai government must knock down the first domino (i.e. legalizing *kathoey* gender status) so that other legal and social dominos will follow.

In fact, from the *kathoey*'s points of view, legal documentation is practical because their ability to legally identify as a *kathoey* will prevent them from having to choose between being male or female. As a transgender, Christie Elan-Cane, a presenter at the Gendy Conference hosted by the University of Manchester, supports acts that recognize transgender as a separate sex status. She complimented Google for offering their users the option to select "other" as their gender when they sign up for a Google account (Elan-Cane). The "*kathoey* gender" option on identification cards would serve the same purpose. "Options" like these serve as the first avenue by which *kathoey* reject social expectations of them having to identify as male or female and having to act according to feminine and masculine standards. Perhaps no other rights would be as important and empowering to the *kathoey* than rejecting the gender trichotomy paradox under a stratification system.

At the same time, social movements, both microscopic and macroscopic, should support legal recognitions of *kathoey*'s rights. As simple as the idea of adding *kathoey* restrooms may sound, it raises key

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<sup>2</sup> I solely used this example to demonstrate the potentials of a government initiated domino effect. I do not agree with the government using this instance of recognition to discriminate against gays and *kathoey*.

questions regarding the current gender structure in Thailand. Imagine a *kathoey* standing in front of *khao* school's restrooms; does *khao* walk into the women's restroom or does *khao* walk into the men's restroom? If *khao* chooses the women's restroom, what prompted *khao* to make that decision? What if *khao* chooses to use the men's restroom? As of 2006, some elementary schools have already started allocating *kathoey* restrooms on campus (Boney). Implementing *kathoey* restrooms may be a crucial social domino piece, but it is far from being the last piece.

In addition to the government denoting *kathoey* gender status on legal documents, privatized and publicized educators should encourage *kathoey* to share and students to appreciate *kathoey*'s struggles and stories through personal narratives. A university-based survey indicated that 51% of the student body believed transgenderism is a form of mental disorder (Armbrecht). The percentage reflects a weak education about and appreciation for *kathoey* in Thailand. The survey also indicates that even the most educated Thais are ignorant of *kathoey*'s feelings and thoughts. It is important that *kathoey* voice their opinions through written and oral personal narratives instead of having researchers write what they believe are *kathoey*'s beliefs and feelings. The goal of these narratives is to normalize *kathoey*. These personal stories would inform readers of the perpetual social pressures that cause *kathoey* to conform, confront, or contest for acceptance. More importantly, these narratives would normalize *kathoey* individuals by bringing out characteristics that *kathoey* share as a group, characteristics that are unique to each individual, and characteristics that *kathoey* share with normatively gendered individuals. Personal narratives also have the advantage of letting the *kathoey* educate their society and demand change from their society.

Historical examples show that narratives are powerful tools for raising awareness of the oppressed. For example, the autobiography of abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass modeled the success of personal narratives in educating and changing society's understandings of a controversial subject. Because many slave-owners prohibited their slaves from writing and communicating with people outside of their house and work fields, many Americans remained ignorant of the harsh conditions slaves experienced. Douglass's autobiography voiced the struggles in his journey from slavery to abolition. Similarly, *kathoey* can use their narratives to expose the unjust social prejudice and treatments and to propose necessary resolutions. Some researchers have started on such

narrative projects; for example, in their book entitled (ironically) *Male Bodies Women's Souls*, researchers LeeRay Costa and Andrew Matzner compiled a collection of personal narratives written by young *kathoey*. These personal narrative projects would empower the *kathoey* if their stories encourage an audience to appreciate the *kathoey's* inner-selves.

The best sectors for presenting oral narratives are the beauty pageants and television broadcasting, primarily because Thais already have a relatively positive outlook on *kathoey* in beauty pageants and television shows. Secondly, Thais host beauty pageants at national and local scales, in urban and rural settings (Boney). Whether a Thai is literate or illiterate, rich or poor, he or she is bound to watch at least one beauty pageant in his or her lifetime; for many, just one *kathoey's* narrative is enough to trigger lifelong perspective change.

Currently, Thais and acclaimed researchers do recognize that Thailand has three genders: male, female, and *kathoey*. Even then, Thais do not treat *kathoey* as a gender that is free of normative masculine and feminine expectations; not even legal documents can validate their gender. While gender partially defines one's character, one's life stories can affect one's sexuality. Through Ping's narrative, one can learn that *khao* lacked a fatherly role model as a child. All Ping has wanted is that Thais would "stop looking down on and despising the third sex"; *khao* urges Thais to "give a chance to the third sex" because *kathoey* "have the same status and freedom of being human just as others do" ("Ping" 76).

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# Each Other

ADAM DRINKWATER

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Despite increased mainstreaming of diverse sexual expression, many Americans generally treat sexuality (and specifically developing sexuality) as taboo—something mysterious, awkward, or inappropriate for discussion. In a time when psychology and science can explain and dispel most irrational beliefs about sexuality, some still shy away from accepting gays as part of life and culture. I wrote "Each Other" quickly in one sitting because these lucid memories came all at once, and I wanted to capture them and sort through them and try to make sense of what didn't make sense. I wanted to translate a delicate personal part of my past into a story about two men coming of age and dealing with issues that many Americans ignore and reject. Thanks to the total freedom of an English 101 assignment, I wrote this story.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: If I had to categorize this piece of writing, I'd call it "creative nonfiction" because it dances on the line between fiction and essay: It has the drawing power of narrative, with its finely drawn characters, vivid scene-setting, dramatic conflict, and development over time (it's no surprise that Adam is also an award-winning fiction writer). But it also explores ideas, and, as an essay, it carries the weight of fact. This is a story about the author's personal experience, but it's also about the idea of growing up gay and about the ways in which that development is interwoven with (among other things) religion, education, and the Boy Scouts. The story draws us in (what will happen?), and then the ideas compel us to respond (what? how? who? where? why?). When I first read this piece, it took my breath away, and I find upon re-reading it that its power has not diminished.*

—Pamela Demory, English Department

I first noticed his legs when he lay flat, reaching into the pool to lift someone out. His blue Speedos were taut against his buttocks, and his whole body was white, soft, and smooth—it reminded me of the naked women you'd see in Renaissance paintings, the women's bodies so pudgy and pale, they're hardly discernible from the toga-like sheets that cover them. At night after swim practice, I'd think about myself wrapped around those legs, my face moving downward, tasting mouthfuls of chlorinated flesh.

Nick lived on my street. He'd come over and pretend we were police officers dealing with violent criminals—at least he did. I usually played the perpetrator, and he'd throw me on my driveway and cuff me and kneel into my back and stab me with the plastic barrel of his nine-millimeter and whisper *this is it*. I'd lay flat on the pavement, my cheek cold against concrete, and he'd continue to keep his knee stabbed in my spine.

We weren't friends really. He went to a Christian school downtown—his seventh grade class consisted of eleven students that learned about creationism in science class. I went to the public junior high at the end of our street and got beat up every now and then for being white, rich, or a faggot. (Justin didn't like me checking out his chiseled body when he took off his shirt during P.E.) Because Nick and I weren't friends, we didn't spend much time together. Nick hung out with the club soccer players who consistently went to state finals every year, while I sat out most of my AYSO games because I was too fat to run quickly. Nick advanced to a full-fledged Boy Scout a year before I did. When I finally crossed from Cub Scouts to his troop, he usually hung out with the teenagers and talked to me when they were busy and made fun of me when they weren't. Then my mom would take us to my house, and we'd stay out in the desert night; he'd chase me to a dark corner where the shadows created an absolute blackness, and he'd take the gun—*this is it*—and I'd taste the cold plastic and pretend I was strung out, and he'd threaten sense into me. *This is it*.

The first time we kissed, I lay by my closet and pretended to be dead after he'd shot me. I feigned unconsciousness, my hands resting neatly on my stomach like the sleeping princess in fairy tales, and he pretended to give me CPR. He put his lips over mine and breathed into my mouth; his breath tasted like sweat. I moved my tongue between his teeth, and he sucked on it, keeping his lips vacuumed over mine. He always kissed like that, even in his teens; he'd keep his mouth open wide, wetting my

five o'clock shadow. That kiss unlocked everything. After that kiss, we had as many sleepovers as possible. He'd come over, and we'd get naked quickly. I'd watch "Boy's Life" while eating pizza, and he'd suck me. Then we'd switch. We'd do it a few times a night. We always had to keep quiet because the bed squeaked, so eventually we started setting up a tent in the backyard and sleeping out there. In the tent we could move freely, moan, rock. "I think about girls when we do this," he'd say when I was on top. "Don't you?" I'd never answer and we'd keep going. Then he'd tell me that he loved me.

At Boy Scout camp we'd share a tent. Summer after summer, he tasted like salt when I sucked him. Summer after summer, those downy legs became sinewy and spackled with hair. The camp was on Catalina Island, and he'd always swim in the murky green bay. I'd canoe and watch the lifeguards—well-made blonds in their late teens, shaggy hair dangling about their sunglasses and sun-spotted shoulders. We'd never talk about the lifeguards though. We never talked about us either. At nights, we'd hike to the cliffs and watch the sea of the sky, a black depth that seemed to close in. As we'd stare up, the stars seemed to spin around us, like we were being lifted away from the crashing waves below. We'd come back to the tent late and put our sleeping bags together on the wooden floor (the cots were rusted by the salt air and squeaked loudly). We'd spend half the night together before putting our bags back on the cots. It was automatic. During the day we never looked at one another. In the shower we kept in our corners, our bodies turned to the spigots. When they taunted someone for looking at cock we'd join in.

The older we became, the less we saw of each other. Only at camp would we spend time together. We never called one another. We never visited each other's houses. But we'd always share a tent (whether it be summer camp or weekend excursions). In the pop-up tents, we'd have to move quietly, forming a consistent rhythm in one sleeping bag to avoid rustling. We couldn't talk. In the night's silence, sound carried throughout the campsite. His dad usually lay in the tent next to us. Sometimes his dad took us to the cliffs at night, and under the stars he'd murmur a prayer, and we'd hold hands in a circle—Nick on one side, I on another.

The last time I saw him was at Camp Moabi, a motor home park bordering the Colorado River. It was July, and the tents were set in a tight circle. Our shirts were off, the air stunk of sweat, and we sat on newly cut grass. Nick got up and told us to swim. He ran to the beach



of the Colorado and waded up to his waist, and we followed. The six of us splashed and swam in the oily darkness. I couldn't see anything except the orange haze of streetlamps in the motor home parking lot, dozens of motorboats bobbing by the dock, and Nick. His back was to me, and he heaved for air, his downy shoulders rising and falling. I reached out, touched the indent of his vertebrae, brushed my fingernails down the back of his trunks. As I did this, he sunk down into the icy blackness and sprouted out and ran back to shore. We showered afterward to get the gasoline water off our bodies. We slept in the tent, barely moving at all for fear of making any sound, and he lay still as my lips covered his, as I tasted his five o'clock shadow and moved my hand across his rough cheek. I lay on him, my body moving like a wave, and we wiped ourselves afterward with his pillowcase, which we crumpled into the dark corner.

I haven't talked to Nick for three years; we lost touch during sophomore year in high school. Before we lost touch, he'd dated someone from his church, a tall big-hipped girl who always wore white debutant gowns as casual dress. They dated for about a year, and he prided himself on the fact that they'd never kissed. They attended a Christian convention together, and their photographs were featured in our local paper. The article described an abstinence pledge they made along with other Christian teens across the country, and they wore special gold necklaces to prove they wouldn't romp until they married. If this pledge were limited to heterosexuality, I doubt Nick would have had trouble. But unfortunately, I don't think he recognized that his sexuality factored into his life, religion, and self. For him, it didn't exist, we didn't exist.

Once we actually talked about *it*. "You ever look at guys when you're sitting in a restaurant or something?" he said as we lay side by side. "Do you wonder how big their dick is?"

Once he asked me if we could get AIDS by having sex, as though we'd somehow create the virus through homosexual contact.

Fear drove us to secrecy. We only knew gay, fag, and queer as insults. We only knew that admiring a male body led to taunting. We only knew that boys liked girls, and those that didn't lived in cross-dressing packs devoted to child molestation. We only knew that gay men were silly, slapped each other's shoulders with limp wrists, and cackled delightfully after lipping a joke. We weren't gay then, not through acknowledgement or self-identification—that was impossible. We knew what we did, what we felt, and what the world would feel if they found out. So we kept

ourselves hidden, even from ourselves. Homosexuality was a sin so great that it went unspoken. The shame punished those who sinned.

Once at camp, a scout leader walked in on Nick and me kissing in the men's room (we forgot our flashlights and couldn't venture into the forest). Only I was facing the man as he entered, and I pulled away from Nick immediately, and at the same time the man quickly diverted his eyes. I pretended to fumble with Nick's class A uniform, readjusting patches that were sewn to his sleeves and breast pocket. And we left. But the man saw, I knew he did. I could feel his shame.

Sometimes I wonder if Nick killed himself (as strange as that sounds). That last night at Camp Moabi, we built a fire together—I was the only person in earshot—and he made nonstop jokes about the military's "don't ask don't tell policy" as though he wanted to convince me he was straight. He laughed nervously after each joke like he expected me to understand some deeper underlying joke. Because he never referred to himself as anything but straight, I wonder how he transitioned into adulthood. I wonder where he lives now, who he lives with, and who his friends are and what he thinks of himself. He never went into the military—the last I heard (from a friend of my mom's friend), he dislocated his knee, and the military wouldn't accept him into basic training (or maybe it was his SAT scores).

I sometimes wonder if I'd recognize him because it's been so long. Sometimes I think I see him driving a Toyota Celica or passing by a grocery store aisle, but I never actually meet him again. I've tried online search engines, directories to colleges I speculate he might have attended, his old high school's website, but I've never seen his name. Last summer in L.A., I drove by his house, but new cars were parked out front, and an Asian family was unlocking the door to his house. His dad may have moved again, as military families tend to do, and exited my life forever; his existence is as ephemeral as my memory of his ghostly white body sinking into the Colorado's dark waters. I wonder where he is and what his beliefs are, whether or not he lives the "God-centered life" his family constantly preached, or whether he broke away and accepted himself despite everyone else. But sometimes I fear he gave up and continues to live in secret, which is not living at all.

The decision to ban gay members from Boy Scouts happened after I'd already become an Eagle Scout and left my troop for college. The irony behind the Boy Scouts's decision to ban homosexual leaders stems

from their philosophy that gays cannot be positive and moral role models for youth. On their website, they officially state the following:

“Scouts come from all walks of life and are exposed to diversity in Scouting that they may not otherwise experience. The Boy Scouts of America aims to allow youth to live and learn as children and enjoy Scouting without immersing them in the politics of the day.”

The BSA aims to allow youth to live and learn, unless they *are* the politics of the day. Their logic somehow assumes that gay men lack “morals and values,” as stated in their widely read internet article “In Support of Values.” By banning gay leaders, the BSA argues that straight leaders will reinforce the Scouting values. But this lack of role models in Scouting (or anywhere) leads gay men to grow up in secret. Nick could not be himself, not then, not in high school, perhaps not even now. He always looked up to older role models—leaders, older scouts. He imitated them, tried to impress them for approval. He’d never seen a gay role model, not in real life, Scouting, or the media. None are allowed, and law reinforces this.

The first gay man I ever met was online. I was 16; we talked in a chat room and met a week later. I met him in an Old-Pasadena bookstore, and we walked to a park. Shortly after he invited me back to his place, which I refused out of fear (c’mon, the guy was at least 27). After that, I met others until it became a habit, and I started meeting one a week. The internet worked wonders because I could meet men without revealing my sexuality to the masses, and even after I met gay men from L.A., I still felt compelled to keep my sexuality secret, as did Nick. I couldn’t tell anyone, especially in high school (St. Catherine’s), where the priests passed out pamphlets that described the illness of homosexuality and the solutions for recovery.

Nick once told me about a man in his church who came out at age 42, and the Church Elders excommunicated him after holding a hearing. Nick ended his story saying “It must suck to be gay.”

Once he asked me if I’d ever been with another guy (besides him), and I said no, even though it was a lie. In seventh grade, I had sleepovers with a fifteen-year-old altar boy, and I’d feel his hairy, sinewy legs (that felt like Nick’s would four years later). But I lied to Nick about this, and he probably reciprocated the lie. And that was all we had ever lived—a lie. We were lost because we knew nothing else. All we had was each other.



# Living a Whole Life

LINNAE EDMEIER

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: My goal for this piece was to objectively research and present transgender issues. Finding scientific research that separated transgender issues from homosexuality proved to be the real challenge for this piece. Ironically, this helped sharpen my focus. I hoped to bring the subject of transsexualism out of obscurity—the same obscurity that had marginalized my friend Frank for most of his life. My personal relationship with Stephanie (Frank) and her sister Kate made the article possible but also presented some ethical challenges. I had to remain objective in order to compose the article, but I had to remain subjective in order to ensure their confidentiality.*

*The use of the Library's Subject Specialists was the greatest lesson I learned from this project. I located two references immediately, but I needed the expertise of someone who could dig deep in a short amount of time. Subject Specialist Diana King and I communicated through email, which saved even more time. Whatever is studied, researched, discovered in the realm of all gender studies, I am extremely proud of my friends for being courageous enough to let go of their comfortable lives despite their fears and strong enough to hold on tight to what each knew was the answer for her.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In my journalism course (English 104C), I assign students a long (2,000–3,000 word) research-based feature. Even though students choose the topic for this piece, it often proves more difficult for them than they had imagined. It's not that they haven't written long research-based papers before—in fact, I think it's partly because they have done such papers before that this assignment*

*is difficult. As you'll see in reading Linnea's paper, it takes real skill to not only get the research right, but also to get the writing right. "Living a Whole Life" does a brilliant job of synthesizing the primary information Linnea collects in her interviews with the secondary material she obtains in her library research. The resulting piece is a riveting piece of scholarly reporting that is written in a style that's a pleasure to read.*

—Eric James Schroeder, English Department

Frank, an Army-trained career helicopter pilot, enjoyed mountain biking, his friends, and living on a sailboat off the California coast. At the age of 43, Frank was diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. The bouts of depression and alcoholic episodes Frank experienced his entire life, are now, five years later, a distant memory for Stephanie, a post-operative transsexual.

Ken, the married father of five children, at the age of 44 was diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. Four years later, post-operative Kate continues to make adjustments in her life as she and her family experience the issues of transsexualism.

What makes Kate and Stephanie unique and important to new research and theories of gender identity, its development, gender ideology, and Gender Identity Disorder (previously called transsexualism) is the fact that they are siblings.

Gender Identity Disorder (GID), a relatively rare condition, frequently marginalized by many conventional researchers, had been researched far less than other more widespread conditions. Although there are no exact numbers, experts suggest that Ken and Frank represented roughly one in 10,000 to one in 30,000 persons. Early research of GID produced many theories, most of which lacked substantial, reproducible results. Is it biological or psychological? Nature or nurture? Is it a choice? Recent studies have produced alternative, respectable theories suggesting a less conventional approach to the understanding of gender. The result has been a shift in perspective on what was once a narrowly researched topic.

The terms *gender identity*, *gender identity development*, *gender ideology*, and *Gender Identity Disorder* are the result of studies done in the mid to late part of the twentieth century as a variety of experts began

more encompassing research. As Joanne Meyerwitz explains in her book *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, “By the end of the century the earlier understanding of sex had given way to three categories of inquiry and analysis: “biological sex” referred to chromosomes, genes, genitals, hormones, and other physical markers, some of which could be modified and some of which could not; “gender” represented masculinity, femininity, and the behaviors commonly associated with them; and “sexuality” connoted the erotic, now sorted into a range of urges, fantasies, and behaviors.” To each of these three categories—biological sex, gender, and sexuality— theorists, scientists, and activists have added their own perspective and variable definitions, but most agree on the fundamental representation of each term.

At the center of the transgendered/transsexual issue is gender identity. The sense of being male or female is a part of our psyche most of us take for granted. Our assumption is that we are biologically male or female at birth, our self-perception (gender identity) matches our anatomical sex, and we grow into a gender role that exhibits characteristics common to that anatomically defined sex. With Frank and Ken, who were anatomically male at birth, gender identity did not match anatomical sex—each self-identified as female even at an early age. Ken and Frank, brothers who, as adults, had little contact with each other, were the third and fourth siblings in a traditional family of six children, five boys and one girl. Ken and Frank were six and five when their only sister was born, so their early childhood play was with their brothers in traditional roles and with traditional toys. Despite this, their gender identity development showed signs of conflict in early childhood. It is important to note that their recollections are independent of one another, and until each was diagnosed in his forties, neither was aware of the other’s experience.

During gender-related development, children like Ken and Frank learn what behaviors, attitudes, and traits are traditionally associated with being male or female by what is encouraged and reinforced by teachers, parents, and peers. Cross-dressing behavior as a child (using his mom’s clothes) brought Ken severe scoldings. One memory stands out from the rest for Kate, “By the tone of her voice, I now realize that this wasn’t the first time she had scolded me for this, and she was more than just disappointed with having her clothes strewn about.” Frank received a reprimand he couldn’t understand when, in kindergarten, he used the girls’ bathroom instead of the boys’. “I didn’t have a sense of such a clear

distinction between boys and girls,” Stephanie recalls. But it was at this point she learned a distinct difference was important, and Frank would have to conform to the value being placed on him as a boy. The confusion that each experienced marked a pivotal point in his gender identity development. Research suggests that by the age of four to five years, children recognize that one’s sex is a constant aspect of oneself that is not variable over situations. The fact that Ken and Frank, independently, cite this age as their earliest memory involving recognizable confusion confirms a cognitive awareness of a conflict between their biological sex and the gender with which they were self-identifying. It also suggests that their original gender identity may have been female, but because of the provocation each received to develop a male identity, the conflict that would progress throughout their lives was born.

In adolescence Ken was attracted to girls, so, as Kate now puts it, “I knew I wasn’t gay, but something wasn’t right. I was attracted to women, but at the same time I wanted to be like them. Because as kids you don’t talk about things, I wondered if maybe everyone had those feelings, or maybe it was something I was going through, you know, as a kid.” Frank was also having a difficult time. Stephanie recalls having “weird” feelings while dating, like being at a dance with a girl and not being able to act the part of a boy well enough. “It was like two shy girls just sitting there,” she now jokes.

What wasn’t funny for Frank or Ken was the slow and “scary” experience each had trying to figure out his feelings. Stephanie recalls hearing the word transsexual and then looking it up in the library. “It was really scary. It said things like *deviant*; and I thought, that’s not me. And where I came from, being homosexual was like being less than human. There was confusion on everybody’s part—they expected me to act like a boy but I didn’t *feel* like a boy.”

Gender roles were far more restricting during Ken and Frank’s childhood. The expected or supported behaviors that constitute gender roles not only vary within our culture, but they also change over time. Gender Ideology, as agreed to by most experts, is a cultural construct to define what a particular culture will or will not accept. It is this cultural construct that provides the best place of departure for new theories of gender identity and transgendered issues—theories that question the traditional binary, dualistic nature of defining genders.



Current ideology recognizes that masculinity and femininity coexist as fluid traits within personalities. The Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences (ESBS), 2001, states, “The simple dichotomy of biological sex has been questioned, as has the cultural gender dichotomy of male/female.” Today, although it is common to assume that all babies will be born obviously biologically male or female, sex is sometimes ambiguous, as in the case of intersexed babies. Many experts are now in favor of waiting until the individual is old enough to make their own decision as to what, if any, surgery they feel is necessary. Some of the philosophical, ethical questions about the appropriateness of surgery on intersexed newborns are questions shared by GID individuals—is enough known about gender identity and its natural development to impose or deny surgery based on our culturally constructed binary gender ideology?

Into adulthood, social pressures to conform to a male-gendered role continued for Ken and Frank. Ken’s choice to marry and have children gave him the loving partner and family he always wanted—a marriage that Kate admits was emotionally over long before her transition. Frank remained alone, enlisted in the Army, and chose a variety of flying jobs that allowed him freedom from emotional and sexual intimacy. Although filled with anxiety, Frank did date a few women. “Most of the time,” Stephanie jokes, “I just wanted to *be* them.”

In their search for an answer, each explored transvestitism. Kate, with humor, recalls, “I started looking around on the Web, found this group, and went to a meeting. There were all types of guys, dressed in everything feminine you could imagine, and they would sit around drink beer, watch football or whatever. This really isn’t me, I thought.” Stephanie also found a group and went hoping that she was TV (transvestite) because “I didn’t know anything else was possible.” As Ken and Frank explored the transgendered world (still unaware of each other’s transgendered issues), it became apparent that each was not TV. Ultimately, each was forced to confront decades of taboos, fears, and misinformation that had left them feeling marginalized and desperate. In her book *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism*, clinical sexologist and therapist Mildred Brown states simply that transsexuals are “individuals who strongly feel that they are, or ought to be, the opposite sex. The body they were born with does not match their own inner conviction and mental image of who they are or want to be. Nor are they comfortable with the gender role society expects them to play based on that body.” The fourth edition

of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, a reference used by many psychiatrists and other mental health practitioners, explains this definition in more clinical terms, adding, in part, that the conflict “causes significant distress in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.”

Ken knew acting on his persistent cross-gender feelings would devastate his family, but years of internal conflict led him to examine his choices. With heartfelt emotion breaking up her words, Kate now says, “I knew I could lose everything if I transitioned—my job, my wife, my home—but I had to get through it with my kids. I kept telling the therapist, ‘I *have* to go through this with them.’ My alternative was suicide, but I knew having me disappear would be worse for them. Because I had done dangerous things in the past, like skydiving and firefighting, I knew I could kill myself—I knew I could take that step and make it look like an accident—for them.” Stephanie was also at a critical point when she decided to seek therapy. For years, she would seclude herself in a hotel room on weekends and live her life as a woman. She now laughs at her first attempts to interact with people during these moments, “I would leave the room and scurry down to the corner for the paper or coffee. I got braver each time. But when I had to return home I would feel horrible. I would take all the clothes and toss them into the dumpster on the way out.” Stephanie moved onto her boat as a way of containing herself. Admitting that there was no room on the boat for all the feminine things she desired, she knew it was one way Frank could maintain his masculine life. “The group I was identifying with was so marginalized. *I* even thought it was weird. I felt I had few options. I didn’t want to go to a therapist because I felt like it would be the beginning of the end—the hormones and everything—I thought, *no way*.” Stephanie’s seclusion, drinking, and frustration continued until she says, “I began asking myself what am I doing here? And what do I have to look forward to? At that point, I didn’t care if I lived or died. I was living half a life.”

Kate and Stephanie express many of the feelings shared by those in the transgendered community—a community where socioeconomic, racial, and geographical boundaries blur amongst the emotional pain. Kate and Stephanie found out about one another by chance. Unknowingly, they had been referred, by different sources, to the same therapist. Each learned of the other before sex-reassignment surgery. Five

years later, both post-operative, their relationship is much the same as it was before they met in therapy. They visit occasionally and remain close through phone calls. Except for living on a boat, Stephanie enjoys her life much the way Frank did—she is a career helicopter pilot, she participates in recreational sports, and her friends know her as generous and optimistic. Kate is an employee of a prestigious nuclear laboratory and also an activist for furthering public education on gender identity and transgendered issues.

Many aspects of Gender Identity Disorder remain controversial. Its causes, methods of therapy, types of treatment, and the appropriateness of surgery are just a few. According to the ESBS, hormonal influences in the womb, genetics, and environmental factors (such as parenting) are all suspected to be involved in GID. This suggests that both psychology and science have a challenge in its research. For sisters Kate and Stephanie, this research, along with contemporary theories of gender identity, its development, and gender ideology, plays very little into the routine of their daily lives, but it has significant effects on their ability to live, what Stephanie calls, “a whole life.”