

“Born This Way”: Queer Vernacular and the Politics of Origins

Jeffrey Bennett

This essay critically examines debates about the supposed inborn nature of sexual orientation. Although popular discourses suggest that sexual orientation is an immutable characteristic, several scholars and activists have argued there is danger in postulating same-sex desire is innate. This analysis looks to another feature of the controversy, arguing that when queers themselves utilize “born this way” rhetoric, they frequently do so in surprising ways that rest outside dichotomist forms of reasoning. Exploring posts on the “Born This Way” blog, this essay argues that vernacular appropriations of the phrase are more fluid among LGBT publics than often imagined, allowing for a rethinking of the epistemology of the closet.

Keywords: Queer; LGBT; Vernacular; “Born This Way”

The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction displays in its lobby a famous letter written by Sigmund Freud to a concerned mother in April 1935. The woman had previously contacted Freud with a veiled reference that her son was “homosexual,” asking the psychotherapist for his guidance.¹ Freud explained in his correspondence that homosexuality

is assuredly no advantage but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development.²

Freud continued by recalling a number of famous queers who have shaped human history and contends that it “is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime.” Freud mused about the origins of sexuality not merely to relay information

Jeffrey Bennett is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. The author would like to thank Jessica Defino for her excellent research assistance with this project. He would also like to thank Isaac West for his productive feedback and support. Correspondence to: Jeffrey Bennett, Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa, 125 Becker Communication Studies Building, Iowa City, IA 52242, U.S.A. Email: jeff-bennett@uiowa.edu

about his ill-conceived scientific method, but to resist oppressive institutional practices and offer comfort to the seemingly worried mother.

This short, infamous exchange yields two compelling observations for this analysis. First, it signals an innovative and eventually widely accepted, albeit problematic, discursive field for approaching and addressing non-normative identities. Decades after this correspondence, the decriminalization of homosexuality to which Freud alluded has transpired in cultures globally, even if his postulates concerning arrested sexual development have been left to the annals of history. As homosexuality began taking forms unanticipated by practitioners in the medical establishment, advocates appropriated those features of psychiatric discourse that supported their causes and left other facets behind. As Chris Walters notes, both queers and anti-criminalization activists who were fighting against incarceration in 1950's England borrowed from Freud's ideas, even if they were not consistent with Freudian literatures or his basic principles of sexuality.³ Still, such articulations were significant because, as Jennifer Terry argues, "the efforts of homosexual men and women who sought allies among physicians were not in vain; they mark the beginning of a long-term struggle to decriminalize homosexual acts that often involved support from sympathetic medical authorities."⁴ For all of the heinous problems accompanying psychiatric discourses, doctors were often more progressive than their institutional counterparts in religion and law.

The letter delivered to Kinsey by that "grateful mother," whose name was scratched off before its donation, is also peculiar because the details of how she came to learn of her son's sexual orientation remain mysterious. We have no knowledge of what came to pass to allow her to make the observation that her son might be queer. Did he self-identify? Did she recognize signs of transgressive sexuality at a young age? Did she witness him with another man? For as much as scholars have recorded the import of Freud's letter in relation to his views on homosexuality, we have few details about the person who is the object of this letter or the relationship he has to his mother.

This brief missive embodies generations of debate about the origins of sexuality, the implications these origins have for quotidian queer life, and the ways people find assurance in authoritative discourses. But it also contains within it ethical questions about the degree to which people recognize the signs of sexuality, their cultural relations to truth, and the ethical interpersonal relationships accompanying such recognition. For over 150 years, we have pondered the origins of sexuality, looking to standpoints that range from psychiatric to genetic to hormonal. And while the scientific explanations of sexuality have rarely been satisfying for those people invested in the complexities of desire and identity, we do no service to the cultural contingencies of such rhetorics without looking to the ways queers themselves have utilized, negotiated, and resisted these discourses.

It is in this spirit, an attempt both to understand the appropriation of authoritative discourses and to fill the absence of people like the son in the aforementioned letter, that I turn to a recent controversy concerning sexual origins and the vernacular uptake of such rhetoric. The idea of being "born gay" or "born this way" is a widely

circulated notion in LGBT communities that is employed in a multitude of spheres for a range of social and political purposes. Although readers might associate the quip “born this way” with a contemporary pop anthem, the phrase has long accompanied LGBT narratives. Most often, the refrain is grounded in scientific discourses concerning genetics, hormones, or evolutionary biology. Rather than attempt to demystify the problematic uptake of this rhetoric to argue for or against the framework, this essay looks to specific incarnations of the phrase, ones that are decidedly vernacular and without consistent appropriation in their use: those posts made to the *Born This Way* blog.

According to the curator, the *Born This Way* blog is a “photo/essay project for gay adults (of all genders) to submit childhood pictures and stories (roughly ages 2 to 12), reflecting the memories and early beginnings of their innate LGBTQ selves.”⁵ The photos are meant to offer visual proof that it was readily apparent, at least in the minds of the people posting, that they were always queer. Generally featuring gender transgressions that visually represent sexual orientation, these past clues to one’s present-day sexuality put on display everything from boys in tiaras and Wonder Woman costumes to girls in cowboy outfits and hockey uniforms. The site is not affiliated with the Lady Gaga song of the same name, though both have been criticized for reifying essentialized notions of identity and unnecessarily promoting stereotypes.⁶

Although it is easy to charge sites like the *Born This Way* blog of swimming in the waters of essentialism, such critiques do not investigate carefully the discursive potential to reinscribe vernacular forms of the coming out narrative and forge what Judith Butler calls “strategic provisionalities,” allowing for multifarious rearticulations of sex and gender that energize incremental changes among publics.⁷ As with the appropriation of scientific parlance to combat the criminalization of homosexuality, LGBT people borrow from the ambiguous lexicon of being “born this way” to articulate the self in ways not fully engaged by medical epistemologies. Far from an essentialized identity, the assorted everyday performances of gender and sexuality found on the blog recast attention to ethical imperatives that generally rest outside scientific spheres by engaging profuse identities, practices, and embodiments. Offering emphasis to the contingency and provisionality of LGBT lives, users on the *Born This Way* blog affirm that discourses of identity are sites of negotiation that take “on a future set of significations that those of us who use it now may not be able to foresee.”⁸ The blog underscores that queer world-making is a process brought to life, in part, by the vernacular contestation of discourses, some of which may cement hegemonic practices and others of which might interrupt normative scripts of identity.

Rhetorically analyzing material from 650 posts on the *Born This Way* blog, this essay explores the ways LGBT people tactically appropriate “born this way” discourses to posit an ethical imperative for site visitors to engage in queer world-making. Interestingly, few people actually employ the phrase “born this way,” and a large segment of blog posters offer much evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, in asserting the supposed self-evident nature of their being, people who post to the blog

are able to claim their sexualities were readily available for all to witness. This approach, which allows contributors to impart a shared commonsense reading of the pictures across audiences, enables a rethinking of the epistemology of the closet in contemporary culture and subtly recrafts the conditions that mediate coming out. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posited that heteronormative cultures use the epistemology of the closet to manage the bodies of queers, either forcing us to stay in the proverbial closet or, after we come out, telling us someone else always harbored knowledge of our secrets.⁹ The *Born This Way* blog bends this idea. It inverts the epistemological conundrum, visually posing the ethical question: “You never thought I might be gay? How could you not know?” Enthymematically, the site invites viewers to ponder who shared in the open secret and how that knowledge affected the lives of LGBT people. The site creates an ethical space for pondering how those who recognized queer subjectivities acted, or not, to make a sometimes violent and cruel world more hospitable. Even more important, it might ask each of us, “What are you doing about it now?”¹⁰

To substantiate the above claims, I revisit the debates surrounding the concept of being “born this way” and the vernacular possibilities for troubling such discourse. I then turn attention to the *Born This Way* blog and explore how it reconstructs the epistemology of the closet by offering evidence of queerness situated in the past. In looking to these photos, we need not ask if people were born LGBT, or when they felt non-normative identifications, or if sexual orientation is an effect of nature or nurture. The shift from an ontological question of being to an ethical question marked by visibility provides the opportunity to explore the strategic reading of identities in the past to productively open a space for living in the future.

Born This Way?

The contention that one is born lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender is often made to combat accusations that LGBT people choose to embrace non-normative identities. For decades, religious conservatives argued that LGBT people elected to engage in “deviant” behavior. The deployment of “born this way” rhetoric has been an effective tool for LGBT people and their allies, shifting the terms of the debate from contemptuous perversity to that of rights-based secularism. The relatively swift uptake of this rhetoric is reflected in a recent Gallup poll, which found 47% of adults believe sexual orientation is inborn. Just two years prior, only 40% of people held the same belief.¹¹ Robert Brookey points out that theories regarding the innateness of homosexuality have been embraced because such discourses establish the immutability of identity for legal protections and effectively reject religious posturing about LGBT impurities.¹² Perhaps most important, Brookey adds that many gays and lesbians genuinely believe they have no conscious choice in regards to their sexual orientation, making the dissemination of such theories both logical and welcome for many.

Despite the enthusiasm mustered by the “born this way” rhetoric in some communities, an array of scholars and activists have cautioned against its appropriation. The common maxim “born this way” can never account for all forms of gender and sexual identification, cultural contexts, or more fluid understandings of sexuality and gender. In short, people do in fact come out late in life, are bisexual, pansexual, or asexual, and often choose to be with members of the same sex. The claim that people are hardwired with their sexual orientation is precarious because the diversity of the human world prevents a complete classification of desire, identification, and praxis. Taken to its logical extreme, some fear that asserting notions of sexuality rooted in biology will lead to the attempted eradication of biological traits that mark one as LGBT.¹³ Scholars have been quick to correct the misgivings of the “born this way” refrain in the hopes of generating more flexible and reflective frames for contemplating identity. Suzanna Walters, for instance, has warned against the born this way banner, arguing

In our present political context, gay volition is like Voldemort—dangerous even to be uttered. This “born with it” ideology encompasses gay marriage, gay genes, gayness as “trait” and is used by both gay rights activists and anti-gay activists to make arguments for equality (or against it). This is bad science (mistaking the possibility of biological factors with wholesale causation) and bad politics (hinging rights on immutability and etiology).¹⁴

Likewise, bloggers on the site Social In(Queery) contended the problem with “born this way” claims is they “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.”¹⁵ The bloggers’ charges of coercion lend themselves to a classic ideological approach to culture that seeks to demystify discourses and lead readers to clarity. There is in both instances above an assumption that LGBT people do not already critically reflect on the categories in which they are implicated.

“Born this way” rhetoric is framed frequently as a biological apparatus of knowledge, eclipsing the ways it can be conceived as a vernacular rhetoric employed among LGBT people. The repeated nods to genes or hormones need not foreclose the inherently polysemous nature of this discourse and its adoption for purposes not concurrent with scientific matrixes. John Sloop and Kent Ono have rightfully argued that marginalized rhetorics are often culturally syncretic, articulating communal feelings that cannot be reduced to oppositional logics.¹⁶ “Born this way” discourses have the capacity to underwrite claims about embodiment, highlight struggles over identification, and lend force to tactics of resistance.¹⁷ In the digital landscape of the Internet, these vernacular appropriations can be shared broadly, performing cultural work that shapes ideas about reasonableness and instigates public conversations about choice, identity, and belonging.¹⁸

The narrative and visual logics of the “born this way” vernacular have the potential to situate transgressive performances as accessible, pleasurable, and ultimately productive. The mediated platform of the blog permits such rhetorics to be disseminated broadly, traveling promiscuously among publics and presenting

spectacular instances of diverse experiences rather than be secluded to discreet or oversimplified renderings of identity. Scholars including Jiyeon Kang and Robert Glenn Howard have argued for the unique power of mediated content in vernacular rhetoric, noting that authority need not be granted based on participation solely in communities driven by expertise or locality.¹⁹ In this way, the *Born This Way* blog articulates a sense of authority outside scientific understandings of origins and also offers entry into LGBT worlds, allowing visitors to interpret “born this way” rhetoric through varied personal histories. Isaac West et al. have utilized the polysemic nature of vernacular discourse in similar fashion, exploring the enabling and constraining attributes of the *It Gets Better* project to retort unreflective dismissals of its utility.²⁰ Pointing to the myriad ways user videos function, the authors conclude that reductionist understandings of the *It Gets Better Project* fail to account for the divergent ways in which people create, distribute, and engage in the complexity of queer lives. Likewise, users on the *Born This Way* blog enable horizons of possible action, looking beyond individual bodies and their contradictory appropriations and toward an ethic of possibility for engendering a more hospitable world.

The *Born This Way* Blog

The *Born This Way* blog was unveiled in January 2011 and received over 260 posts in its first month alone. Although posts peaked early in the site’s creation, the blog continues to draw submissions and remains operational as of this writing. The site received widespread attention, being featured in news outlets such as *CNN*, *The Huffington Post*, *Salon*, *NPR*, *Buzzfeed*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. It was also reviewed in numerous LGBT and feminist media, including *The Advocate*, *Towleroad*, *Joe My God*, *Queerty*, and *Jezebel*. Perhaps because of this ubiquitous coverage, the site has been viewed over four-a-half million times since its inception. The success of the blog led to the production of a coffee table book that attracted dozens of entries from celebrities that include former Congressman Barney Frank, Andy Bell of the pop group *Erasure*, blogger Perez Hilton, *Village Voice* columnist Michael Musto, and Broadway legend Marc Shaiman.

With its assumed embrace of unreflective determinism, the *Born this Way* blog generated its fair share of controversy. Skeptics argued the site did little more than reify essentialized notions of identity, prop up damaging stereotypes, and offer simplistic understandings of LGBT life. In a scathing critique, sociologist Lisa Wade beseeched,

many gay men, lesbians, and their allies desperately want to prove that being gay is biological on the assumption that showing so will mean that intolerant people will be forced to accept them ... I appreciate what *Born This Way* is trying to accomplish, but I don’t think that convincing people that homosexuality is biological will have the effect many hope for. In the meantime, they’re doing everyone a disservice by perpetuating the stereotype of sissy gay men and butchy lesbians.²¹

On the one hand, Wade's criticisms are valid in worrying that the biological thesis rests on problematic gender representations, which generally have specious connections to sexuality. However, Wade is unable to explain away those bodies that do violate gender normativities and the pleasure many people partake—especially as children—from their non-normative practices. As will be detailed below, Wade's fears may be for naught. The vast majority of pictures posted to the blog do not offer visual evidence of sexual stereotypes.

While essentialism is a valid conceptual critique of normative impulses in a persistently heteronormative culture, it is equally important to avoid the trappings of take-it-or-leave-it criticism. As with Dustin Goltz's notion of "critical frustration," this essay advocates a "commitment to critique as the opening of a discussion, rather than its demise."²² To be sure, the charge of essentialism is strange in the context of the *Born This Way* blog, especially considering how many of the photos illustrate a gender fluidity that is unparalleled in the adult world. Certainly, there must be more productive and reparative ways to understand the appeal and popularity of the blog, ways that might affirm how LGBT people narrate their own histories and the possibilities for altering an often-hostile world. Far from a sense of certainty about sexual orientation that some observers see in the photos, the degree of speculation and doubt the corpus of photos permit is powerful. As a collection, the photos destabilize static notions of identity because the gendered signs that signify the semiotics of sexuality are never coherent. The blog does not strive to resolve the many contradictions that are inherent to the experiences of LGBT people. Even as the blog is troubling for reasons related to the commodification of LGBT identity (which I discuss in the conclusion of the essay), the site accomplishes much in its exploration of performativity, identification, and difference.

The blog functions visually by embracing those aspects of gender and sexuality generally understood as discreet to a community and then projects them outwards. Gaydar, for instance, is generally presented as an affective feeling, one that assumes a common sense understanding of bodies, but without proof. Participants on the *Born This Way* site turn gaydar outward to the general public and spur ethical questions concerning the ways they were treated at a time when all could see "who they were." The transgressive performances accentuated on the blog do not necessarily trap LGBT people in dominant logics, but allow for a rearticulation of social relations based on the provisional nature of their adopted practices. Far from transparent, experiences posted on the *Born This Way* blog require an examination of norms and normativities, insider/outsider relations, and the complicated layers of sociality that give rise to the performance of identity.

As of March 2014, the blog had collected the photos and stories of about 650 people. To fully analyze the blog, I surveyed and kept records on each of the posts to ascertain a representative understanding of its form and content. I looked to various characteristics of each blog post, including the visuals, the narratives composed by each person posting to the site, and the content of those narratives. Importantly, it was recognized at the start of the project that the blog master offers prompts for people posting but who may not be comfortable with public disclosure.²³

In short, several patterns are present because the blog itself is a catalyst for steering the discourse. To avoid these obvious observations, I looked to repetitions that were consistent, but *not* prompted by the blog master.

The hundreds of responses generated by the blog produced thousands of motifs for analysis. There are posts referencing subjects that range from the serious (immigration reform for same-sex couples, bullying, suicide attempts, childhood sexual desires, religion) to the mundane (sports, toys, holidays) to the humorous, campy, and fantastic nature of queer lives. As a humanist researcher, I was interested in questions regarding the dialogical relationship between the narratives, the pictures, and the blog's audiences, especially those posts that concerned queer world-making and the engineering of more inclusive public cultures. To fully explore these rhetorics, the following sections unfold by looking to two themes that constitute the site's composition: the visualization of sexuality through gender and the ethical relationship established for people viewing the blog.

Visualization of Sexuality Through Gender

The visual proof of sexual orientation presented on the *Born This Way* blog generally focuses on violations of gender norms and not those explicitly related to sexuality. The signs for one are read metonymically as signs for the other, even as many people might find this conflation problematic. Because sexuality is typically mediated through cultural cues, the *Born This Way* blog can only visualize queerness by looking to seeming gender transgressions represented by the sassy placement of an arm, a fabulous pose, the clothing people wore, or objects generally affiliated with masculine or feminine performances. Still, this blurring of sexuality and gender need not be problematic or essentializing. Gender and sexuality are frequently over-compartmentalized in public cultures, and the pictures, accompanied by the narratives, repeatedly illustrate how fruitful those intersections can be for exploring the complexities of identity.

Photos of gender non-conforming children trouble political and ideological understandings of identity by visually interrupting the trajectory of heteronormative conformity. Children grow at such a fast and immediate pace (the phrase, "I can't believe how big s/he is getting" is a cliché of American life), but it is rarely noted in scholarship how easily their ubiquitous performances demonstrate ideas related to "becoming." When children do not rehearse gender scripts in normative fashion, everyday ideas about becoming are overrun with anxieties concerning their development. Writing about gay male gender contravention, David Halperin observes, "in a social and symbolic system where gender differences are systematically polarized, dichotomized, and turned into binary oppositions, any gesture that implies a refusal of conventional masculinity is certain to be read as feminine."²⁴ Even among some LGBT communities, stereotypical representations of gender performance are frequently elided because of fears concerning backlash, the conservative disciplining of queer bodies, and shared anxieties over non-conformity.



Figure 1. Jason.

Rather than be constrained by such phobic impulses, the *Born The Way* blog embraces non-conforming moments in a productive fashion.

One photograph that captures the power of the image to communicate the pleasure of gender non-conformity comes from Jason, who was four in 1979 (Figure 1). Writing of his life in Missouri, Jason remembers, “All I wanted Santa to bring me for Christmas was an Incredible Hulk doll and a Wonder Woman costume. I wasn’t aware Wonder Woman’s ensemble had a version with pants—but Santa apparently took pains to find it.” The photo is of Jason sitting on the couch in full Wonder Woman regalia, including the tiara, a shirt with the golden eagle breastplate, and blue and white starred go-go shorts. In many regards, the photo captures the *mise en scène* of a typical middle-class Midwestern home in the 1970s. The brown, tan, and beige hues associated with the era offer a salient contrast to Jason’s Wonder Woman costume. There are no discernible markers of Christmas, save for perhaps a large box in the background that appears to have held a rocking chair. This could be any day in Jason’s life after receiving the outfit. He sits with a contented look on his face, with his hands folded neatly where Wonder Woman’s bracelets of victory meet. Jason summarizes the scene by noting, “I wish I had the photo of my dad sitting on the couch opposite me, as he had this really concerned look, complete with a grimace. He and mom obviously loved me, though, as there are many more incriminating photos.” The photo is both fantastic and mundane, illustrating the everydayness of queer bodies and the pleasure of gender fluidity, but underscoring that such contravention is enabled best among supportive friends and family.

The photo is especially telling when contrasted with Jason's narrative, which is otherwise unremarkable. In his brief commentary, Jason alludes to how transparent his sexuality was to others, his struggles with coming out, and his gradual acceptance of self. He writes, "Ten or more years ago, I'd cringe at this pic; but now all I can think of is, 'Wow—I'm pretty dang lucky to have my mom and dad.'" The temporal figuring of the narrative is noteworthy, as Jason details an idyllic life at age four, unease in his early twenties, and eventual acceptance in his mid-thirties. Although it is easy to be skeptical of narratives read decades in hindsight, the users are describing not only the here and now, but the when and where of their lives. The potency of narrative remembrance here lies in its capacity to rearticulate the relational influence on personal identity and the import of fostering more hospitable spaces for queer lives. Jason's gender transgressions spark nostalgia, awareness of internalized homophobia, and the pains others took to keep him well. Like many on the blog, Jason is thinking through the past, but also subtly shaping his narrative to mark present-day contentment that signals future happiness. Detailing the power of narrative to temporally situate our lives, Jay Allison contends that, "human beings structure their experiences and actions in a narrative fashion not only retroactively as they look back on experience and action, but proactively as they work to achieve an envisioned future."²⁵ Not surprisingly, many posts on the site are directed towards kids, with users explaining that their nostalgic and humorous longings helped to shape their experiences and the trajectory of their lives. Jason's narrative, like many on the blog, implicitly imagines a better future, as he has moved from shame to contentment. The posting of the picture is itself an act of pride and the gender defiance it propagates a continued part of whom he has and will become.

These presentations of self remind viewers that gender contravention is more ubiquitous than sometimes imagined and sexual non-conformity frequently celebrated. The narratives and the photos help to complicate accusations of essentialism because the pleasures derived from gender derelictions are unquestionably variable. The transgressive pleasure associated with the blog offers an opportunity to reflect on the power of gender fluidity to be productive and forward-looking for those engaged in queer world-making. The photos are endearing and sweet and above all, posters frequently mention how comfortable they were with themselves in the pictures. To be sure, a boy dressing a Barbie or a girl playing ice hockey does not by itself make him or her queer.²⁶ Nonetheless, Lauren Berlant reminds us that looking to why people embrace particular attachments over others is a more imperative project than simply dismissing those identifications to start.²⁷ This trend can be spotted immediately on the *Born This Way* blog with Kevin, who was the first poster to the blog in January 2011. Kevin's photo is a shot of him at age four in 1964 and he explicitly comments on how much he enjoyed bending traditional gender norms during his youth. Noting his love of baton twirling, he writes, "At the time this photo was taken, I was joyful, giddy, fearless, and ready to perform. I mean, who wouldn't want to dance around on stage and receive all that attention? I remember being especially excited to see the older girls with their fire batons." Likewise, the famous drag queen Jackie Beat recalls the pleasure derived from gender non-conformity, explaining,

I remember my mom dressing me up in these fabulous late '60s/early '70s outfits that were really only appropriate for an adult appearing in a production of "The Boys In The Band." But I loved being fashionable! Especially as I got a little older and became a full-fledged teenager.

Laurie submits, "As a kid, I always enjoyed dressing up in more 'boyish' clothes. I loved my Star Wars figures, and hated Barbie dolls. I wore boys Under-roos (Superman was my favorite!) and played sports." Alfred, who was six in 1966, remembers, "I was the only boy that wanted to be Catwoman. And certainly the only boy in the neighborhood that did a decent Eartha Kitt impression." Sarah, who was 12 in 1988 emphasizes the importance of realizing such pleasures and the influence they can have on personal development:

And even though socially my world was a mess, and school was very difficult, the majority of the time I remember feeling idyllic and content. I was comfortable in my body and with how others saw me, confident that I could be whoever I wanted to be.

The personal narratives repeatedly highlight moments of awareness, pleasure, and possibility. These reflections are not marked solely by the inherent dangers of nonconformity, but often illustrate the myriad ways hope and identification can be mediated for likeminded audiences.

The pleasure derived from being non-normatively identified is on full display, as the pictures often depict gender-bending children smiling as they participate in acts of gaiety. The blog captures a queer vernacular that transcends debates about being born a particular way, moving into periods of life when queer subjectivities were being crafted. The pictures provoke intrigue because of the shared identification many of us have with the signs being spotlighted in the photos. Despite this gender play, it is important to reflect that not all people—indeed I would argue the majority of them—are readily recognized as LGBT on the blog.²⁸ Because childhood allows for more freedom to play with cultural signs, generally the pictures just look like kids being kids. The differences between boys and girls are noteworthy, as the most gender "transgressive" photos circulated in the media are of boys in effeminate poses. Perhaps because the tomboy has strong presence in American culture, female contraventions are remarked upon less in public forums about the site. Jamie Skerski has argued persuasively about the permissibility afforded to girls to embrace tomboy identities until puberty before they are expected to conform to gender normativities.²⁹ This disciplining of gender carries over to the blog in consistent fashion. Still, the men, women, and transpeople posting these commonplace photos clearly see something that other observers might not. The imperative question we are left with is, who else might have noticed?

Mediating a Queer Ethic

Photos that embrace, rather than interrupt, stereotypical gender performances frequently associated with sexual orientation act as a catalyst for the visual ethic prompted on the blog. Unlike gaydar, which requires a close reading of cues that are

ambiguous or unmarked, the people on the *Born This Way* blog establish an ethic of communal responsibility by embracing the supposed obviousness of their non-normative identifications. Users on the blog assume an understanding of signs across publics in order to conjure an ethical imperative that demands support and humanity over discipline and isolation. The visual affirmation of queer lives, Charles Morris and John Sloop remind us, is often the first step in instigating productive modes of world-making and kinship.³⁰

One of the most compelling images on the blog that captures the ethical spirit of fostering a more hospitable world for queers is presented by Shawn, who recalls life in the rural Ohio town of Litchfield, when he was five in 1987 (Figure 2). Shawn is recounting an experience wherein he and a neighbor girl named Jennifer decide to “get married” and have a ceremony to mark their nuptials. The photo, taken post-ritual, is of Shawn dancing at their faux reception. Shawn’s body is tilted slightly profile left to the camera, with his head tilted back towards the lens, facing the bottom right part of the frame. His right arm is in the air, with his palm open, looking as though he might be voguing (a trend not yet popular in rural Ohio in



"Gettin' Hitched"

Figure 2. Shawn.

1987). Shawn's left arm is cocked on his waist. Although his narrative clarifies that he is dancing, Shawn appears as though he is about to snap his right finger for the camera. Shawn's eyes appear slightly closed and his lips are pursed, as though he is singing and dancing with ecstasy. Shawn's pose appears frenetic, especially compared to the two children standing immediately behind him. Shawn is dressed in blue and the girl in pink, but his pose betrays any classification of traditional gender roles. Shawn's blue stripes are especially bold against the brown hues of the deck he is dancing on, the gray siding of the house, and the mild colors worn by the other children.

Shawn narrates the action of the photo, remembering,

As a kid, I enjoyed marriage as a ceremony. Perhaps it wasn't a movie I shouldn't have watched at age 5, but I loved the twisted wedding scene at the end of "Flowers In The Attic," where the mother falls off the balcony to her death. Anyway, I suppose this makes Jennifer my first and only beard in my first and only homo-flexible moment.

Commenting directly about the photograph, Shawn writes,

Seeing this pic again really made me look back and realize how effeminate and, well, f*gggy I've always been. Now, 23 years later as an out adult, I look back on these photos and it makes me wonder why anyone would ever make me feel bad about being FABULOUS!

Shawn troubles the script of heteronormativity with nods to camp, pride, and, importantly, ethics. He plays up a traditional queer artifact with *Flowers in the Attic*, a film that disrupts familial unity and the romantic flare of marriage through a sordid tale of incest. The pride with which he embraces such trash viewing illustrates the acceptance of his non-normative identifications and offers intelligibility to an otherwise ridiculous practice (getting married at age five). Shawn employs the term "homo-flexible," as opposed to the more widely utilized "hetero-flexible," to mark his identity as resolutely gay.

Notably, the final portion of Shawn's statement is not merely about his transgressive gender performance, but about the social environment in which he was raised and disciplined. Indeed, Shawn's past is striking when we contemplate the everydayness of queer life as it is presented. The photo does more than capture a single moment in time; it suggests this performance could have been one of millions snapped over the course of Shawn's life. And still, it is difficult not to share Shawn's speculation about who identified his sexual orientation, how they did so, and when. After all, this moment was documented by another person, someone who may have intuited that Shawn's performance reflected a defining attribute of his personality. The person standing behind the camera, and those kids residing behind him, give presence to those who surrounded Shawn and who may have known he was gay.

The photos frequently relay an image of the fantastic among the normative, the unequivocally queer among the banal. Perhaps the most widely circulated of the pictures on the blog comes from Isaac, who posted a photo of himself when he was seven in 1995 while living in Karratha, W. Australia (Figure 3). Isaac is standing between his two brothers, and the boys are wearing identical school uniforms. The



Figure 3. Isaac.

sibling on the right portion of the photo appears to be the oldest, being noticeably taller than the others and posing with a stoic look on his face. Isaac's brother to the left is smiling, but is otherwise not noticed because of Isaac's frenetic pose. In contrast to the subtle expressions of his siblings, Isaac is radiating with an excitement that conveys movement among stillness. Isaac's legs are crossed and his knees bent, with his left hand hooked behind his back. The other arm is thrown upward, looking as though he is introducing a prize on a game show. Isaac is the only boy with his mouth open, appearing to be shouting with glee as he strikes a pose.

Remembering his life at the time, Isaac writes,

Here I am with my two brothers in the dustbowl mining town of Karratha, where the dirt is red and the people are predominantly white. Being one of the few ethnic people in town didn't bug me much, as I just assumed I was white like everyone else. Ah, the innocence of youth. At this point in my life I lived a blissfully unaware gay lifestyle: Having all female friends, really REALLY liking Catwoman, and always trying on my friend's fake, plastic, high-heeled shoes when I went to their house. I actually didn't realize I was even close to being gay until my graduating year of high school. So this photo is one of those things I look at now and think to myself—"How did I NOT know?!" Whenever I have a party at my house or friends come over, they all see this photo and piss themselves laughing. And I share a pretty similar sentiment. I mean, look at me: I can't tell whether I'm posing or trying to hold in a pee!

The photo is arresting in part because the boys are literally locked into a normative pattern, as exhibited by the dull blues and grays of their school uniforms. Set against

this backdrop, Isaac's explosion of happiness is impossible to miss. Despite the acknowledged complications of race, gender, and sexuality that accompanied his life, Isaac's narrative expresses bewilderment—for even he is puzzled by his lack of self-awareness. Significantly, Isaac observes that even the most seemingly common and normative qualities of life (his race, his sexuality, his gender performance) were social constructions. Still, the ethical imperative for others to recognize and rehabilitate queer worlds is painfully obvious. He was, in his words, “innocent,” “blissfully unaware,” and “didn't realize” his sexual orientation. The photo is starkly opposite these words. Even if the drab colors of the institutional clothing he is wearing mirror the first 15 minutes of the *Wizard of Oz*, Isaac's personality is in technicolor.

The publicity these two photos received highlights a cultural preoccupation with the signs demarcating sexual orientation. Each charts a movement of bodies that digresses from typical understandings of gender performances, each contrasts the normative bodies of other children to the eccentric movements of those featured, and each seems to exude a stereotypical joy that has the potential to stunt more dreary notions of LGBT life circulated in the media. Regardless, these photos are consistently positioned as queer and underscore the ethical responsibility for those viewing the photos to foster more hospitable worlds for LGBT people.

In this way, the political-ethical import of the *Born This Way* site can be found among the many posts that contend people clearly knew the blog posters were LGBT well before they came out. This theme is especially conspicuous when we consider it is not one of the many prompts offered by the blog master. Kurt, for example, posted a picture with his twin brother Matt (who is also gay) when they were five years old in 1990. Kurt writes:

When I stumbled upon this picture at my dad's house, my first thought was, “How did you all NOT know we were gay?” Especially when we spent so much time playing Cinderella—and need I even mention my purple My Little Pony?

John from Duncan, OK, noted: “I always knew I was ‘different’ and my family could sense it too. Especially my big sister.” Ray, from St. Louis posted a picture of himself at age six in 1980, scribing,

Other kids used to call me “Gay Ray.” I was not particularly feminine as a child, but the other kids still knew there was something very different about me. This was because of the things I would say, and not being shy about the fact that I enjoyed lots of things typically reserved for girls.

Likewise, Taylor observed that she hated receiving stereotypical girl toys like Barbie as a child, but exacted revenge by cutting their hair short like her own and having the dolls marry one another. She writes,

But after years of depression and self hatred and a couple of suicide attempts, I've learned that I am a wonderful, loving, caring person. When I came out at age 20, it was more like, “Yeah we knew. We were just waiting for you to tell us.” My mom had a tougher time accepting it, but she loves me because I'm her baby and she wants me to be happy.

Collin, who identifies as a transman relays,

I didn't hear the word 'transgender' until I was in college, as a friend I made there was transitioning from male to female. And right away it made sense, even though I was scared to admit it to anyone. When I finally told my parents, they'd been expecting it for a while, although they still weren't happy about it.

These examples are not atypical, frequently pointing to the open secret that everyone knew and consistently posing that it was only a matter of time before these visual indexes gave way to verbal confirmation.

The degree to which these assertions are made is frequent enough to resist the claim that some of the bloggers were ever in the "closet." Bradley from Wisconsin noted under a picture of himself sucking on a lollipop that, "No one was betting on me growing up to be a lumberjack!" Sarah from Pennsylvania recollected, "Later that year I tried to come out to my mother, who assured me that I couldn't be gay because I was too young to know about these things." Kellie, who posted a picture of herself at age four in 1973 relayed a story from later in her life.

When I was in 2nd grade my teacher called my parents in and told them she thought I was gay. I suppose I was posturing in a way that was too masculine for her liking. I never knew of this accusation, or even what "gay" was at that time. But when I came out in my mid 20s, my mother told me about it.

Some of the moral retorts LGBT people make to those who consistently treated them in hateful and violent ways is striking. Jay, for instance, recalls that he began experiencing heterosexism at a young age:

It's sick that a 5 year old experiences homophobia. Obviously, I had never had sex and had never been on a date. When those opposed to our equality say it is about our deviant behavior, they are lying. At 5, I had never been "deviant." It is about "the other" and the need to feel superior to someone else.

In this way, the *Born This Way* blog conjures a doubt that is not simply about the ways queer people see themselves. It recasts attention to those that surrounded them and their moral culpability in regards to queer lives. If the photographs capture one fleeting moment of a person's life, what did the rest of this person's gender performance convey to those around them? Did those close contacts never once have doubts these kids might not be straight? And if they did have doubts, what did they do to make their lives more livable? I pose these questions because, by and large, posters to the blog rarely embrace the rhetoric that one is born gay. Rather, many participants articulate themselves to this discourse to suggest, "I feel like a part of me was always this person. Was I the only one to know this?" The ethics of such a question forces us to ask what roles communities have in offering voice to LGBT experiences and altering heteronormativity to make such worlds intelligible.

Sexual Ethics and the Articulation of Authority

Far from being secluded to individual performances of sexuality, the *Born This Way* blog instigates questions concerning the relationship between culture and ethics, as

well as the ways we look back to the past and hold communities responsible for making queer lives more livable. Although it is fashionable to denigrate claims that a person might be born LGBT, it is important to think through the prospects that exist for narrating the self within these normative scripts, looking to the ways strategic provisionality might allow new modes of understanding sexual orientation and gender identity. The blanket dismissal of any mention of origins misses broader cultural implications for adopting these discourses tactically, especially for audiences that have been primed to receive messages using essentialist lenses.

The discursive possibilities for reworking the parameters of the closet are best illustrated by two counter-intuitive elements on the blog. First, most people posting to the site never invoke the notion of being “born this way.” Although a key word feature on the main page suggests “born this way” is the most commonly appearing phrase on the entire network, those three words are a part of the blog’s template, misleading viewers about the cohesiveness of experience or subscriptions to this idea. This is not to say that some people on the site do not embrace biological determinism—certainly many do. However, those participants who identify as bisexual, asexual, pansexual, gender queer, transgender, once married to people of the opposite sex, or a host of other identifications illustrate the shaky foundation on which authoritative rhetorics rest. The appropriation of these discourses is vastly more complicated than any one aspect of everyday life. Interestingly, controversy surrounding the phrase “born this way” almost always focuses on the word “born” and never the more flexible signifier, “this.” Unlike the more essentialist groundings of “born,” “this” narrates the lives of people who may or may not subscribe to biological norms concerning their body, their identity, and their livelihood. Giving more presence to “this” demands attention to the provisional, contingent, and contextual elements of queer lives. Rather than chart the ways people are ideologically interpellated by scientific rhetorics, a thorough investigation of the ways LGBT people articulate themselves to dominant messages and rhetorically mold those messages for their own purposes offers more insight to people’s lived experience.³¹ Critics must take a more holistic approach to sexuality and identity, looking to bodies through the coterminous approaches of material, social, and rhetorical registers of vernacular discourse.³²

Second, most people are not easily identified as LGBT by their pictures, indicating a slipperiness of crafting a visually queer subject. While popular press accounts of the *Born This Way* blog focused largely on white gay male stereotypes related to femininity, most of the pictures on the site do not generally reinforce social caricatures about LGBT people (including gay white men, whose pictures are ubiquitous, but largely unremarkable on the site). Nonetheless, the people posting to the blog clearly see a non-normative subject in the photos, calling for a sexual ethic of care that demands recognition of the marginalized among the mundane. The visuality inherent in the epistemology of the closet is given new life, but one that demands moral obligation in the face of potential recognition.

The blog has much to tell us about how media and culture foster modes of communicating about LGBT lives and the rhetorical potency of rewriting the public

transcripts of gender and sexual performance. Cracks in the “born this way” ideology abound, the site often suggests that traditional ways of looking at sexuality and gender are not always predictable or inherently normative. As diverse LGBT communities expand the terrain for articulating their identities to new cultural forms and narrating their lives in novel fashion, it is imperative to continue investigating the ways vernacular rhetorics are brought into being, silenced, or overlooked. While the *Born This Way* blog is but one forum for exploring the appropriation of a dominant and authoritative rhetorical frame, untold occasions exist for probing the ways people give voice to their lives. The texture of everyday life is a complex composite of social roles, embodied transgressions, narrative omissions, and relational actions not easily scripted by any one site.

Despite the fact the *Born This Way* blog hints at productive changes in culture, this does not mean it is without complications. The capitalist enterprise surrounding the blog—which has now been released as a coffee table book that is sold at retailers such as Urban Outfitters—should give us pause about the dissemination of LGBT narratives and the mass mediated form they adopt. Padding the pockets of CEOs who actively work to dismantle LGBT communities is assuredly no gain to the people on the site reimagining how their lives might unfold.³³ While there is great risk in any public narrative about LGBT populations (assimilationist rhetorics risk oversimplified equivocation, radical rhetorics risk dismissal) the material rewards going to conservative millionaires must be carefully weighted against potential gains in queer world-making.

Despite this worry, I believe media such as the *Born This Way* blog open up opportunities for capturing the complexity of queer lives. The blog offers visual proof that forecasts not a simple script of identity, but a complex ethics of relationality and belonging still controversial in some public spaces. Marlon Riggs once noted that his sexuality was not much of a mystery to those around him—it was his embrace of the pleasures of queerness that marked him publicly.³⁴ The blog encourages a diffuse telling of intricate stories that offer depth to queer lives and the unique possibilities that lie ahead.

Notes

- [1] The word “homosexual” never appears in the mother’s letter, but is the phrase used by Freud in his reply.
- [2] Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy argues that Freud contradicted himself on issues related to same-sex desire. He notes that Freud once advocated transporting homosexuals overseas as a “solution” to their presence. See *Sex the Measure of All Things: A Life of Alfred C. Kinsey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 159.
- [3] This is not to discount the movement of psychotherapists who wrongly appropriated Freud’s ideas as pathological. Legal victories often gave way to draconian measures, such as being locked away in asylums. See David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 33.
- [4] Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 416, n. 65.

- [5] See *Born This Way Blog*, <http://borngaybornthisway.blogspot.com>
- [6] Suzanna Walters, "Born This Way?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 5, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/born-this-way/37016>; Lisa Wade, "Are We Born Gay? And If We Were, How Would We Know?," *Sociological Images*, February 21, 2011, <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/02/21/are-we-born-gay-and-if-we-were-how-would-we-know/>
- [7] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories/Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1981), 13–31.
- [8] Butler, "Imitation," 19.
- [9] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- [10] Fredrick Corey and Thomas Nakayama remind us that new media "have changed how gay culture has chosen to cross the lines between public and private" and, as such, "a new epistemology of the closet" is necessitated. See "deathTEXT," *Western Journal of Communication* 76 (2012): 19.
- [11] Jeffrey Jones, "Most Americans See Gay, Lesbian Orientation as Birth Factor," May 16, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162569/americans-gay-lesbian-orientation-birth-factor.aspx>
- [12] Robert Brookey, *The Rhetoric and Power of the Gay Gene* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 5–6.
- [13] Mark Joseph Stern, "Born This Way?" *Slate*, June 28, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/06/biological_basis_for_homosexuality_the_fraternal_birth_order_explanation.html
- [14] Walters, "Born This Way?"
- [15] "No One is Born Gay (or Straight). Here are Five Reasons Why," March 15, 2013, <http://socialinqueery.com/2013/03/18/no-one-is-born-gay-or-straight-here-are-5-reasons-why/>
- [16] Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 22.
- [17] Michelle Holling and Bernadette Calafell, "Tracing the Emergence of Latin@ Vernaculars in Studies of Latin@ Communication," in *Latina/O Discourse in Vernacular Spaces: Somos De Una Voz?*, ed. Michelle A. Holling and Bernadette A. Calafell (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 18.
- [18] Jiyeon Kang, "Coming to Terms with 'Unreasonable' Global Power: The 2002 South Korean Candlelight Vigils," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2009): 171–192.
- [19] Robert Glenn Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25 (2008): 490–513.
- [20] Isaac West, Michaela Frischherz, Allison Panther, and Richard Brophy, "Queer Worldmaking in the *It Gets Better* Campaign," *QED* 0.1 (2013): 49–85.
- [21] Wade, "Are We Born Gay?"
- [22] Dustin Goltz, "It Gets Better: Queer Futures, Critical Frustrations, and Radical Potentials," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30 (2013): 137.
- [23] Users are not required to follow the prompts, but several do. Prompts include, *What pop culture type of things excited you then?* and *Any feelings you have about this picture now, as an adult?*
- [24] David Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 318.
- [25] John M. Allison, "Narrative and Time: A Phenomenological Reconsideration," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 14 (1994): 119.
- [26] On the debate over social construction and essentialism, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57–74.
- [27] David Seitz, "Interview with Lauren Berlant," *Society and Space: Environment and Planning D*, March 22, 2013, <http://societyandspace.com/2013/03/22/interview-with-lauren-berlant/>

- [28] In coding the photos, one of the questions posed was, “Do they look LGBTQ?” I offered a very broad interpretation of what that might mean to be as inclusive as possible. Typically my interpretations were guided by poses, facial expressions, dress, toys, and LGBT cultural artifacts, among others.
- [29] Jamie Skerski, “Tomboy Chic: Re-Fashioning Gender Rebellion,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15 (2011): 466–479.
- [30] Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop, “What These Lips Have Kissed: Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (2006): 1–26.
- [31] Isaac West, “Debbie Mayne’s Trans/scripts: Performative Repertoires in Law and Everyday Life,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5 (2008): 245–63.
- [32] John Lynch, “Articulating Scientific Practice: Understanding Dean Hamer’s ‘Gay Gene’ Study as Overlapping Material, Social and Rhetorical Registers,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 449.
- [33] CEO Richard Hayne pulled a line of t-shirts supporting same-sex marriage in 2008. Sharon Clott, “Urban Outfitters Yanks Same-Sex Marriage T-shirt From Shelves,” *New York Magazine*, December 8, 2008, http://nymag.com/thecut/2008/12/urban_outfitters_yanks_same-se.html
- [34] Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied: Black Men Loving Black Men* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1989).

Copyright of Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.