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Still here, still queer: a personal essay

Biographical note:

Kelly Gardiner is a lecturer in Creative and Professional Writing at La Trobe University, and also works as the Learning Design Manager at the State Library of Victoria. Her latest novel is *Goddess* (Fourth Estate 2014), based on the life of the seventeenth century French swordswoman, cross-dresser and opera singer, Mademoiselle de Maupin. She is the author of two historical novels for young adults, *Act of Faith* (HarperCollins 2011) and *The Sultan's Eyes* (2013). Her books for younger readers include the 'Swashbuckler' adventure series (HarperCollins) and a picture book, *Billabong Bill's Bushfire Christmas* (Random House 2007). She was editor of the *Melbourne Star Observer* and *Lip* lesbian magazine, and has worked in a range of community organisations including Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Her poems, travel writing, reviews and features have appeared in journals, magazines and newspapers from *Marie Claire* and *New Idea* to *OutRage, Southerly* and *Going Down Swinging*.

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> There is a point in one's life when one recognises that what for us is memory becomes, for younger people, history (Altman 2015: 61)

Once upon a time, in Gertrude Street Fitzroy, there was a heavy wooden door. Like the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts, it only appeared to those who needed it – those who knew. To everyone else, it was just a normal – shut – door.

Late at night, if you knocked hard on the door, it opened a crack so that someone on the other side could peek at you, and then, if you looked like the sort of person for whom that door would open, they let you in. On the other side was darkness, was music, was cheap beer and dancing and community. Everyone you knew was there. If you didn't know anyone, that was where you felt safe. Outside the door were danger, and isolation, and invisibility, and illegality.

The door made everything clear. It was the only thing in town that accepted us. It took one look and knew whether we were allowed inside. It closed behind us because we belonged there and nobody else did. Like any barrier, the door made assumptions about identity, about need, even about gender, and instead of barricading you out like every other door, it invited you in. But only on certain nights.

Our families never knew about the door. Or what happened on the other side, even though it was only dancing and perhaps a bit of a pash in a dark corner. They didn't know about our relationships or even our friends, our parties, our other – found – families; our lives. We didn't tell them and they rarely asked, until, sometimes but not always, there was the Coming Out and everyone cried and some people on both sides never recovered, never spoke about it, or never spoke to each other again.

Now, you can't bloody shut them up.

Now, everyone (apparently) has a gay friend, a lesbian couple down the road, that guy in Accounts, absolutely everybody at gym – an uncle, a daughter, perhaps a mum or dad. Even Tony Abbott has a lesbian sister.

Honestly, you can't go anywhere.

Everyone believes in same-sex marriage. Taxi drivers talk to you about it. Politicians make statements. In public. Even conservative politicians. Movie stars, mayors, your mum's next-door neighbour.

Of course. It makes perfect sense. If we argue *we're just like you, we ought to be able to get married*, and if we argue that long and hard enough, first we convince our friends and family – and that's most of the population, when you think about it – and they bring everyone else around. Because *they're just like us, why shouldn't they?*

Just like us.

Welcome to the New Normal.

The power of normal

The New Normal celebrates on social media when Antony and Tim or Portia and Ellen get married, signs petitions and votes for change. It campaigns against

intolerance and injustice on our behalf, as if we were a protected species or the Great Barrier Reef.

Lest you think that sounds too dismissive, remember this: the New Normal is powerful. It has allowed legislative change pushed for decades by people who suffered the kinds of discrimination and abuse and closed doors that the New Normal will not countenance. It means that normal things, like being treated as normal by superannuation funds, the most normal of rights, are now embedded. It also includes the enormous respect for politicians like Penny Wong, and vocal advocates on all sides of politics (it should be said that some were supportive even before there was a New Normal and would be no matter how queer we get – but those are fewer).

I wouldn't want to be without it. The New Normal can fight back when the appalling happens or when human rights are threatened. The New Normal takes it for granted that we exist, and have a right to do so safely.

I never thought that would happen. Not really. It is the sort of tolerance I never seriously believed would occur in my lifetime and yet it has, amazingly, happened since the nights I knocked on that door in the dark on a dangerous street. It was what we wanted, what we fought for, what we argued and marched and lobbied and wrote and struggled for: to be treated the same as any other human being. Such a simple thing to ask for, and yet still denied to so many. Over the span of my life we've seen the horrific backlash against gay men in the early years of HIV; the murders of George Duncan, Harvey Milk, Matthew Shepherd and so many others; teachers sacked, activists beaten and vilified, protestors arrested; bars raided, books and films banned. And we fought back – with argument, with our own media, with protest, with art, with community organisations, with campaigns, with alliances, with the law, with influence, with raised voices and fists. We didn't do that for the right to get married. We did it for the right to exist.

Hopefully, we will not go back to that. The New Normal is here.

J. Jack Halberstam has argued that normal is finished: 'Heterosexuality has come crashing down in the early 21st century, and normal has reached its breaking point' (2012b). Perhaps. We'll see. But what if normal has simply adapted and redefined itself, and its tolerance encompasses and digests certain categories of difference, and turns those into something that normal can celebrate? An all-new normal, now with sparkly pink decorations?

Normalisation is powerful. It can be stripped away, but that's unlikely. It brings with it a change in everyday life that is a huge relief to those who know what it's like to have no choice – we've gone from lying to everyone around us, to standing up in fancy duds and having our families throw confetti. I am amazed, all the time, by young people who are so totally out I want to applaud them in the street. By the number of representations of people a bit like me in popular culture (even a TV series about two gay men having a baby, called, naturally, *The New Normal*). By the unquestioning love of people close to me. By the fact that once, when news of some other family's latest divorce disaster hit, my mother patted my hand and said, 'I'm so glad we're all normal.'

But within the New Normal there are degrees of tolerance and unwritten rules that nobody understands until they are breached. 'I think tolerance is a good thing,' said NSW Premier Mike Baird, without a hint of irony, during the recent furore over his government's ban on school screenings of the film *Gayby Baby*. 'But I think there should be some parameters around it' (Bagshaw 2015).

There is genuine acceptance and understanding, and there are levels of tolerance – some skin-thin. Not for everyone. And not always. Underneath the veneer of the New Normal, queer kids are still being bullied and beaten and commit suicide, our stories often go unheard and unread, the public protestations of belief in equality are not always backed up by action when it matters, and there are still plenty of virulent homophobes in our world. In many countries people are jailed or even executed for the crime of being themselves.

The exotic but icky Other

The New Normal is all about tolerance. But tolerance is not the same as acceptance. As approval or respect or celebration. Tolerance is defined by difference instead of commonality, and allows a degree of deviance within the culture, if only to stop society from imploding. Tolerance is based on the belief that the Other must be endured and even maintained, and that it adds to the culture or community in spite of or because of its difference (Brown 2009). Tolerance even extends to romanticising the Other. After all, the world has always had a soft spot for the eccentric, for the charming Bohemian, for that sweet boy on *Glee,* for the flamboyant or intense or gifted – *so long as they don't take it too far*.

But as Suzanne Danuta Walters notes in *The Tolerance Trap*:

> Tolerance almost always implies or assumes something negative or undesired or even a variation contained and circumscribed […] To say you "tolerate" homosexuality is to imply that homosexuality is bad or immoral or even just benignly icky, like that exotic food you just can't bring yourself to try (2014: 1-2).

Acceptance – radical acceptance – is a different thing, and it is much harder. It's a process of consciously undertaking to understand and embrace genuine, sometimes shocking, difference. Tolerance comes more easily to individuals and gradually but eventually to institutions. Because after all *they're just like us*. Gay and lesbian relationships *are just like ours. Look – some of them even have kids.*

But *Just like us* is not the same as *Us*.

Here in Australia, as in the US and UK, there were two critical strategies around which such widespread tolerance finally solidified. The first was the idea that homosexuality is about nature, not nurture. And after years of activism for equality, along came the idea that a 'gay gene' might explain same-sex desire. Why, we wondered, does it need explaining? Simple. Because it is Other. A deviant gene. Something amiss in the binary code. So, goes the argument, if we can prove that it is inevitable, cellular, then we can't be blamed for being this way.

Born this way.

'In the old days,' writes Julie Bindel, 'we would proclaim we were "glad to be gay" and "We're here, we're queer, get used to it." Now we seem to be saying: "We're here. We are forced to be queer, please help us"' (2014). Wendy Brown argues that tolerance *needs* to essentialise difference: 'It casts those culturally produced differences as innate or given, as matters that divide the human species rather than as sites of inequality or domination' (2009: 47).

The second factor was the campaign for same-sex marriage – not just recognition of our relationships, but marriage. Put-on-your-tux, invite-your-Nana, in-a-church-or-it-doesn't-count, white cake, white dress, white bread marriage.

I never quite know how I feel about either of those concepts as political tactics – or, at least, I change my mind all the time – but have to concede they worked. Not alone. Both came after decades of campaigning and fighting for visibility and for survival (and sometimes, sadly, for dignity after death). Both were hotly debated within our communities then and now, and rode the crests of waves of activism and agitation in health, law, sexuality, gender, education, politics, media and the arts that were already having a profound effect on the world.

But people understood those two ideas, where they hadn't been able to cope with the reality of our lives. It made us seem normal. *It's not a choice, you see. They can't help it. They can't help who they love.* And *it's all about love, after all*. Not about desire, which is murky and *too much information*, but about true love that knows no bounds and must be recognised publicly. Everyone gets that. Everyone wants that (*don't they?*) and wants it shared around. It makes sense.

Except it doesn't. The two ideas don't fit together. We can't be just like everyone else if we are also, fundamentally, from birth, not like everyone else.

Be that as it may, those two contradictory concepts helped our families and the wider community think of us as less queer. And however it came about, tolerance allows many of us to live free of physical persecution. It allows us similar legal rights to other people. It provides the wider community with cultural representations of us that are not too threatening, so that people who are not queer can develop an understanding of our lives. Sort of. And sometimes. It creates a safety net of support and it certainly makes for a better world for young queers.

Tolerance is so many steps in the right direction. And yet. And yet… Tolerance is not embrace. It's not recognition of our true selves. It offers support in a general human rights sense but glances away when things get a bit intense – a bit, well, gay.

Loved The Slap, but not all those stories about sex.

The New Normal loves queer pride parades because *after all it's just once a year, although they do get a bit carried away*. It knows not to make poofter jokes, at least at work, but is astonished and a little disappointed when one of its favourite actors/singers/sportspeople comes out (*Ricky Martin? Oh no! What a waste!*), as if somehow s/he is lost to them. The New Normal is quite fond of the sight of girls kissing one another, too – not even averse to giving it a go one night after a few drinks.

Even inclusion is something that is granted. Bestowed. An invitation. *Come in – have a seat at our table.* It's awkward. We have to explain stuff. Make small talk. Be beguilingly Bohemian. We can't just tell normal stories. Our stories have to be more interesting, more fabulous and more adventurous than everyone else's. But not too shouty. We have to smile, or we might be asked to leave. Carson the butler hovers at our elbows, ready to advise on which fork to use. We are still the Other, the kids sitting at the makeshift table for Christmas dinner, visitors from out of town – or possibly another planet – who are only tentatively welcomed into the fold. Tolerance doesn't genuinely include. It merely allows.

We want desperately for our voices to be heard. We know how important it is for young people and for children, especially, to have their identities reflected in literature and in the cultural products they experience. So we argue for diversity of representation. And so we should – it's good. It's right. It's real. It makes a difference. It's an argument from the outside, being taken up (slowly) by those on the inside. But isn't the idea of diversity also based on tolerance; on an assumption that the monocultural, the heteronormative, will be made richer and better with the inclusion of diverse voices? Inclusion is an adaptation of exclusion.

So is inclusion enough? Is diversity enough?

Normal queer

It gets even more complicated when some of *us* really want to be the same as *them*.

'Never underestimate the importance of being ordinary,' writes Jeffrey Weeks (2007: 9). Gay is part of the New Normal. Lesbian too, most of the time – *especially if they're hot. Or funny.* (The New Normal isn't yet quite sure about the rest of the LGBTI acronym, but is working on it.)

Does the New Normal include queers who want to be ordinary, who just wish they were like everyone else? And if so, are New Normal 'gays' part of Queer, or does it stretch the idea of Queer beyond its limits? If it's not radical, is it Queer? If it's not threatening, is it Queer? If it wants to be normal, is it Queer?

I don't know. Is it Queer to be party to an institution like marriage, a ritual so loaded with undeniable cultural and religious meaning? As Dennis Altman notes: 'For queer activists, the rise of gay marriage exemplifies the ongoing tensions between seeking respectability and asserting difference' (2013:193). Is it still an act of transgression for us to hold a marriage ceremony, as it once was, or is it an act of acquiescence – a queer adaptation of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1984)? Or both? Or something else entirely?

Some of my dearest friends got married (overseas, obviously) because, they say, *you have to be the change you want to see in the world*. I'm so proud of them. I celebrate them, wholeheartedly. One day my partner and I might do the same. Equally, I have friends who despair at the fact that they can't marry here, now. And I support their right to do so. Wholeheartedly. So any unease is not about the idea of same-sex marriage (although I'm a little uneasy about what to wear). It's about the New Normal

idea that same-sex marriage is some kind of high-water mark after which we can all relax – that a specific sort of legal recognition of our relationships is the same thing as equality, and as if equality is a concept that can be quantified and measureable under law.

The right to get married is an emotional right as much as a legal right. It hurts that we are not allowed that right. So when marriage rights are granted? (Let's face it: that will happen in a few short if interminable years, after the next change of federal government.) If and when we are included in that ritualised right, will we be on the same emotional playing field as everyone else? Will we be equal then?

Short answer: no. Because we're not *just like them*. Because our lives and loves are still largely invisible, except when they look like everyone else's. We are visible in mainstream culture as people who want to have babies, who want to get married, as supportive friends in minor roles, and as exceptions. But most of the time the people that we meet will assume at first that we are not queer, unless we can be bothered setting them straight, as it were, or some cultural clue filters through to them from our tribal badges and behaviours. Ordinary is a different kind of invisibility.

And it's not only about sexuality. We are the Other – culturally, psychologically, politically, socially – we have been constructed as Other, and have constructed ourselves as Other. We learned how to lie to those we loved at an early age, and it's instinctive now to cover our tracks, to fail to answer questions clearly, to fudge details of who we were with and what we did. Pathetic. And probably unhealthy. But necessary. We self-censor our stories. We cling to each other and clutch at cultural straws like a TV kiss or celebrity outing. People have to feel safe in order to tell the truth, and we don't feel as safe as everyone else. The very fact that we're having these conversations right now proves how different we are. We are sometimes angry, and afraid, and vulnerable – not in the same way that everyone else feels those things, but because of who we are.

That's why, when we celebrate, it comes from somewhere so deep it's scary, and why pride for us is a different thing to pride for other people. It is pride in spite of everything else that happens, pride in the face of fear. That's why it's powerful – and attractive.

Still Queer

The New Normal is a model of integration. It may, in time, embrace rather than tolerate same-sex New Normal couples. It assimilates a few of our cultural tropes into its preferred archetypes (or vice versa), tolerates the tolerable, and views with suspicion the less tasteful, the inexplicable, the more monstrous Others among us. The world does not accept the Other. But Queer does. Or at least it should.

Queer is not interested in assimilation. It is something profoundly Other. Queer dwells in the margins, where it always has, with poets and graffiti artists, and alongside other Others. Queer has no interest in tolerance. It is interested in boundaries and testing their permeability; it is interested in anger, in fluidity, in performance, in flight – in subversion.

Here's a funny thing. The New Normal, at least at its liberal leading edges, finds subversion fascinating. That's because it has no idea what it means. Subversion is a word constantly in use in debates around education and in technology, for example, thrown about by people who have no clue what subversion feels like. In the New Normal world, subversion means something a bit like commotion, as if the world can be turned on its head by the use of a new app or multimedia.

Queer lives are subversive lives – even when they appear normal. Jeffrey Weeks claims that, 'Millions of gays and lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people have not so much subverted the established order as lived as if their sexual difference did not, in the end, matter' (2007: 9). But the process of coming out, which never ends, is a process of unveiling our subversive nature as much as overthrowing other people's assumptions.

We've been lying to you for years.

Think of the incredible cultural impact of those late 1990s 'lipstick lesbians'. *There they were all the time, looking just like us ... well, even more glamorous than us, and we'd never have known because they don't look like lesbians.* As if there were secret sleeper agents of Queer, in disguise as fabulous and desirable and powerful women, suddenly awakened and on the front page of every newspaper, fully-formed and dressed for maximum impact. They were celebrated without any comprehension of the genuinely subversive concept that is and always has been femme. 'If the butch deconstructs gender,' Joan Nestle once wrote, 'the femme constructs gender' (1992: 16), and in ways that have had a profound and often subconscious impact. The New Normal gaze sees femme and believes they belong to each other – it assumes femme is normal, but it is very wrong.

So of course our sexuality matters. One day, it might not. Right now, it still does. Queer says to the New Normal gay men and lesbians: *we are all queer under the skin. We are sisters, you and I, but in danger of becoming estranged. Without me, you don't exist. Don't forget me. Don't deny me. Don't become so normal that you too fail to love me.*

Now the question we each face is: how queer do we want to be?

Attitude or identity?

I talked about this with a friend who recently began exploring the possibilities of queer life. She asked: *Is it an attitude or an identity?* Good question. Queer used to be about identity: a tattoo under the skin, a suit of armour, a secret handshake – later a banner bright against a blue sky. It was a taunt turned into a triumph.

Queer was a moment of definition. In 1981 I first clearly defined myself as a lesbian. A decade later, I redefined myself as queer, in part as a reaction to my identity becoming commodified. Lipstick lesbians and pink media were all the rage. I chose to say, out loud: I am unfashionably butch and queer. *Take that.*

We were all Queer. We snatched the idea of Otherness and brandished it between our teeth like a cutlass. We wrote it, always, with a capital Q. It was experiment, it was

outrage, and it was defiance. It was also, for the first time, an important statement of sisterhood with queers who were transgendered or bisexual or who didn't want to identify as anything but queer. We'd been rather rude to them up until then. Queer asks questions instead of providing clear answers, and perhaps that's how we learned to live with fluidity.

Ten years after that, I didn't care very much. I was sick of coming out every week to people who were astonished. I was burnt out and identity politics were apparently finished. Christos got famous for writing about straight people – Not that there's anything wrong with that, to paraphrase an infamous *Seinfeld* episode. I got old. I totally missed the moment when everyone decided we were born this way. And that episode of *Ellen*.

But now, again, I find it matters. Not the gay lifestyle, whatever that is. It's the culture that matters, the writing and performance and film-making. The voices. The attitude. Attitude that can't be legislated. Attitude that can't be assimilated.

Because Queer was, apart from anything else, a creative moment in response not just to the mainstream but to our own congealing community cultures and sub-cultures. Queer was partly reactive, although far from reactionary. Cultural Queer was in some senses the progeny of Bohemia and punk, which exist in reaction to the bourgeoisie while Queer exists in opposition to heteronormativity. Queer doesn't seek approval, but if the mainstream takes into itself the parts of queer culture it finds amusing or interesting, if the bourgeoisie starts wearing velvet and writing poems, what happens? Tolerance.

Tolerated individuals will always be those who deviate from the norm, never those who uphold it, but they also will be further articulated as (deviant) individuals through the very discourse of tolerance (Brown 2009: 43).

And in that lies the room to move that doesn't exist in the ordinary.

Get used to it – or not

So now?

Now, perhaps, as the idea of identities deconstructs, it's attitudes that matter. I don't care, anymore, what identities other people claim. I don't care if they change over time. When identity was a scarcity and community was circled wagons, it mattered deeply. It seemed we all knew one another (although that was a myth) and we smiled if we passed on the street, even if we'd never seen one another before. Secret handshake. Wink. Nothing sexual, necessarily. Just acknowledgement. A change of identity was a betrayal. Now, we're everywhere, and everything is shifting around us and through us. Even the visual signifiers of identity, those coats of arms which were once so obvious to knowing glances, might now be borne by anyone, or are rejected by those who are entitled to bear them, or are simply daggy.

After all these decades of feeling excluded and abnormal, of calling for acceptance and equality, of voicing the untold, it turns out I don't want to be normal at all.

Fundamentally, I don't want tolerance, though it helps. It soothes. But it's not enough. I want acceptance for those who feel the need to be accepted, and from people I care about – as I am, not in the shape of normal.

I don't want assimilation, except when it protects me from violence and vulnerability – then, of course, I want to seek the safety of the crowd. Who wouldn't? But I'm sick of self-censoring, sick of movies with gay best friend characters, of cultural tourism projects like *Lesbian for A Year*, of feeling grateful for a bisexual character on my favourite TV show.

I don't want mere equality. I want freedom.

I have no idea if I was born this way. I suspect not. But I certainly wasn't born with this attitude. It became. It is a constructed thing, made of the margins, built consciously and unconsciously from decades of reading, feeling, thinking, talking, shouting, writing, living, knowing and being. It is made of parts of other people too – of lovers and enemies, writers and thinkers, film-makers and friends and people whose names I don't even remember. It came out of meetings and funerals and songs and festivals and speeches, out of books and late night conversations, out of anger and boredom and desire.

It is not ideology. It is not fixed. Sometimes it is frustratingly feeble. But mostly it is oppositional while I am conciliatory, it is radical when I can't be bothered, and it is identity when I am lost.

It is queer as fuck.

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Research statement

Research background

This personal essay begins with a memory from the early 1980s, when the feminist and lesbian mantra was 'the personal is the political'. This memoir-inflected essay pays tribute to the personal essay in the voice of the ideological 'I' (Smith and Watson 2010: 76), an accessible form adopted and mastered by queer writers over decades.

Research contribution

If the personal is political, then perhaps the personal is also the academic, the cultural, the literary and the historical: so this piece intentionally blends memoir, analysis and narrative non-fiction to queer the boundaries of academic writing, particularly for readers unfamiliar with queer histories. This work participates in an ongoing conversation about memoir and remembered collective and cultural history and is voiced by an exploratory writer-as-narrator. The essay treads the soft edges between autobiographical narrator and historical observer and, through a definition of 'New Normal', interrogates popular notions of progress, identity, and the triumphalist discourse around tolerance.

Research significance

This is a wholly original work of memoir and personal reflection. The research merit of this work is evidenced by its publication in *TEXT*, a peer-reviewed journal highly regarded in the creative writing discipline.

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