

Reexamining Gender and Sexual Orientation: Revisioning the Representation of Queer and Trans People in the 2005 Edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

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Big Platform Shoes to Fill

When Heather Stephenson asked me to revamp what had been a four-page introduction on gender and sexual orientation into a full-length chapter in the 2005 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, I was flattered, elated, and absolutely terrified. *OBOS* is, as Heather lovingly refers to it, *the bible* on women's health of the late-twentieth century, and I am 24 years old, just two years out of college. I am also an anti-authoritarian African American high femme dyke from a working poor family. I do not fit what I and many others in my peer group see as the target audience for *OBOS*—white middle-class women who grew up reading this book, and their teenage daughters. Yet when Heather asked me to write this chapter, I tearfully accepted because I realized that *OBOS* was committed to expanding the breadth and depth of its audience by becoming more inclusive of young women, women of color, and trans and queer people.

Challenging and Honoring the Past

Before I began to work on my chapter, I decided to research the representation of queer and trans people in earlier editions of *OBOS*. In one of the first editions of the book published more than 30 years ago, the chapter on lesbians was titled “In Amerika They Call Us Dykes” (BWHBC 1973). There were a few major themes that ran through this section. First, the writers of the chapter self-disclosed that they were all middle-class white women. They wrote the chapter as a collective, and some were out of the closet while others were deeply burrowed within. Another interesting theme, one that I don't hear echoed among the young political queers that I know, was that deciding to embrace one's lesbianism was a decidedly political and feminist *choice*. Many of the writers in the chapter suggested that becoming queer was the next logical step in their politicization as feminists. Consequently, choosing to be a lesbian (or at least live and/or come out as one) was also equated with a conscious rejection of men and “male” values, such as oppression and patriarchal domination within interpersonal relationships. Also, anyone who was not gendered as a woman in this particular lesbian context—bitches, transgendered people, and even femmes—was completely invisible from the discussion. In fact, gender expression and identity were hardly discussed in the chapter.

As I read through the chapter, my first impulse was to discount it as politically and socially backward, the words of lesbians whose lives could not possibly have any connection to my own struggles as a femme, a woman of color, a dyke who dates and loves butches and tranny boys and trans men, a woman who grew up working poor. However, as I began to write my chapter, my respect and appreciation for the authors of this chapter grew. These women lived in a world in which “coming out” was not something proudly flaunted on primetime television. To be themselves, they gave up their families, their careers, and their friends. They recognized that they came from privileged positions in society and did not hesitate to admit to their shortcomings. Moreover, women across the country tell me that this chapter saved their lives. While I do lead a different life in a different time, I realized that I share with these dyke pioneers the same desire to be heard.

New Voices and New Themes for a New Generation

Though my chapter is fairly short (about thirteen pages in the book), it includes introductions and definitions of topics such as gender identity, sexual orientation, bisexuality, coming out, queer and trans communities, and homophobia and transphobia. My hope, and the hope of the *OBOS* editors, is that people from a wide range of backgrounds and identities can pick up this chapter and walk away with a basic understanding of the difference between gender and sexual orientation, the idea that gender is not always determined by sex, and at least an overview of some of the issues faced by lgbtqi (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersexed) individuals.

The first basic question that I asked myself as I sat down to write my chapter was “What does it mean to be a woman?” *OBOS* bills itself as “by women for women,” but who does that really include? People born biologically female? People born biologically female who still identify as women? People who identify as women regardless of their sex at birth? It was never a question for me that in my chapter “woman” includes anyone and everyone who has at one time or does currently identify or live as a woman. We all need information on health, sex, feminism, and relationships, even if our lives and struggles look completely different. More important, in this first edition of *OBOS* to which a new generation might be exposed, it is essential to include and expand the section on trans people.

Word choice and language posed some of the most trying issues in writing this chapter. How to describe, in accessible language, such complicated and personal issues as one’s gender identity or the choice to medically transition or how a searing homophobic or transphobic remark can damage our psyches? How to define words like “transgender” or “transsexual” or “queer”—loaded words that some of us claim, others

of us do not, and some do not even recognize or understand. I am not trans-identified. As a femme, I pass for straight on a daily basis, and I do not experience queer and trans bashing when I walk down the street by myself. Writing from this relatively privileged position, I felt that it was of the utmost importance that my language was inclusive and respectful. The editors and I decided to use the broadest language we could find, emphasizing often that we all have the right to choose whether or not we want to use labels, and which labels we want to use. However, as we struggled to use inclusive language, contradictions and subtleties arose that we could not always adequately address. For example, I discuss at length the idea that there are many genders, and that our sex does not determine our gender. And then, a page or two later, I discuss bisexuality, a term that reasserts the two-gender paradigm. Another example—I use the word queer repeatedly in my chapter with nary a mention of the history and class and race background of the term. There was not time and space to describe the complexity of my choice and why I chose to use that word, despite its history. In the future I hope that space and time allow for a more nuanced examination of the complexities of gender and sexuality within this book.

Coming out was another topic that I grappled with while writing this chapter. In the mainstream media, both gay and straight, coming out is portrayed in an extremely idealized and simplistic way. The gay person, always white and middle class, decides that he or she is gay, tells families and friends, might experience a little homophobia but none too pernicious, and ends up marching proudly down the main thoroughfare of a progressive major metropolitan area during the exuberant gay pride parade with a rainbow flag in one hand and a life partner in the other. Though this representation may seem fairly innocuous and hopeful to some, it is far from reality for many. Queer and trans people of color oftentimes have to make the agonizing choice between coming out in a mainstream way and losing touch and support from our communities of color or facing racism within white gay spaces. For the working class and working poor, coming out in our communities and at our workplaces can mean losing the only means that we have to support our families. In my chapter, I emphasized that coming out looks very different in different spaces. For some, it might mean telling our closest friends, or having a queer life in one sphere and a straight life with relatives. It might mean dressing up in racy lingerie while at home and wearing loose jeans and a hoodie on the street. While the world might be easier for queers if we could all live like *“Will & Grace,”* the diversity of our struggles and our communities means that we look and act queer and trans in countless ways.

An Outpouring of Support

The most exhilarating and touching part of the process of writing my chapter was the astounding e-mail response that I received in a call for submissions of anecdotes for my chapter. Each chapter in *OBOS* combines information about various topics with anonymous quotes from women sharing their experiences with the topic. I decided that I wanted new quotes from people reflecting the issues that we face today. For this reason, I composed a short e-mail asking for queer and trans people to tell me their stories about coming out as queer or trans, their experiences living as queer and trans people, as queer and trans people of color, of differing abilities, class backgrounds, and politics. I sent this e-mail to a network of about 30 or 40 of my queer and straight friends, who then passed it on to their networks. To this day, close to a year later, I am still receiving submissions. I have received more than 200 responses from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, and Belgium. People were hungry to have a voice in this famous book. Many remained skeptical that *OBOS* would accurately and sensitively convey their issues, but they submitted their stories nonetheless.

As a queer person of color, reading the barrage of e-mails daily from queer and trans people around the world was an extremely emotional and personal experience. The stories of social isolation that many people shared were heartbreaking and sobering. I live in Philadelphia and came out at a progressive, elite liberal arts college, and I am lucky enough to have a family that supports me. Queer people not having anyone else to talk to, not having access to community centers or gayborhoods or even bars, trans people living deeply closeted for years and years in fear for their lives—this is our experience in America and beyond. I was struck by how easily I could forget that my situation is a rare and privileged one.

In addition to social isolation, there were a few other recurring themes in the responses to my call. Many trans people wrote about their negative experiences with the women's health movement and health care providers, a topic that *OBOS* is addressing for the first time in this new edition. Coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender was another prevalent theme. Stories ranged from the tranny boy who comes out to his accepting mother as they make spaghetti sauce together to the lesbian whose father suspects she's gay and reminds her that he "does not want a fucking faggot for a daughter."

One topic mentioned numerous times that I found unsurprising and, at the same time, enraging was the prevalence of transphobia in lesbian communities. More specifically, a number of trans women wrote to me about their attempts to take part in lesbian and women's communities only to experience blatant discrimination within these spaces. Their

stories often followed the same trajectory: after struggling for years, these women decide to come out as trans and soon after begin to seek out community. Assuming that a gay community would accept them because of shared struggles, the women attempted over and over again to enter into women's coffeehouses, festivals, support groups, bars, and clubs only to be repeatedly rebuffed and humiliated. The frequency of these stories conveys, to me, the magnitude of the need for increased education on trans issues within many lesbian communities.

Looking Toward the Future

In the upcoming edition of *OBOS*, queer and trans issues are incorporated more fully throughout the text, from discussions on lesbian parenting in the parenting chapters to the inclusion of trans issues in sections about mammograms and exams of the breasts and uterus. Of course, I would also love to see more trans and queer people taking part in the creation of the book on every level. Throughout *OBOS*, each writer uses the "we" and "us" pronouns. This is a political choice from the early editions of the book. The editors encourage the chapter writers to use these inclusive pronouns to give readers a sense that the book really is by them and for them. However, I think that this practice needs to be more closely examined. As I wrote my chapter, I felt extremely uncomfortable writing as if I belonged to groups such as trans and genderqueer communities or people with disabilities, who face struggles that I have never lived and that I can never truly understand. It is problematic to have someone speak "for" another person, let alone "as" another person. Before the next edition of the book goes into production, I hope that the writers and editors reexamine this language policy and the politics of personal privilege and the power of voice that influence it.

I have learned and I have grown so much through writing this chapter. I have felt empowered by Heather Stephenson and my fellow co-authors at *OBOS* to make change through my words. This book will hit the shelves imbued with encouraging voices reminding us all that we have a right to live our lives and in our bodies in the ways that are healthiest and most empowering to us, as queers, as trans people, as people of color, and as women.

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Organizing Campaign. Elizabeth is most passionate about creating community and fighting for liberation with other queer and trans people of color. Elizabeth can be reached at elindse1@yahoo.com.

Reference

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective. 1973. *Our Bodies Ourselves: A Book by and for Women*. Simon & Schuster: New York.

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