QUESTIONING THE BINARY; ILLUSTRATIONS; LGBTQ CULTURAL ICONS; COMPULSORY SEXUALITY; CAMP CULTURE; POETRY; LGBTQ VIDEO GAMES; GENDERING IN ART; INTERVIEW WITH CN LESTER; DISCUSSION ON LGBTQ CULTURE; LGBTQ MOVIES; PHOTOGRAPHY.
Welcome to [no definition], the magazine of CUSU’s LGBT campaign. I’m Emi, and I’m still your editor (thanks for re-electing me). This term’s issue is discussing LGBT culture – what it is, what it means to people, and where it’s at. We’ve run-downs of video games & movies, a head-up of some of queer’s cultural icons, as well as discussions on cultures of compulsory sexuality; the importance of flexible categories; ‘camp’-ness and its history; and gendering in art. We’ve also interviewed the lovely CN Lester on their work as a musician and an activist, and held a discussion between some wonderful members of the Cambridge community on what LGBT culture means to them. There will be another discussion, on next term’s theme, this term: please do get involved, all are welcome. We’re also always looking for contributors, articles, fiction, art, reviews, anything you can think of – get in touch at lgbt-editor@cusu.cam.ac.uk or facebook.com/cusuND. Finally, a huge thank you to S.T. for all their help.

Editor’s Note

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What makes us think we have to treat people within social contexts as ‘normal’ – gender identity, for example? To what end is formulating a distinction necessary within social interactions and relationships? And if one argues that individuals or society need these constructs to function, then why? Who expects us or puts pressure on us to treat ‘girlish’ as one thing and ‘boys’ as another? How does one grow to have expressive relationships with people as individuals, without alienating those who do not fit into our preconceived notions?

It is one thing agreeing with the principle of people being diverse. It is another saying ‘I accept people’ but in reality rejecting them from our personal view of ‘normality’. What we regard as ‘normal’ is hugely time – and context – dependent; it changes throughout our own lives as we encounter new things and grow in experience and wisdom. Very few people live on a desert island of unchangeability. It could, however, be suggested that many people have a fear of how people will treat them for how they interact or construct relationships with people of varied social identities. They may accept people as individuals, but their fear of judgment from the dominant social group often prevents a comfortable outward display of civility, familiarity and closeness in ‘normal’, or even intimate, interaction with those who do not fit neatly into social boxes. They may find it hard to reconcile their own feelings, especially if they like or care for a person who doesn’t fit a box or framework. All these factors and more can lead to the breakdown of meaningful interpersonal relationships between individuals, in prioritising the more transient ones of the social group.

A Captain's Performance

Call it ‘Captain Shakespeare’ syndrome. In the movie of Neil Gaiman’s Stardust, the pirate captain maintains a ‘fearsome reputation’ for fear of losing the respect of his crew, hiding his love of music, tea and women’s clothing. Eventually, when he is ‘discovered’, we find out that the crew, loyal and supportive, always knew it was an act (and in some cases, cringed at it). Sometimes we ‘perform’ in ways we think hurt to someone whom they alienate don’t really consider my being trans/mixed gender as necessarily giving me an advantage. It took a long time to accept both myself as well as others into my own world perspective.

Think of the ‘performance’ of social situations where the obvious focus is on treating people as either ‘male’ or ‘female’ – often the origin of sexual identity in order to\n
QUESTIONING

THE BINARY

The importance of pigeon-holing for LGBT culture.

BY EDDIE DEMELZA TINDALL

“Change the way you behave to incorporate what you know about the person, not just what societal roles suggest that they should be like.”

makes us more socially acceptable/comfortable: it gives us the transient warmth of perceived acceptance, but we feel empty when we stop ‘doing’/disturbing ourselves. A lot of us have tried to fit in with people who don’t really identify with; who don’t actually care about us, and who do not have permanence in our lives. This includes how we like to be seen to be treating others to give us the right image. It is common for some people to perform differing roles like ‘man interacting with a man’, or ‘a man interacting with a woman’ in social situations. A person with a good heart can still cause great emotional support to negotiate this new encounter. However, poor advice (from people with an equally limited understanding) can be extremely counter-productive. One of the most damaging reactions is to alienate the ‘challenging’ person(s) when feeling like there is no other option. The resulting emotional and social damage can have a lasting negative impact on both affected parties. To say ‘I accept this, as long as it keeps to that side of the room’ is, in some cases, simply an alternative form of active prejudice. It is saying one thing and acting otherwise, damaging people in the process. We wouldn’t dream of saying this about people of different-coloured skin in this time and culture, and those who do we unanimously consider to be morally ‘wrong’; we don’t defend their ‘right’ to be prejudiced.

“One doesn’t have to change one’s own sense of identity in order to accept and embrace another’s.”

However, empathy is not learned by forcing ideas upon people, no matter how ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ we deem their reactions to be. Obviously, it is equally unfair for them to force alienation upon others. Indeed, alienation is not a harmless thing; it is very real and very painful. But it doesn’t mean one has to participate in, believe in, or agree with everything. There is fear shared by those who are not bad people, but who find it hard to place ‘new things’ – along with a negative apprehension of change. Yet one doesn’t have to change one’s own sense of identity in order to accept and embrace another’s.

Some people take it completely for granted that their identity is deemed ‘legitimate’. What value does one person have over another in terms of being accepted and appreciated for who and what they are? Why should one person be made to feel that they are ‘fortunates’ if accepted into someone else’s world, yet another is somehow automatically privileged to not have to justify their identity and their value? Without dwelling on the ‘wrong’ way to treat a ‘person’, there are better and more common-sensical approaches to take.

Happiness

The rejection of a less fractured ‘normality’, including those of non-stereotypical identity, is a real social problem. Does this really serve the pursuit of a genuine happiness and contentment in our relationships? The greatest loss may be on the part of the alienator, insistently that they are ‘happy’ with rigid structures of social interaction. Imagine if someone you cared for presented you with two arbitrary binaries, neither of which you exactly fitted, and said that was the basis of their ‘legitimising’ you into their world? Or an arbitrary aspect of your identity with which to judge and alienate you; something that specifically
made you special and unique – even proud – and to be actually criticised for being distinct. What would that say about the person ‘accusing’ you of being unique, of forging your own identity? It is offensive, hurtful, and tremendously poor form.

One might say: why not ignore that person and find people who appreciate you for who and what you are. But what kind of relationships is the ‘rejector’ actually forming with anyone? Long lasting, strongly connected, companionships, or relationships fashioned after superficial stereotypes of interaction? If one is not ‘forgiving their own identity’ and instead constantly assuming a complex social mask, how can one ever truly engage with people meaningfully? Give the genitals mouths and let penises and vaginas, vaginas and vaginas, and penises and penises talk to each other so intelligent minds are free to connect, please. It’s hard to imagine that such a world-view, lacking in general insight and engagement, can lead to a true happiness that isn’t just moment-to-moment satisfaction.

Indeed, what about non-routine banter? True beauty and value? Or do we live only for transient moments of homogenous social anonymity? Not every social activity has to be meaningful or profound (far from it), but it’s amazing to contemplate how many insist that ‘my world is complete as it is, thank you very much’ – whilst unconsciously embodying many aspects of quirky non-conformity. It is surprising how much unacknowledged non-normative behaviour occurs in the most stereotypically polarised social circles, yet there is insecurity in acknowledging our own inherent variations. One could miss out on the best companionships out of fear or lack of reassurance. In some cases we wise up after life’s experiences, but isn’t it a shame not to have done so earlier? It could be too late to regain those special relationships.

Even our friends don’t necessarily know how to help us – though we look to peers for validation. Friends are part of what reassures me that my identity is far from a ‘problem’. A friend’s alienation still wouldn’t hurt me any less – yet I might care more for that person’s difficulty than the trauma it gives me personally. The right support is essential, especially at University age, when exploring avenues of identity – yet fear of one’s peer group can severely hinder this process.

Consider the film Sex Drive, an American teen comedy in which a boy spends the whole movie exaggeratedly bullying ideals of heteronormativity into his younger sibling. Later we find it to be a front to hide his own (legitimate) non-normativity – he was simply afraid of the social repercussions. The ‘act’ sees him neurotically and idiotically exaggerate stereotypes. If social frameworks really were only taken as ‘guidelines’, rather than set rules of engagement, there wouldn’t be a problem of mis-reaction and alienation and people wouldn’t think they have to sacrifice individuality and integrity for other peoples’ approval. Is this, and society as a whole, really as functional as we are lead to believe? Some people laugh and say ‘society’ is a farce anyway. It has less power over us than we think it does. What may be reassuring to those who are afraid of change is that, although the brother stops acting to hide his true sentiments, he is still the same person, pulling pranks on his sibling – he hasn’t changed who he is or what he does. The burden of his own fear is simply dismissed.

The Normality of Difference
Treasure those who are unique and extraordinary in life. Surely that doesn’t need to be argued about. What more fulfilling way of tackling life? Equally, one doesn’t have to be friends with someone simply because they are notably different: everyone is “different”. Everyone wears a mask to some extent. It is all down to scales of relativity. A person should be offended by those who want one to conform to a dysfunctional consensus, not those who offer freedom from it. One is amazed at how little changes; how unremarkable letting go is. In short, it’s not about rejecting our frameworks and categories, but building on them with common sense. It would be good to encourage people to see the best of what others have to offer, rather than assessing them by frameworks that in reality don’t really function in the way we are led to believe. Adopting this as part of your worldview shows a credible integrity and awareness. One might have to defend one’s position from time to time, but integrity counts for a lot. The best people will be drawn to that, and it is those that fulfil us. Challenge may be inherent, as with the most ultimately rewarding paths. To draw a Cambridge analogy: take rowing. The ultimate reward comes of the ultimate challenge; the most demanding commitment; the greatest strength of mind and most steadfast self-belief. The challenge of social fear is nowhere near as hard as rowing – but it does require, sometimes, support, encouragement and confidence.

The context of Cambridge should be a relatively protective environment to explore one’s identity and companionships. The hardest thing is realising that it is not all that hard. Until then, support and awareness campaigns should be interested in people getting the best out of their relationships with each other, helping avoid not simply rejection by casual social acquaintances, but the alienation of those who are friends and/or emotionally close, due to the confusion and difficulty suffered by those who have preconceived notions of society and roles that they find hard to reconcile. As such, appropriate support should be accessible to those who may resort to alienation of friends or family members as their way of (not) coping, as well as fostering a culture of reassurance and nurturing of individual identity. This approach also takes the ‘blame’ away from individuals and works to make people aware of the nature of personal identity in the social world.
We all know the stereotype: the (performing) arts are a haven for queer people. And is there any truth in it? Well, I don’t know. I’m a scientist, & I don’t know if statistics are even available. But what I do know is that we’ve got a whole range of role models available to us: from Tchaikovsky to Freddie Mercury, Margaret Cho to S. Bear Bergman – there are plenty of people for us to support, listen to and crush on, if only we can find them. From a personal perspective, finding trans* and especially non-binary gendered people is particularly hard – so join me, if you please, in a whistle-stop tour of some of the people currently making waves in their various cultural arenas.

S. Bear Bergman.
Bear is an author and story-teller who made it big with hir first book Butch is a Noun. Ze was a founding member of the first Gay-Straight Alliances in the USA; ze is a lecturer, a performance artist, & an activist; and one of hir more recent collaborative projects features in the book Gender Outlaws: the Next Generation.

Johnny Blazes.
A Boston-based “vaudevillian performer”, ze makes use of drag, burlesque, comedy and clowning in hir theatre performances. Johnny is currently a mainstay on ‘all gender, all genre’ cabaret show TraniWreck, in addition to hir work with the queer feminist sex magazine Salacious Magazine. While trips to hir live shows might be difficult, Johnny’s work is also featured in Gender Outlaws.

Kate Bornstein.
Ah, Auntie Kate. One of the better known non-binary gendered writers, she’s had a varied career: between Scientology, theatre and phone sex work, she’s got a lot of experience to draw on. And it shows: she is firm, thorough and – above all – loving, and, while people often find plenty to disagree with, she never fails to be thought-provoking. She made her name in queer circles in 1994 with her semi-autobiographical book Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us, and she’s been a mainstay ever since.

Ivan Coyote.
Ivan is a spoken-word performer, story-teller, and musician – they have written several collections of short stories, one novel, and produced two collaborative CDs combining stories and music. They’re dedicated to the collection and preservation of oral history: they’ve taught writing & memoir classes, and...
co-edited Persistence: All Ways Butch & Femme, an anthology (a collection of autobiographies as much as a conversation). They’re well known for their Youtube channel, and recently finished writing a regular column for Xtra, a Canadian LG news site.

Lashings of Ginger Beer Time.

A self-styled “queer feminist burlesque collective”, Lashings is a group of performance artists of a variety of identities. They sing about love and cartography; trans* characters (played by trans* people) take centre stage (complete with laminated cards explaining gender-neutral pronouns, as a teaching aid for David Cameron); and make huge efforts to ensure events are accessible to everyone. They’ll next be performing at OsFringe in June.

Leslie Feinberg.

Leslie rose to prominence in 1993 with her first novel, Stone Butch Blues, which won the Lambda Literary Award. Ze is a strong voice in trans* advocacy, and well-known for their photographs as part of hir artwork.

Andrej Pejic.

A model who works in both men's and women's shows, Andrej's been making international headlines since their career started. They wear beautiful clothes, give frequent interviews, and talk openly and assertively about gender: “I think there’s always been male and female, and there’s always been in-between. It’s just that the in-between doesn’t have a place,” says Andrej. “If gender wasn’t so important, if it didn’t affect the way people treat you, or the opportunities you have in life, like nationality didn’t or anything else, it wouldn’t be such a big deal, that in-between.”

Coco Rist & Elisha Lim.

These two visual artists collaborate to produce stunning works inspired by their trans* status: art inspired by “they becoming they”. Elisha produced the cover for Persistence, they run exhibitions, and have a tumblr full of their work: this and their extensive collaborations with other queer artists will lead you down all kinds of delightful rabbit warrens.

Ignacio Rivera.

A lecturer, activist, filmmaker and performance artist, and founder of Poly Pato Productions, an organisation that produces sex-positive everything (panel discussions, performance, teachings, workshops) designed with queer women, trans* folk of colour, and their allies. Their activism often takes the form of skits, poetry, experimental film, and spoken-word performances: with a calling from around the world.

Nat Tilman.

Founder of Asexual Visibility & Education Network, and Practical Androgyney, among other things, Nat is well known in the UK LGBT+ community for their activism and resources: they recently produced a fantastic video on vocal androgyney. Nat is also a talented self-taught singer and sci-fi fan: they’re a likewriter working the women to existing songs for comedy, generally as part of sci-fi (fandom) and use their powers only for good (well, mostly).

What I haven’t told you about here is the other side of the Two Cultures: people outside the arts. Julia Serano is one of the better-known names – a biologist whose book, Whipping Girl, introduced the term ‘transmisogyny;’ there’s Sophie Wilson, who designed the Acorn Micro-Computer; Ben Barres, a neurobiologist of the famous “he’s much better at this than his sister” anecdote; or Alan Hart, a pioneering researcher in TB. There’s also plenty of fantastic binary trans* writers & performers. We’re out here, and the water’s fabulous! Come and join us!

So, I have this sneaking suspicion that toilet doors tell us more about how we think about gender than any number of essays can.

Think of the signs on toilet doors: a stick figure is a stickman by default, so to draw a woman, you draw a stick figure wearing a triangular skirt. Now, this isn’t enforcing a dress code; most women wear trousers and manage to visit toilets despite that. What it is, is a bit of visual shorthand seen as more universal than the symbols ♂ and ♀.

What exactly the distinction it makes isn’t “men wear trousers and women wear dresses”. There’s no contouring or joints or other detail to indicate the man’s wearing clothes: these are not two images of equally distinctive criteria by which to identify distinct kinds of people. Instead, this abstract representation tells us ‘women are people who wear dresses’.

Male has spent a long time as the cultural default: a woman’s an alumna and a man’s an alumnus, but in a mixed group, it’s grammatically correct to use the masculine plural: alumini. The default third-person pronoun in any legal contract is ‘he’; ‘mankind’ is a collective way of referring to people – and specific language for women is an exception from the rule.

That’s got a pretty clear parallel in the ways we write gender into images. The normal way of representing a person or thing is defaulted to male; to establish that the representation is of a woman, we embellish it. Think of kids’ cartoons: there’s a well-established tradition of presenting cartoon animals with bows in their (improbable) hair, or whose lipstick or eyelashes are used to distinguish them from their male counterparts.

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Sometimes, these extra feminine details make very little sense: plenty of cartoon animals other than mammals find themselves in possession of mammary glands in kids’ shows and science fiction, and while I was hunting around to check whether my opinions for the women were justified, I discovered that the designs for female robots in Transformers include both lipstick and high-heels. Neither of these are features I can see giant robots finding particularly useful as they amble around Earth and turn into motor vehicles. Even Pac-Man gets a counterpart with a bow atop her upper hemisphere, although what purpose this serves a perpetually ravishing yellow circle is left thoroughly unclear.

Now I’m sure many people will look at all this stuff and think: ‘so, is there any problem with this?’ Individually, there isn’t much that’s particularly infuriating about any one character or piece of signage or little animation trope: anthropomorphising and stylising stuff for the enjoyment of kids is a pretty fine tradition, and visual shorthand is useful. But when lots of different kinds of media use visual shorthand that teaches kids to recognise female characters by the fact they wear makeup, or dresses, or high-heels, without ever considering telling us they’re not female by, say, their facial hair? That’s just lazy, and that’s likely to create female characters who are far less visually interesting than their male counterparts.

They’re also much more likely to teach children that women are people who wear makeup and men are people who don’t, and that is not a lesson I’d want to teach kids. So, sorry, so long as you’ve got a bunch of different smurfs with carefully chosen personality traits and then one Smurfette whose personality is “she’s a woman”, I’ll be turning the TV off and finding any kids in my care illustrated lessons about gender normativity instead.
This article is only available in the print edition of [no definition].
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As you say to me sometimes, My Dear,
I long for your arms now warm around me,
your heart - best pillow of my life,
your skin - under me beating.

And your brushstrokes of your hair,
like softest, lightest, longest,
furthest edges of a feather quill against me writing,
writing your name, your name.

I Sit Here and Am
the girl in the cafe writing,
who cannot know what you might be
writing onto me.

Is my white neck
a telling sign of something?
My pink lips, my nose,
the split dark circle
outline of my lashes;
Are these calligraphy,
a manuscript on human skin?
Or am I hieroglyphs;
a fringe, a bracelet, a biro,
a student, a linguist,
living abroad?

As you say to me sometimes, My Dear,
I long for your arms now warm around me,
your heart - best pillow of my life,
your skin - under me beating.

And your brushstrokes of your hair,
like softest, lightest, longest,
furthest edges of a feather quill against me writing,
writing your name, your name.
If there’s a single trait that causes the biggest divergence in opinion in gay circles, it’s arguably camp. Whilst it may not be obvious in our generally non-too-extrovert Cambridge communities, historically there has been an overwhelming amount of hyper-masculine expression and performance associated with gay scenes and bodies. These ideas have been captured (and exaggerated to an eyebrow-raising degree) by the artist Tom of Finland, whose drawings encapsulate bodybuilder physiques, Village People attire, and absolutely no subtlety whatsoever.

Whilst one obviously can’t say that such images are a reflection of our gay-to-day experiences (though who hasn’t seen more than a couple tank-top clad body worshippers at the local watering hole), the more general idea of visible femininity being undesirable in gay men is all over the place. Whether people are declaring themselves ‘straight-acting’ or ‘only interested in men who are men’, I doubt I’m the only person to have heard the occasional queen declare how they cannot stand ‘queens’.

So I’ve been talking about masculinity and femininity, and whilst it has become pretty common for femininity expressed by men to be referred to as ‘camp’, this is very much a cultural shift the word has experienced. As with any tripos essay, Wikipedia is our friend when it comes to historical origin. Historically, particularly in the pre-Stonewall era when effeminate behaviour and sexuality were even more conflated than they are now.

The very old social stereotypes concerning gay men behaving more ‘like women’ certainly played a part in the hyper-masculine cultural backlash of the 1970s and 80s. In the days when the argument ‘we’re no different from anything you’ was a popular part of the rhetoric in the important struggle for rights and recognition, some saw it as damaging to the ‘gay cause’ to present anything other than homonormativity (tongue in cheek) that femininity is in fact a weapon, when she points out how far the average straight man will hold a handbag away from his body if given to it for a minute.

This may go some of the way to explain why some gay men may have a discomfort with ‘camp’ – worrying that people potentially associate what may be seen as a screaming, overstated, kitch performance with your identity may be very disheartening. Likewise it may just not care for the style, just as others don’t care for rap battles or musicals. But what about when the word ‘camp’ is used more to describe feminine tendencies or behaviour in men (as it so often is), without alluding to the absurd performance-oriented nature that was originally intended? Without drowning in the gender politics of Judith Butler, one wouldn’t call man-bags, fake tan, foundation, ‘affected’ or ‘fake’ as some LGBTers levy as a criticism.

These sorts of behaviours are all things that firstly don’t receive special notice or consideration when done by women, and secondly result in assumptions being made about the sexuality of men who do engage with any such behaviours. Often this isn’t even questioned, with the rather tamer justification of ‘but it’s true!’ Whilst masculinity in women is also policed, it generally doesn’t experience the same level of disdain. In the Julia Serano’s fantastic book Whipping Girl, she states (tongue in cheek) that femininity is in fact a weapon, when she points out how far the average straight man will hold a handbag away from his body if given to it for a minute.

Nowadays, it’s a huge thing for someone to be accused of being a misogynist. People will leap to deny this label as quickly as they will deny being homophobic or racist, even when engaging with obviously unacceptable behaviour or language. Whilst it would be shockingly naïve to make any claim that repression due to being female wasn’t still very much prevalent, judgement against femininity is arguably aired more casually.

Masculinity and femininity are often treated (simultaneously, and erroneously) as oppositional, and such ‘men are from Mars, women are from Venus’ attitudes are linked in large part to gender stereotyping. Whilst masculinity is ‘honest’, femininity is ‘affected’. Masculinity – strong, femininity – weak. Masculinity – stoic, femininity – emotional; the list goes on. When considered in these terms, masculine behaviour by women makes more ‘social sense’ than feminine behaviour by men, due to patriarchal structures that reward such behaviour (in the ‘right’ contexts such as work – this is clearly a book’s worth of discussion all on its own). Campness has an undeniable tie to femininity both due to the historical judgement of gay men and from the indulgence and gendered challenges presented by drag performance. Whilst not really admitted, the evidence is plain to see that exhibition of femininity commands less respect and demands less social capital and power, generally speaking.
CN is a musician, writer, and LGBTQI activist. An alternative singer-songwriter, as well as a classical mezzo-soprano, their appearances include Classic FM, the BFI, and Diva magazine. They also co-founded the Queer Youth Network.

BY EMI DUNN

Would you say you were part of an 'LGBT+' culture? I would say I’m wary of the very term LGBT+ culture; I don’t believe there’s a homogeneous culture specific to LGBT+ people. What it means to be LGBT+ is so contingent on historical and cultural context – I feel it’s more accurate to say that I’m part of a movement that challenges the separation of ‘straight’ and ‘queer’ cultures, that celebrates diverse possibilities within this huge amorphous cloud of culture in general.

Do you feel you’re part of this culture ‘by default’ of your sexuality/gender identity? I think there are distinct cultures created through like-mindedness and choice, but I don’t think that the idea of LGBT+ cultures should be limited to that. I think opening it up to a ‘default’ position makes life more interesting, but why stop there? Gender, sex and sexuality are so multifaceted and mutable, and we can often reveal more in our art than we could in life.

What is your music about? What are your influences, both musically and politically? I consume affects my gender and sexuality. To the library!

Do you feel your LGBT+ identity affects the culture you consume? I would rather say that the culture I consume affects my gender and sexuality.

Do you think LGBT culture can function to change the wider (heteronormative) culture? I think artistic culture (both ‘high’ and ‘pop’) is one of the greatest tools we have with which to effect change. The nature of artistic communication – the necessity of empathy and imagination, of being unthreateningly close, of transcending the self – is, I believe, the very form of communication required to break down the barriers imposed by a kyriarchal system.

Can you tell us about one of your most influential experiences with LGBT+ culture? I was one of those teenagers – madly in love with Oscar Wilde. The collective debt we owe him!

What have been the best and worst parts of your career so far? Worst is easy – any event where I’m misgendered by the MC/organiser to the whole audience and then have to get on stage and shrug it off. I know once I start playing I’ll feel safe again, but it’s the walk on when all you really want to do is run away.

Do you think music as a form of political activism? I think music is music – I don’t believe the medium itself is a form of political activism, unless it’s at its most basic level of unshindered communication. I think the activism comes from the performers themselves – anyone devalued by society who has the strength to stand up and make themselves heard is an activist to me.

What music can also do is to carry words – to seduce people into listening. Thinking specifically of opera, there’s an awful lot of subversion that takes place through plot and libretto – historically, far more subversion than was allowed on the ‘straight’ stage. I think there’s something powerful in that.

Do you think music should engage with musicians’ identities – or should it stand alone? The greatest part of a musician’s identity is their music – I don’t think there’s any way of splitting one from the other.

You’re the co-founder of the Queer Youth Network – tell us about this? You’re the co-founder of the Queer Youth Network – tell us about this? How it came to be set up is detailed in my blog – go read it cnlester.wordpress.com! I no longer work closely with QYN, but inside gossip suggests exciting new things for the future.

Do you think of music as a form of political activism? Anyone who can keep the higher ground and hold firm to their principles. I’m a big fan of loving kindness – even in anger, even in opposition.

Will you tell us more about the book & photography project you’re involved in? Well, the plan had always been to write a manifesto dealing with sex/gender/desire through a radical trans lens – and the time finally seemed right. I’m taking a short break from my doctoral studies – maybe I just missed the British Library? I’m hoping it’ll inspire more debate than mudslinging.

The photography project with Sara Morato is a triumph of idealism over common sense – I hate being photographed. But we need more images of diversely sexed and gendered bodies out there – images that show us as creatures capable of inspiring art, as universal symbols – and I can’t expect to preach that message and not follow through. I love her other works and, when she asked for volunteers for a project that would explore non-normative masculinities and show trans people as ‘whole’, there was no way I could say no.

If I can get those two projects down, and record my second album, Aether, then I might be prepared to call 2012 a success.~
Different from the Others
To Germany first, with the controversial 1919 classic Different from the Others, the first film to clearly depict a gay relationship. Paul Körner is a renowned violinist who falls for his adoring male student, Kurt Sivers. When the two men are seen walking hand in hand through a park, a sleazy extortionist uses it as a oportunity for bribery, demanding money from the musician in exchange for his silence. His demands increase, and he is forced to contend with the prejudices of their small town. Different from the Others was eventually destroyed and director Leontine Sagan and many of the cast were forced to come. Nevertheless it its best, its most poignant moments are those focussing on the apparently banal — waiting for a phone call, drinking chocolate milk. It never resorts to overwrought melodrama for impact but neither does it trivialise the difficulties the girls face, and offers a strong and bold conclusion.

Ma Vie En Rose
Another film from the continent is Ma Vie En Rose, a Belgian study of gender identity, following seven-year-old suburb-dwelling Ludovic. Mother and father despair as their son begins playing with Barbies, dressing in skirts and make up and professing a wish to grow up to be a girl and marry the little boy next door. As Ludovic becomes increasingly inistent in identifying as a girl, parents become increasingly frustrated and neighbours begin attacking, a policeman has his head spray-painted onto the wall, a ‘Choose or enact violence on anybody who try to engage with the AIDS crisis. The Living End
A wholly different style of film comes from American director Gregg Araki, a major figure in the New Queer Cinema movement of the nineties whose movies, he says, are like those of an ‘avant-garde queer John Hughes’. Darkly funny, outlandish and trashy, rich in pop culture references and full of graphic depictions of sex, drug use and violence, his work is divisive. It’s particularly effective as a result of two strong central performances from actors Zohar Strauss and Ran Danker who manage to convey the longing and inner conflict in just brief glances and silences.

Einaym Pkuhot
To a quite different environment, Israel, and 2009’s Einaym Pkuhot (Eyes Wide Open). It follows the relationship between a married butcher and his young male assistant in an ultra-Orthodox area of Jerusalem and shows the daily life of a restrained and intimate sexual relationship between two girls at boarding school and how their lives change when they are ousted.

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Paris is Burning

Another strong film to emerge from the NOC movement is Paris is Burning. Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary on the drag ball culture of New York City, focusing on Latinx and African-American, gay and transgender communities, Livingston looks at the vast and elaborate subculture of balls that developed in the city during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The balls are shown to be in part a reaction to the marginalisation felt by these minority groups. Memorably, one performer comments: “I’m black, I’m male and I’m gay.” Three striking, “I’m out” on his inability to “enter” mainstream society. Many of the competition categories invite participants to dress as professionals like drag queens, or in elaborate evening wear, or as college students, with marks for performance awarded for “reality”. Interviewees assert that these categories allow them to occupy social positions they are otherwise denied. The competitions also encourage the formation of rival ‘families’ of performers, these families provide a structure of support and care for competitors, many of whom are without stable homes. The scenes following these families as they perform and live together are moving, and the interviews with prominent drag queens offer a great deal of insight into what motivates participation and what makes the balls so popular, whilst also touching on touching on issues of AIDS, prostitution, poverty and gender identity. The performances themselves are pretty mesmerising – a wealth of AIDS, prostitution, poverty and gender identity.

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Tongzhi in Love

To a second documentary, 2009’s Tongzhi in Love. The first Chinese film, with explicitly gay themes, East Palace West Palace was released in 1996, and since then a pretty slow stream of films with LGBTQ themes and characters has followed. Tongzhi in Love is well-crafted and sharp, offering (at just thirty minutes) a brief look at the lives of three gay men living in Beijing. It emphasises the dilemma the men face, the contrast of their lives in the cosmopolitan Chinese capital and the expectations of their parents, in line with Chinese tradition. The pressure for the men to produce a grandchild is great. They talk of the shame marriages of their friends – often to lesbians – as a means of appeasing their parents. One of the men berates his parents when he refuses to marry a woman and have a child, calling them ‘selinis’. It’s a huge difficulty: the men must choose between alienating themselves from (and potentially losing) family, or living a lie, and while the study can offer no real resolution it does give an invaluable look at the social expectations of different generations in China.

Ben & Arthur

And finally, a bleak day of essay pregnant with the promise that hopefully in the near future, when a number of featured performers will be able to “turn gay” so they can be together. There are perhaps some more nuances to the plot – someone was going to open a sex shop, I think – but character developments and plot twists tend to be thrown away after a scene or two in favour of more exciting things like fire and shouting. Movie highlights include bottles of holy water being nailed to doors to fend off the evil homosexual “holy protein” that may be semen. This letter to anyone!“ and “P.S. Don’t show this letter to anyone!”

The most prominent feature of any line-up of queer video game characters is the fact that most of them are from Japanese games. Japan is far from a utopia for queer people, but is at least much more willing to represent them in media than Europe and America. These representations often recapitulate stereotypical appearances and behaviours.

In Europe and America being a gay or bisexual man is strongly associated with effeminacy. In Japan, this is actually associated with heterosexuality, so most gay and bisexual male characters in games exhibit a macho campness. One of the earliest such characters was Ash from Streets of Rage 3 (1994). Ash is a loser with muscular topless henchmen, who dresses like the biker from The Village People, and who runs and jumps in an exaggeratedly balletic manner. Another playable character is Zangei, who first appeared in another beat ‘em up, Street Fighter II (1991). He’s a muscular Soviet wrestler who wears nothing but a red Speedo and gold belt. He’s been claimed by the bear community as one of their own despite the producers’ attempts to portray him in relationships with women. The Cho Aniki series of games belongs to the kuso-ge (“shit game”) genre and sells itself entirely on its ridiculous campness. The protagonists are a pair of muscular brothers with holes in their heads and Speedos over their bulging crotches. The enemies and plot are similarly ridiculous, with the latest game centred around chasing a blob of “holy protein” that may be semen.

Whether and how queer people are presented in culture matters because it directly affects our lived experience. One such game from ‘mainstream’ video games (as stocked in mainstream shops) reinforces the idea that we’re deviant and society needn’t accommodate us, while stereotyped presentations of us at best constrain our behaviour and at worst generate contempt. Conversely, positive portrayals reinforce the idea that queer people are complicated human beings and mobilise awareness of, and resistance against, unjust treatment. When it comes to video games, queer characters are overwhelmingly absent. Those that are present tend to be in Japanese games and role-playing games (RPG). The queer gaming community, therefore, faces the challenge of improving its representation in games. This is a challenge I think best met by developing our own queer games, something many independent developers are doing.

Bisexual men also have a ‘predatory bad guy’ stereotype, at least in the Metal Gear Solid series. This isn’t necessarily bad – being amoral and good at fighting is usually attributed to heterosexual characters. Vamp is a bisexual Romanian who drinks blood, is good at fighting is usually attributed to heterosexual characters. Vamp is a bisexual Romanian who drinks blood, is good at fighting is usually attributed to heterosexual characters. Vamp is a bisexual Romanian who drinks blood, is good at fighting is usually attributed to heterosexual characters. Vamp is a bisexual Romanian who drinks blood, is good at fighting is usually attributed to heterosexual characters. Vamp is a bisexual Roman...
Trans characters in Japanese games are conspicuously effeminate – regardless of whether they’re men or women (I can’t find any other genders). Trans women include Yoko from Final Fight (1989) and Kaine from NieR (2010), both fighting games. Both are very sexualised, a property shared with cis female characters. For example: Kaine wears a nightie that has holes cut into it over her breast and bottom, which I can’t imagine help her to fight monsters. Fortunately, this sexualisation doesn’t fetishise their trans status. In fact, their transsexuality is hardly mentioned.

Trans men include Flea from Chrono Trigger (1995) and Bridget from Cautly Gear XX (2002). Bridget was brought up as a girl because his village considered twin boys to bring bad luck (presumably he was male assigned at birth), but asserted his male identity when he grew up. His effeminacy comes from wearing a blue and white nun outfit and using a teddy bear and yoyo for weapons. Many straight men have misidentified him as a woman (despite the male symbol on his headband) and become attracted to him, leading to an “everybody is gay for Bridget” Internet meme.

The RPG Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4 (2008) contains the best mainstream representation of the experience of being trans, rather than merely featuring a trans character. Naoto is a 16 year old detective prodigy whose trans identity is partly attributed to a desire to be taken seriously by a misogynistic police force. The game portrays Naoto as very skilled and popular, whilst at the same time exploring the conflicts that occur when a trans person considers sex reassignment surgery and when one member of a relationship is trans. Such explorations should be encouraged, but this doesn’t mean the game was unproblematic. It insists on the particular conception of heterosexual masculinity than is put into those that have a relationship with some of these allies, and many of them are bisexual. These relationships show quite strong dedication to legitimising same-sex relationships. Each pairing required effort – scripting, animation and dialogue recording. Sex and nudity feature in the relationships in a way that neither hides it away nor fetishises it. BioWare is also publically unapologetic about including same-sex relationships. Dragon Age 2 features a male character who will make an advance on the player’s character regardless of their gender. Numerous threads appeared in the BioWare forum demanding a “no homo” option that prevented this to cater to the “neglected straight male gamer”. The lead writer for the games, David Gaider, wrote a fantastic response, telling the complainers that they were a privileged majority that were “so used to being catered to that they saw the lack of catering as an imbalance”.

The Sims is a very different sort of RPG – it simulates a family, whilst the player chooses the path of their lives. It has allowed same-sex relationships since the first installment (2000), and allowed same-sex marriages in the third installment (2009). As of the time of writing, the first installment is the best-selling PC game ever, while the second installment (2004) is the second best-selling. I think these two facts are related. The Sims has been successful because, in addition to being fun, it doesn’t make unfounded assumptions about the player.

The second type of game that reliably features queer characters is RPG – ones where you’re given a lot of choice as to how the characters develop. These games are necessarily selective about which choices they offer, since their developers have finite resources. However, often much more effort is put into enabling choices that conform to a particular conception of heterosexual masculinity than is put into those that don’t. A growing number of RPGs have resisted this pattern by including same-sex relationships. BioWare is a company that has consistently included the option of same-sex relationships in its RPGs. Since 2007 they’ve released six games in their Dragon Age, Mass Effect and Star Wars franchises. All of these are RPGs that involve the player’s character battling some foe with the help of a party of allies. You can optionally select a party that is predominantly male, predominantly female, or includes people of either gender. BioWare has also included same-sex relationships in their non-RPG game, The Sims 3. Since 2008 they’ve released three games in this series.

These independent games haven’t convinced game publishers to represent queerness in their video games yet, but these games don’t exist to convince a company to pay attention to us. They exist so that people can enjoy and explore queerness – something that is achieved as more people create and play queer games.

Anna Anthropy (www.auntiepixelante.org/en), an Italian collective dedicated to making political video games. Amongst games on war, religion, and the ethics of smartphone production, are games about sex. Queer Power subverts the idea of fixed sexual orientations and roles by pitching two ambiguously gendered silhouettes against each other in a battle to achieve orgasm. The players have to switch between many different roles in order to discover what their silhouette finds pleasurable, rather than relying on a preconceived notion of what sex should be like.

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[Ed: furrykikproject.tumblr.com is an RPG being made by a couple of queer PoC, and needing all the support it can get!]
Would you say you were part of an LGBT culture?

- Yes: most of my friends are LGBT.

- Is LGBT culture just meaning knowing lots of LGBT people - or is it specific 'types' of culture consumed?
- I select more for politics. Queer & feminist things do seem to have a higher incidence of LGBT people but I don't go for the 'signposted' LGBT groups. Formal lesbian things seem very cis, and trans things don't seem very queer or feminist.

- Yes: when I identify with LGBT culture, it's political.

Do you feel being LGBT changes the culture you consume?

- I don't feel it does, I've never defined myself by that.

- It's really changed the culture I consume - so has feminism. Together, it just means I can't read or watch anything! [laughs]. I find myself desperate to watch something closer to 'my people', even if it's trashy. I suppose that's admitting some cultural identification with LGBT.

- I agree. As a queer feminist, even if it's not having 'lesbian taste', I'm sure I find myself desperate to watch something closer to 'my people', even if it's trashy. I suppose that's admitting some cultural identification with LGBT.

- Being LGBT broadened the culture I consume, it made me review how I've done things and treated people in the past.

Is 'normalising' LGBT characters a good thing?

- Take Coronation Street – the two lesbians getting married in big meringue dresses. It's a very scripted femininity: 'We're still real women, guys! We want the same as you do!' I don't like this as the dominant depiction of LGBT people.

- With the meringue-dress lesbians, I see that it's trying to avoid 'which one of you is the man'. But it risks disowning a whole history and community of masculine lesbians. Saying all lesbians want white weddings is just as false as saying all lesbians operate on a butch/femme dynamic.

- The trend in the media seems everyone has to be femme!

- Even on the L. word! [laughs] That bastion of accurate lesbian representation, culture and values!

- Well, you'd think, being made by and marketed at lesbians.

Is LGBT culture defined against straight culture?

- Look at weddings – the meringue dress is a kind of heterosexual femininity, positioned opposite a kind of heterosexual masculinity. Whether one is in a suit or both are in dresses, there's still heterosexual rivalry!

- Like trans people having to conform to heteronormative masculinity or femininity.

- [laughs] It feels like a huge dark planet next to LGBT culture – we're all bent around it, it's hard to exist in isolation from it.

- As valuable as it is to signpost 'LGBT culture'... I'd be good to see more films with LGBT characters, that weren't about being LGBT, about coming out. Those films are great, but I wish they weren't the only films we had!

- We have to accept understanding is going to come slowly; we have to ease LGBT things in gradually.

- Signposted 'LGBT' things are good because it draws attention to there being LGBT cultural items, but it also risks segregating them. You want it to be talked about, not just sectioned off.

- Exactly. A friend once said 'why would I watch that, it's a gay movie' and me thinking they wouldn't be saying 'that movie is about gangsters, why would I watch it, I'm not a gangster'... Probably we have an LGBT section because people are so reluctant to watch gay movies.

Why are apparently non-homophobic people so reluctant to consume LGBT culture?

- People are afraid of threats to normality.

- That depends on the form it's given to these people love Glee.

- That's not a 'gay movie' in the same way.

- But Brokeback Mountain was popular because it was 'the gay cowboy movie'.

- Brokeback Mountain is an all-one-word 'gayfilm'. You (being cis & straight) can go and watch that film and the gay is 'over there', there's no feeling that it can contaminate the watcher, it's boxed with convenient tragedy at the end, so we know what happens to gays. But films where people are just gay: that suggests gayness is there throughout humanity, and that's a much more 'contaminating' idea.

- It makes me think of Orientalism. Things can be fascinating from over there - almost like a freak-show. As long as there's not been to see any overlap between Us and Them. It's something that happens to other people: gaypeople.

- I find it hard to understand what people are afraid of.

- A fear of stigma, from other people!

- I think it's often internalised discomfort.

- I think it can be people perceiving a threat to power structures. Andrea Dworkin writes about the bit in Leviticus that certain Christians use to justify homophobia. She says the prohibitions against sodomy are against 'men being used as women'. Forced intercourse is seen as a thing done to keep male-over-female power structures intact, one of the rules being that men don't do that to men. Hence no mention of women's sexuality with women - it poses no threat.

- It doesn't even count as sex!

- Yes, it's even more imagined that it could happen, let alone that it could be transgressive. And that's still present today. People see a threat to power structures - sex, gender, heteronormativity, etc.

Are there elements of queer culture in non-LGBT culture?

- My rugby team are obsessed with wearing pink and dressing as women; that's quite queer.

- I'm not sure that's a transgressive thing, it seems the opposite.

- It's a kind of male homosocial bonding.

- Yes, these straight cis guys with a very limited way of representing that, so they pick something that to them is cartoonish and couldn't possibly be mistaken for reality because 'hahaha who wears women's clothes!' [laughs].

- It's bizarre.

- Is it? It's emphasising difference. A rugby guy in a pink shirt with a stupid bra over the top is a huge joke.

- The whole idea of caricature is 'this is what we don't do', it's reinforcing your own hegemonic masculinity. If any of these guys' identities were truly invested in that performance, I think there'd be hell to pay.

- Rugby is a good social commentary for showing up the 'act of manliness, how people say one thing and do another, how people can be okay with something as individuals but not as a group.

Is it ever okay to 'out' someone in the public eye?

- That was a tactic used in the first wave of the gay liberation movement.

- I think outing has different effects on...
different people. Someone powerful and homonormative has a lot to lose, but it won’t kill them. What becomes difficult is that the act of one gay person is often seen to represent all gay people everywhere – and it suddenly becomes impossible for straight cis people to understand that their outing someone is very different to an LGBTQ person outing someone of their own sex.

The same argument as ‘well if you call each other dykes, why can’t I call you dykes?’. *I don’t mind if a straight person calls me a dyke, as long as they’re not saying it seriously.*

*I wouldn’t be okay with a straight person calling me a dyke,* 

*But it can mean very different things: which is one of the reasons we get to say it and they don’t.*

**“Dyke can mean ‘fuck off and die’, or it can mean ‘you’re hot, coffee’, which is one of the reasons we get to say it and they don’t.”**

**Should LGBT culture assimilate?**

*I don’t know if this is an appropriate comparison, but it reminds me of the “Uplift” black civil rights movement in the US. The idea that being perfect is the road to civil acceptance, that one negative act will drag everyone down, leading to self-policing. Except calling it self-policing ignores the extent to which White supremacy was complicit in it."

*I’ve definitely experienced policing from the LGBT community. That if you’re too noisy, or angry, or different, they’re being straight cis they will just stop listening and move on.*

*There’s a time for subtlety and a time for banging pans.*

*It’s about choosing the right time.*

*There’s a fear within the community as if gay rights were attached by this fleshy thread, that if we tug too fast or too hard it will snap, and then everything will fall to the ground and we’ll all be burned as witches [laughs].*

*There’s also the ‘not airing your dirty laundry in public’, don’t ever show we’re divided, or disagree.*

*We have to speak with one voice! Which coincidentally tends to be the voice of the perfect, idealised, gay man.*

*Generalisations can be well-intentioned but don’t tell you about individuals. The fact that queer is about not defining can be very hard for people to swallow.*

*One of the privileges of being mainstream is that you get to be an individual, someone not defined by the properties of their class. No one’s outside all the ‘boxes’, but many are going to judge you by what’s in your head – it’s a refusal to box your disclosures, so you can’t be other people.*

*You don’t become ‘An X cue assumptions’?*

*Yes! What are you? Fuck you!* 

*The opposite anti-boxing strategy is assimilation: I’m just like you, so I get to be unique like your people do.

**“We can articulate our desires, even if we don’t need to assimilate into culture, we need to come one by one into ours, and leave something behind when they do.”**

**How do we make culture better for queers?**

*I loath mainstream culture to accept me. We don’t need to assimilate into their culture – they need to come one by one into ours, and leave something behind when they do.*

*People are afraid of that, and their extreme reactions make it hard to get on with life.*

*You don’t know who will be that person who’ll react, either. You’re always on guard for these queerophobic landmines, even if you never go off. I read an interesting post by a queer PoC, talking about The Fear in the trans community of ‘tranny bashing’. Life isn’t great for someone a lesbian see, but most of the stats come from trans PoC working in the sex industry. She’s not saying we shouldn’t fear, but we should question whether it’s in proportion, or whether it’s just keeping us down. Coming from within the community, it think it’s a more subtle point than calling you an ‘X’, but I’m wary of.*

**Is it hard for heteronormative culture to accept LGBT culture?**

*On an individual level no, but on a structural level it would need to be made so that there’s not structural exclusion are huge, legal, socially normative, economic etc. It would take a huge number of changes to even imagine a world where heterosexuality, binary gender, gender-sustained over time aren’t all normative. Those changes are hard. It’s easy to say ‘we’re just like you’ and get 90% of their rights if we fill in ‘1b’, to their form ‘1’. But dismantling structural inequalities is hard.*

*Because they fear it will change their world for the worse.*

*It will! They’ve got privilege, and they’ve got to give some back.*

*Will they lose privilege by allowing us some, though?*

*Yes: privilege of having a gender that’s your gender of attraction, for whom you are theirs, which permeates every space. That ‘caring’ of someone that LGB people have to do before approaching them: They’re going to have to do that, too.*

*I don’t think the idea that their lives have to get shit easier helps our cause.*

*Their lives will get slightly harder work; it’s just no longer receiving an unfairly greased path.*

*I don’t want mainstream culture to accept me. We don’t need to assimilate into their culture – they need to come one by one into ours, and leave something behind when they do.*

*I totally agree, I’m not going to wait for their permission to do my thing.*

*I don’t think our culture is different to mainstream culture, it’s just broader.*

*That doesn’t speak for everyone. Coming from a non-binary separatist point of view, it’s more about distancing myself from their world, consciously and politically, with as much intention as possible.*

*Yes, LGBT culture isn’t just mainstream culture plus.*

*It’s impossible to just say ‘burn it all down’, though!*

*We can articulate our desires, even if we don’t think we can singlehandedly meet them, they can inform our tactics and strategy.*

*Nothing happens overnight, though. But that risks shifting into liberal ‘each to their own’ arguments which just allow inequality to go unchallenged.*

*You just have to be louder.*

*Some of us are doing louder!*

*That kind of louden.*

*I don’t think the tone argument, and it being our responsibility to educate the whole world for the worse.*

*But even when their framework falters when confronted with someone queer, they still don’t reconsider sometimes. How do we make them take the initiative?*

*There’s a tradition within radical feminism of not waiting for anyone to ‘get’ anything, of just organising autonomously. The early radicals wouldn’t give interviews to male journalists, so lower rank female journalists got the scoop and higher profile as a result, and conveniently many of them got radicalised, too.*

*This is the idea of the women’s autonomous movement: what can we actually do? Whose lives can we make better, without waiting for anti-feminists to change anything? Can we build structures that support women? That way of organising appeals to me so much, and is much less tiring!*

*That [the next LGBT discussion will take place this – if you want to be involved in anything, please do get in touch at lgbt-editor@cusu.cam.ac.uk. To be kept updated on future events, see www.facebook.com/cusuND]*
Sanctuary [Amo Rex]

Let’s go down, down to the harbour,  
built from words that I have gathered,  
Break the waves before they wash me out to sea.

We’re all looking for a sanctuary.

Do you see the writing on my skin?  
Straight from a bloodline I let in,  
it keeps me from slipping away.

You must stand by me  
or they will knock you from your feet.

Do you see the writing on my skin?  
Tracing the footsteps of my kin,  
it keeps me from fading away.

Everybody’s looking for the safest place.