Lesbian Visibility: What does being visible mean to you?

Pictured: Anna Smith, Staff Pride Network Bookclub Coordinator

What does being visible as a lesbian mean to you?

In lieu of any formal events to celebrate Lesbian Visibility Week, one of our co-chairs and bi-rep, Katie, and our book group coordinator, Anna have had a virtual discussion (over email, fitting in between their busy work schedules!) about what it means to Anna to be visible as a lesbian.

Katie: The big question: what does being visible as a lesbian mean to you?

Anna: As a teenager coming to terms with my sexuality, I found the label ‘lesbian’ a useful one. It helped explain me, first and foremost to myself. Others had felt what I was feeling, had made sense of it and were out living their lives. My sexuality and gender presentation – things that marked me as different from my family and most of my friends at the time – also connected me into a wider community of people, existing in the past, present and future. Seeing lesbians in public life reinforced the idea that my identity was legitimate and not something to be ashamed of. As an adult I now try to be visible wherever appropriate, both to signal to lesbians who may be struggling to come out (either to themselves or others) that they’re not alone, and to signal to society in general that we’re a normal part of their world, too. I also hope that
this visibility will help me to use my privilege as a relatively well-represented identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum to be an ally to and advocate for others whose identities are not yet recognised or celebrated.

**Katie:** Thank you so much for sharing that, I was wondering if you could expand on a few things for me? You refer to seeing lesbians in public life as important – was this generally or was it specific, perhaps well-known, figures that were helpful?

**Anna:** When I was a teenager it was generally people in the arts such as the author Sarah Waters and the musicians Tegan and Sara Quinn who were particularly helpful to me. These women were open about their sexuality, successful in their fields and were creating work that featured characters and narratives that resonated with me. Lesbian pop-culture websites such as AfterEllen (and later Autostraddle) also helped me feel part of a cultural conversation on lesbian and LGBTQ+ issues at a time when I had very few people in my offline life who I felt I could discuss these things with.

**Katie:** It just goes to show how important representation is. You also mentioned earlier that being a lesbian is a ‘well represented identity’ could you clarify this a little – do you mean, the average person may know that lesbians exist more so than other LGBT+ identities? Is this related to the fact there are now some quite famous lesbians in public life, politicians and celebrities etc…?

**Anna:** Yes, I think ‘lesbian’ is an identity that the
average non-LGBTQ+ person will have at least heard of and that many people will understand. For example, I would not expect to have to educate my colleagues, my boss or my GP on the basics of what being a lesbian means. I think this is partly down to the visibility of lesbians in public life, and in particular lesbians working on the creative side of the media in which we are depicted, for example lesbian film-makers, television writers etc. Other folks in the LGBTQ+ community don’t have that luxury because there are always more barriers in place for trans, pansexual or non-binary people (for example) trying to get a platform from which to tell their stories than for gay or lesbian people. Sadly, prejudice from the gay and lesbian communities towards more marginalised sexual and gender identities often contributes to this problem.

Katie: Do you have anything else to add?

Anna: Representation of lesbians has come a long way in recent years due to the work of activists both in and outside the public eye. However, there’s still some way to go, particularly in terms of increasing visibility for lesbians with other intersecting identities such as race, class and disability. I’m hopeful that in the future lesbians (and indeed any LGBTQ+ person), regardless of their situation or background, can see themselves accurately represented in society.
Lesbian Visibility: Shining a Light on Lesbian Authors

by Anna Smith, Coordinator of the Staff Pride Network Book Club

As part of Lesbian Visibility week I thought I would compile a list of books by lesbian authors, with lesbian characters, or both. This list is by no means exhaustive or representative of the objectively ‘most notable’ works around; it’s simply a collection of authors whose work I get excited about. A note of caution – often an author’s work may feature queer women but there is no record of the author’s sexuality, which is fair enough because that’s absolutely their business, but I’m hesitant to apply a label of ‘lesbian’ to these works given how often bisexual and otherwise queer-identified women are erased in LGBTQ spaces and dialogues. I’ve tried to stick to works where either there’s some public record that the author self-identifies as a lesbian, and/or the character in the work
only has relationships with female-identified people. Please accept my apologies for (and let me know about) any errors! Furthermore, while I’ve attempted to make the list as diverse as possible I recognise that as a cis, white woman my reading (and therefore my recommendations) will probably have a cis- and white-centric bias, and I would encourage readers to seek out works by and featuring lesbians from the trans, BME, disabled and neurodiverse communities.

Lesbian authors whose work I am familiar with:

Becky Chambers
Chambers’ science fiction series, which starts with *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*, imagines a far-future society in which humans have left Earth, met up with aliens, and are now trying to make their way in intergalactic society. Chambers’ novels often feature multiple queer characters and put questions of friendship, identity and cross-cultural co-operation and understanding front and centre. Plus, y’know, spaceships! What more do you want!?

Emma Donoghue
Most famous for the contemporary novel *Room*, Donoghue has written many novels set in different time periods. I am a particular fan of *Life Mask*, a work of historical fiction which follows the life of sculptor Anne Damer in the Georgian period. It focuses on Damer’s life burgeoning friendship with – and feelings for – a well-known actress of the time. Donoghue has also written lesbian characters in her short story collections *Astray* and *Touchy Subjects*.

Jackie Kay
Jackie Kay is a Scottish poet, playwright and novelist who I
was first introduced to when I read her memoir *Red Dust Road*, which interweaves reflections on her experiences of being adopted by a white family with the story of how she sought and met with her biological parents as an adult. *Red Dust Road* is a powerful exploration of identity and the concept of belonging.

**Carmen Maria Machado**

I read Carmen Maria Machado’s short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* on the recommendation of a friend and was absolutely blown away. Often featuring lesbian or queer women, the stories have a way of drilling right down to the bones (sometimes literally, given the often horror-inflected nature of the narratives) of their chosen themes. Despite all being set in worlds which are recognisably present or near-future, there’s a broad spectrum here in terms of the degree to which the fantastical is allowed to manifest, and Machado wields the tools of magical realism with precision and wit.

**Tamsyn Muir**

I first heard about Muir at Worldcon last year, and have gleefully devoured her short stories *Union* and *The Deepwater Bride*, which are wonderfully creepy works of science fiction featuring lesbian characters. Her debut novel *Gideon the Ninth* has been described by the author as “just a collection of swordfights and people leaning in doorways” but by many other people as a thrilling adventure featuring lesbian necromancers in space. IN SPACE! I am, alas, waiting for it to come out in paperback so haven’t yet had the pleasure of reading it.
Sarah Waters

Queen of lesbian historical fiction, has written several novels with lesbian protagonists. I’d personally recommend *Fingersmith* as a starting point, a gothic romance set in Victorian England, in which a thief plots to con a reclusive heiress out of her inheritance by posing as a ladies’ maid. Waters’ other works include *Tipping the Velvet*, *Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests*.

Jeanette Winterson

I think most people probably know who Jeanette Winterson is, right? She’s best known for *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, a novel based on her own childhood and adolescence coming to terms with her sexuality as an adopted child of very religious parents. She’s incredibly prolific and everyone who reads her work probably has their own favourites, but I love *The Passion*, a fantastical story following two protagonists (one a queer woman) across France and Italy during the Napoleonic wars.

Interesting-sounding books with lesbian authors or characters which I haven’t read:

*The Labyrinth’s Archivist* by Day Al-Mohamed

*A Two-Spirit Journey* (non-fiction) by Ma-Nee Chacaby

*The Confessions of Frannie Langton* by Sara Collins

*A Safe Girl to Love* (short story collection) by Casey Plett

*The Seep* by Chana Porter

*Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me* (graphic novel) by Mariko Tamaki & Rosemary Valero-O’Connell
Shout out to the Lesbrary and Tor Publishing’s Queering SF series are other good sources for recommendations.

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**International Transgender Day of Visibility**

March 31st marks International Transgender Day of Visibility. Since it was founded in 2009, this day has been dedicated to celebrating transgender people and raising awareness of the discrimination faced by trans people worldwide as well as their contributions to society. In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic that we currently find ourselves in we wanted to take this opportunity to highlight some of the ways in which the trans community are being specifically impacted by this crisis.

You will have seen in the news that many non-emergent/non-urgent, routine surgeries are being postponed. For trans people, this means gender-affirming surgeries will not take place as despite the life-altering and in many cases, life-saving, nature of these surgeries the NHS still considers them non-essential Many Gender Identity Clinics in the UK have waiting times of 18months to 2 years to get a referral to a gender identity clinic. Indefinitely postponing surgeries will only add to the already agonising wait for essential support experienced by the trans community.
Information from the community care group Queercare indicates that many GPs are asking trans folk to do their own hormone injections at the moment. Queercare have produced guidance on this here if it is an option for you: https://wiki.queercare.network/index.php?title=IM_injection_protocol. The Scottish Trans Alliance has also circulated information about how to request different hormone preparations from your GP if injectables are not an option. Many trans people are also concerned about the impact that COVID-19 will have on stock and availability of vital hormones.

There are dedicated groups who can help trans and queer people in Edinburgh in these terrible COVID-19 times – contact us for more info.

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Committee Statement re Schools & Gender Diversity Event

In the interest of transparency this version of the blog has been updated since the original was circulated to our members on the 13th of November and this blog was initially posted here the 14th November 2019. The updates are intended to provide clarification on some of the concerns we have cited and new information that has come to light since the time of writing.

Dear Staff Pride Network Members,
An event entitled ‘Schools and Gender Diversity’ has gone live. The Committee are upset and disappointed that another event featuring external guest speakers with a history of transphobia (1) will take place on our campus.

The event is advertised as a research seminar though there is no clarity from the event description what research will be presented e.g. published research referenced or acknowledgement of research in progress that is funded with ethical approval. Details of the proposed speakers can be found in the event description. We are of course interested to hear objective, fact-based, pedagogic research on how best to support young transgender people in our schools. However from what we understand of the work conducted by Transgender Trend (the organisation that one of the proposed speakers is the founder of), they produced guidance for schools in England and Wales which has been resolutely denounced by Stonewall, stating, “It is a deeply damaging document, packed with factually inaccurate content” (2). We are concerned that the speakers at this event will provide a biased viewpoint on supporting schoolchildren. Challenges to these views will most likely have to come from the audience, or be posed by the chair of the event.

University senior management invited us to meet with a view to establishing ways in which to reduce the harmful impact of this event on the trans and non-binary community here at the University. They informed us that while the University does not necessarily endorse the views of the speakers at this event, it is however permitted given the University’s commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression. They have indicated that they want to work with SPN, EUSA and PrideSoc student network to support trans and non-binary staff and students at this difficult time. Nonetheless we have made it clear that, without a statement to the opposite, the University will be seen as endorsing this event simply by hosting it on University premises and that the Staff Pride
Network sees no way to make the event not harmful. We will continue to support staff and students with informative, unbiased events.

The event organiser has told the media that the SPN were invited to participate in this research seminar. In fact, they invited us to participate in an earlier version of this event, an ‘in conversation with’ event on this topic which was proposed as a balanced discussion. We understand LGBT Youth Scotland and Scottish Trans Alliance were also invited to that event and that they declined to participate because they would not share a platform with speakers who do not accept trans identities as valid, putting at risk the health and wellbeing of their staff. We agree with this stance and declined to participate in any event with these speakers. The SPN believes that an event cannot be respectful when the very foundation of that event is predicated on the denial that trans identities are valid.

We met with the secretary to the University compliance committee and they advised us that without balance the ‘in conversation with’ event, which was intended as a professional development event, would not be approved. This research seminar approved by the compliance committee appears to be the same event, with the same speakers as the previous proposed event, but without balance. At no point were we invited to participate in the research seminar. Due to the refusal of the organiser to host a different event, we are at initial stages of planning an event to explore the imminent Scottish Government guidance, to counteract misinformation, to include speakers who affirm trans people’s existence, not advocate the rolling back of hard-fought legal rights.

We believe that having external guest speakers with these beliefs at a University of Edinburgh sanctioned event contravenes the University’s commitment to Dignity and Respect(3) and Trans Equality(4) and these external speakers should not be allowed this space.
It does not “create a positive culture for our trans and non-binary students and staff where they feel supported and respected to live as their true selves”. Indeed, staff and students have told us they are considering leaving the University – and have since resigned – due to management appearing to endorse speakers such as these.

Kind regards,
Staff Pride Network Committee

1 We believe it is correct to say that the activity of the proposed external guest speakers constitutes a history of transphobia because they have publicly and repeatedly misgendered and dead named trans people, and cited trans identities as equivalent to pathology (something that is simply not the case). The work of the proposed external guest speakers encourages schools to deny trans children the right to self-identify and recommends trans children be discouraged from living as their true selves.

2 https://www.stonewall.org.uk/node/62946
3 http://www.docs.csg.ed.ac.uk/HumanResources/Policies/Dignity_and_Respect-Policy.pdf

UPDATE

From event organisers via Eventbrite:

“We are sorry to inform you that the research seminar on Schools and Gender Diversity has had to be postponed. We aim to re-schedule the seminar early next year.”

The Staff Pride Network Committee are relieved the event is
not going ahead at this time and we are working with the University to provide a safe, inclusive environment for ALL staff and students to work and study.

Visibility (or lack of)

Having decided to go to the event at the Parliament on 10th September to mark 50 years after the Stonewall riots, I was pleased to be asked to be one of the people to pass around the mics for the Q&A sessions. We had two main speakers, Nicola Sturgeon and Sir Stephen Wall. Both gave fascinating talks, and both fully included trans people in what they were saying. This is great but stirred up a few issues for me as a trans person. I was very visible when I transitioned. Now I am not. In many ways it is a privilege to have the relative safety that comes from this. And yet…….is what people see who I am?

This was highlighted after the event when it was discussed that the two mic handlers were not very diverse, being two white men. Yes, we are and yet that is not all I am, and it would be wrong for me to make any assumptions in that regard about my colleague. But that is what the world saw. There is a constant strangeness in that part of my life.

This means I tend to out myself at times. My gender identity is relatively male, but my experience of life is very much non binary. It is certainly not the same as cis men of my age. If I am getting to know people well, then I do mention being trans as my history is part of who I am. But I have also disclosed for safety. That sounds bizarre, doesn’t it? Why would it be safer? Well, if it’s not known I am trans then I do not have the protection of the Equality Act. I have found times of discrimination when I have realised someone who is a
factor in that does know about my trans history and therefore it could be relevant to the problems.

Coincidentally, the day after the parliament event two trans male friends were chatting online about how they are both seen at work as cis allies – and the feelings this stirs up for them. We are at a point when society’s attitudes to trans people are becoming increasingly polarised. Sometimes people need to remember we are not ‘freaks’, just people getting on with our lives. We can even be the boring, middle-aged white bloke passing round the mic at an event.

Cameron Waddell

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**Staff Pride Network Survey Report 2019**

The Staff Pride Network undertook this survey with the aim of improving our organisation and future events. Thank you for helping us learn by completing it.

80 people responded to the survey and answered 16 questions that touched upon attendance to events, the reasons why you find this network important, communication, approachability, and representation. You can find a copy of this report in SharePoint (you will find the graphics are easier to read there). A further more detailed report will be published later in the year.

**Attendance to events**

Although some of the respondents (35%) expressed they have not attended any events organised by the network, some explained
that it is important that the network exists. One of the respondents wrote: ‘It makes me feel secure and welcomed in the University that this network exists, so I want to support it and participate when I can’.

The reasons for not attending the events organised by the network were varied:

‘I act as the departmental lead/rep for this, but am not part of the LGBTQ+ community, so don’t feel the events are for me.’

‘Wasn’t aware of events.’

At the moment, 85% of you would feel able to approach us if you had an issue you wanted to discuss. These responses are very useful to us and will help us to improve our communications so you all feel welcome to attend and get notice of the events.

**Representation**

A theme of concern was that 5% of the respondents expressed they did not feel comfortable/included and 2.5% didn’t like the sound of the events. We understand that people prefer to engage in different ways and, therefore, we are working to react and improve to ensure that people feel included and comfortable.
The survey showed our membership is diverse in many ways, but we have much to do to increase BME representation.

We are pleased to see that 19% of our respondents are allies. It is important to acknowledge that our network is a diverse group and the LGBT+ umbrella does not capture the richness of our identities, as your responses showed us: ‘[I am] Asexual! But I fit that under “queer”’ and ‘I’ve been committed to a straight relationship forever, but feel that in another universe things could have been different. I’m happy though. But I don’t really know how to label that. Operationally straight/theoretically pan?’

The importance of the Staff Pride Network
In response to this question, some of our members answered in ways that were reassuring and heart-warming. Quotes include:

‘I am impressed by the many efforts the LGBT+ staff group puts into its work, and I know that this is widely appreciated.’

‘I want to use Staff Pride to make the university more welcoming, to challenge prejudice, and effect meaningful change.’

‘It inspires me how to teach my kids about valuing diversity’.

‘I had a difficult time to come out to myself, the SPN started exactly at that point and it helped me very much to know that some LGBT+ colleagues were there, visible. I could not do it, I am not comfortable enough to share my sexual orientation with others, but I am so thankful that you guys are here! And maybe someday I will do it too.’

We were overwhelmed with the positivity and love for what we are doing. You brought joyous tears to our eyes and gave us lots to think about for where to improve our work, events, and activities. Thank you.
Pride Edinburgh 2019

Prior to the Pride Edinburgh march on Saturday 22 June, we’ll be meeting at Levels Cafe on Holyrood Road at 11.30am and plan to head to the march at 12ish for a 12.30 start. Join us at Levels so you can find us easily.

We are making placards for our beautiful posters so do let us know if you’d like to carry one. Look for the placards if you can’t get to Levels.

Time to get your beautiful UoE Staff Pride Network t-shirt for the march (or for your wall/presentation cabinet/sleeping shirt)! First round deadline is 10.30am Tuesday 4 June, so please get your orders in soon! Many thanks to April for organising this.

T-shirt order form

T-shirt payment

Cost price is £13.20 including VAT, so that’s all you pay.

Ideally you will be able to pick them up at a Central location by Friday 21 or we can send by internal mail. Closer to the time we may be able to deliver to other campuses.

Promoting equality through sustainable procurement

Recently, University of Edinburgh staff, including Andy Kordiak and Peter Hayakawa from the University Procurement Office, participated in intensive trainings and discussions on
ways to promote equality through public procurement for those who share protected characteristics (including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation). UK public bodies like the University of Edinburgh collectively spend billions of pounds annually through purchasing with third party suppliers, and thus have a lot of potential influence with industry to promote equality and better working conditions. These half-day sessions led by the **Equalities and Humans Rights Commission (EHRC)** were aimed at partners of Scotland’s **City Region Deals**, a set of agreements between Scottish Government, the UK Government and local governments and other public partners to strategically improve regional economies. The University of Edinburgh is key partner of the **Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal (ESESCRD)** leading its **Data Driven Innovation Programme**; through this the region’s councils and higher education institutions have committed to deliver inclusive growth, combining economic growth with greater equality and opportunities for all, through a series of major investments. One big challenge is to leverage the major pipeline of procurement spend to achieve a collaborative, common approach to promoting inclusion and equality in supply chains.

The training was wide-ranging, but EHRC highlighted the often overlooked duties in the 2010 UK Equality Act to take positive action to promote equality in organisational activity, rather than the better-known duties to avoid discriminatory behaviour. EHRC and attendees discussed allowable ways to take positive actions to promote equality, for instance, gender parity in industries like construction or health and social care. The University has worked over the last years with partners, in particular the University’s Staff Pride Network, to incorporate equality in its procurement, for instance highlighting equality duties in supplier documentation and requiring information and positive action from suppliers, but
we will look forward working more closely with regional partners and organisations like EHRC, with the aim to increase the impact of measures like these. As a first step after the training, the University Procurement Office supplemented the Scottish Government Equality in Procurement measures that we currently refer to in our sustainable procurement process with EHRC’s guidance on Responsible Procurement of Cleaning Services for this high risk area.

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**HESA data category to recognise non-binary identities**

The University is required by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 to submit statistical returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), under category labels set down by HESA.

Institutions are now able to report staff sex under three categories: ‘male’, ‘female’ and ‘other’. Although the naming of this last category is far from ideal (!), it does now allow reporting of staff who define as anything other than male or female.

In future this data will be captured via a self-service portal in the new HR system. Until this is in place, any staff who wish to be returned to HESA under the ‘other’ sex category should send an email to the confidential mailbox equalitydiversity@ed.ac.uk.

With regards to recording sex in University of Edinburgh job applications, colleagues are working on changes, and we hope
to provide an update in the near future.

Filmhouse event

The Everyday Cyborgs and Humanimals event on April 14th at the Filmhouse was the first public screening of four short films exploring fears, hopes and anxieties, as well as the everyday reality, of being not-fully-human. The films were made by local artists, creatives, and a group of young people, as part of the Animal, Mechanical and Me: The Search for Replaceable Hearts project led by Dr Gill Haddow in Science Technology and Innovation Studies at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Wellcome Trust.

The project explores patient experiences and public reactions to using material from non-human animals or from implantable cybernetic systems to repair, replace or regenerate the human body. It seeks to bring patients’ experiences, anxieties, and wider questions around human identity and selfhood, to bear on conversations about recent developments in medical technology. The film screening was part of a more general attempt to showcase social science research at Edinburgh University to wider audiences, and to generate public awareness and debate about these issues.
We decided to wear rainbow lanyards in addition to the classic dark-blue one to promote a more inclusive public image of the University, but also to pay tribute to the LGBT+ contributions to academic thought around identity, selfhood, and embodiment, and around the figure of the cyborg in the Western cultural imaginary.