

Essay: Heterosexual Borderlands

Author: Rieke Schröder

Introduction

As a queer person, I often encounter invisible frontiers in my everyday life. Here, I refer to these as situated within heterosexual borderlands, through which, I argue, queer people navigate with a higher mobility than straight people. In most spaces, a cis gender identity - consistent with the gender assigned at birth - and heterosexual orientation is automatically assumed. Adrienne Rich (1980) describes this with the term *compulsory heterosexuality*, stressing how it is considered obligatory for a subject to be cis-heterosexual. When a subject deviates from this, for example when they have a trans or nonbinary gender identity, when their sexuality is homosexual, bisexual or pansexual, they can be described as *queer*. While this term used to be a slur, it has been re-appropriated by the queer community within the last decades. Being queer goes hand in hand with being expected to perform a *coming out*. Pick a label, come to Pride, and get asked the same questions - over and over again. Straight people seem fascinated by anything non-straight and will expect information about the way you love, live and have sex.

Such an outing is often described with the metaphor of *coming out of the closet*. This metaphor mirrors the assumption that the subject concerned had previously kept their queerness a secret, behind a closed door. The closet as an epistemic piece of furniture is positioned at the vague border between *being* heterosexual or queer. In the book *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) has shown how the closet functions “as a publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues” (Sedgwick, 1990, p.14). *Coming out of the closet* is visualising the closets existence for straight people. Thus, Diana Fuss (1991) argues: “*the first coming out was also simultaneously a closeting*” (Fuss, 1991, p.4).

How does it feel to realise that a piece of furniture, big and bulky and full of prejudices and ideas about how and whom people should love, has been acquired unnoticed? That is a question for ‘the straights’ out there. I propose here that it is not great to consume unconsciously in times of sustainability and wokeness, and to be stuck in a borderland from which other queer cosmopolitans can navigate in and out. The heterosexual borderlands are not territorial or spatial but

epistemic, that is, anchored in our thoughts and perceptions. Nevertheless, crossing these borders, or realising that we are stuck in them, can lead to a similar feeling of displacement or uprooting as crossing national borders can. But more on that later.

Outing is out

Criticism of the idea of having to perform an outing is anything but new. Diana Fuss (1991) argued already in 1991 that the performance of a coming out reinforces the hierarchical position of cis-heterosexuality. Heterosexual people never have to come out as just that, but queer people do. If cis-heterosexuality were no longer assumed to be the only 'normal' identity, then coming out as such would be an abstruse idea. And, suprise: it is!

Queer theorist Judith Butler (2006) demonstrates in her book *Gender Trouble* that heterosexuality is just as much a performance as homosexuality or queerness. The difference here is made by the power relations that, as already described, present cis-heterosexuality as the only 'normal'. All of us perform our sexuality and gender identity differently, according to the space we are navigating through. This is for instance mirrored in the way we dress or speak, which differs if we are at work or at a party. When are we authentic, then? This might not be as relevant as we are taught to believe.

However, the perspective from within the closet is a unique one. Is a person who is still in the closet still part of the heteronormative realms? If I don't tell the straights around me that I no longer see myself as part of their crew, then I am not yet outed. But for myself I have already dared to take a step out of the heterosexual borderlands, in the sense that I am much more conscious about the way in which I perform my sexuality and gender identity.

In countless films and series that have queer characters, the narrative of coming out is told repeatedly, so that it almost resembles a self-fulfilling prophecy. What is striking is that being white is almost set as a prerequisite for a character to be queer. Yet queer BIPoC were at the forefront of the 1969 Stonewall protests that gave rise to today's Pride movement (James, 2019).

But race and ethnicity are not the only intersecting identity markers that influence how (in)visible and (in)credible a subjects' queerness is. An (assumed) non-belonging to the nation state at hand generally renders queerness invisible, as the perception is that "all the immigrants are heterosexual" and "all the queers are citizens" (Luibhéid, 2004, p.233 in Lewis & Naples,

2014, p.912). Thus, the situation is distinct for queer refugees, who are asked to proof their queerness when applying for asylum. For men, being perceived as Muslim entails expectations of a stereotypical masculine gender performance, as their (perceived) belonging to Islam renders them hyper visible as perpetrators and homophobes (Tschalaer, 2020).

Although coming out is often portrayed like a one-time event, in reality it looks different: Basically, people expect me to be straight - and justify this with my appearance, my behaviour, or not at all, since this is the only 'normal' sexuality and gender identity. The straights around me build up the closet again and again and again, have it ready in all situations - when going for a walk, at parties, in classes. This prompts me to have to get out of the closet again and again and again. Tired of this perpetual coming in and out of the closet, I began to ask myself whether one could not simply smash the closet to pieces.

Goodbye binaries

I am not alone in this deconstructive approach. Butler (2006) and other queer theorists aim to question the simplified, binary division of the world. People are described as cis / trans, heterosexual / homosexual, straight / queer, in / out. Often, we understand these binary pairs as either / or. But, as so often with simplifications: They don't work, they don't go far enough. For example, when is a person no longer heterosexual? When they have sex with the 'same sex' once? When they are poly and have several relationships, even though only with the 'opposite sex'? Or is it enough to love each other - as far as possible as a heterosexual couple - freed from the constraints of patriarchy?

It is (at least) just as complicated for queer people. Being bisexual is especially exhausting here - yes, really, it is a thing, not a phase! And being in a relationship with a cis man as a bisexual cis woman does not invalidate your queerness. Besides, queer people are not in or out of the closet. Even if you make as many insinuations as possible and conform to all queer clichés, there will still be Sabine and Thorsten out there who thought you were a fellow heterosexual. And who then want to hear the story of your outing, with as many dirty details as possible, and hopefully some tears. To then be able to say: Love is love! Excluding non-liberal, queerer subjects in this statement, of course. Where does this straight fascination with queerness come from? Isn't it much more fascinating that people are never attracted to more than 'the other' gender? I mean female straights, hello, have you all seen womxn before? Seriously?

Borders revisited - Queer mobility

Back to my initial hypothesis: straight people live in their self-imposed heterosexual borderlands, from which they do not move - often unconsciously - throughout their lives. I, as a queer person, can decide to stay in a heterosexual space and not address my queerness, I stay inside the closet. Of course, this does not apply equally to all queer people, but as a white femme lesbian/queer, I have rarely experienced people assuming that I am non-straight.

And when I want to, I leave the heterosexual borderlands, through the back door of the closet, and enter the queer spaces where I can be at home. Can I be ascribed a higher mobility here? In the book *Boderlands*, Michel Agier (2016) refers to people who can go back and forth across a border as border dwellers, attesting them a cosmopolitan privilege through their increased freedom of movement. Even if Agier is more concerned with territorial borders, this consideration is also interesting for the epistemic realm of heterosexual borderlands. For straight people can also enter queer spaces, but they will never feel as at home here as we queers do. And their mobility in queer spaces is certainly more restricted than ours.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to belittle or negate decades of oppression of queer people here. Instead, I am proposing a new reading of queer mobility that can also explain the straight fragility that queers often encounter when coming out.

Emplacing straights

So as soon as straight people realise that the narrow border areas in which they move are fenced off by themselves, and we queer people transgress easily beyond the borders, this could lead to a feeling of emplacement. Emplacement here means a compulsive placement in the heterosexual borderlands. Julie Chu (2006) shows how this sense of forced placement is another form of displacement, i.e., eviction or expulsion from an area. Chu argues “the ultimate form of displacement was seen and experienced as the result of *immobility*, rather than physical departure from a “home”” (Chu, 2006, p.397).

Experiencing immobility - due to their sexuality or gender identity - is a fairly new experience for most straights. We queers, on the other hand, already use a different world map for orientation in the geographical borders of the world. *The Sexual Orientation Laws in the World* map by ILGA World (2020) shows us where we should travel, and where who we love or how we live our gender is enough to put us at risk of imprisonment or even death penalty. Here I would

like to explicitly emphasise that the discourse that declares Western European countries safe havens for all queer people negates the reality that is lived here as well. The heterosexual borderlands I am talking about here also exist in Germany and Denmark.

When straight people are suddenly confronted with these heterosexual borderlands, through which we queers have been navigating since time perpetually, they realise that their own comfort, their sleepwalking in the (hopefully) more progressive and advanced queer agenda dreamland is causing them to fall behind. Leave the safety of your normative cis-heterosexuality behind dear straights, stop building closets and let's blur the lines.

Authors' affiliation

Rieke Schröder, *MSc Development and International Relations graduate 2021*

References

- Agier, M. (2016). *Borderlands: Towards an anthropology of the cosmopolitan condition* (D. Fernbach, Trans.). Polity.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Chu, J. Y. (2006). To Be “Emplaced”: Fuzhounese Migration and the Politics of Destination. *Identities*, 13(3), 395–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890600839504>
- Fuss, D. (Ed.). (1991). *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*. Routledge.
- ILGA World. (2020). *Sexual Orientation Laws in the World*. https://ilga.org/sites/default/files/downloads/ENG_ILGA_World_map_sexual_orientation_laws_dec2020.png
- James, S. (2019, June 22). *Queer People of Color Led the L.G.B.T.Q. Charge, but Were Denied the Rewards—The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/us/lgbtq-minorities-trans-activists.html>
- Lewis, R. A., & Naples, N. A. (2014). Introduction: Queer Migration, Asylum and Displacement. *Sexualities*, 17(8), 911–918.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs*, 5(4), 631–660.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.
- Tschalaer, M. (2020). Between queer liberalisms and Muslim masculinities: LGBTQI+ Muslim asylum assessment in Germany. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 43(7), 1265–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1640378>