



# Blue House Monthly

Volume 3 Issue 5

July 1, 2024

The “Born This Way” Argument  
& Why We Still Need It

Hiding in Plain Sight: Trans in the UAE

Agender, Genderqueer and Intersex  
Representation in Pre-2000 Games

Happiness in an Unhappy Times

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## About the Cover

“July Jumble” by Ashley (@icrashley)

July Jumble is a small project I created while learning Blender. My goal was to capture the essence of July, chaotically filled with various elements that evoke the summer vibe. Most of the junk consists of abstract shapes with a beachy material, but I included a few special items that should be familiar! I hope to create more cool projects with Blender and contribute again to BHM in the future.

## Community News for July 2024

- Purple Rosie got accepted into a master’s program for human-computer interaction.
- The seasonal group photo for Summer 2024 had a total of 63 participants.
- Poliwhirl’s and Lapis’ cat celebrated her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- Miku, artist for the April 2024 issue, injured her arm and proudly wore the server emblem on her cast.



*Miku’s cast, photo credit Miku*

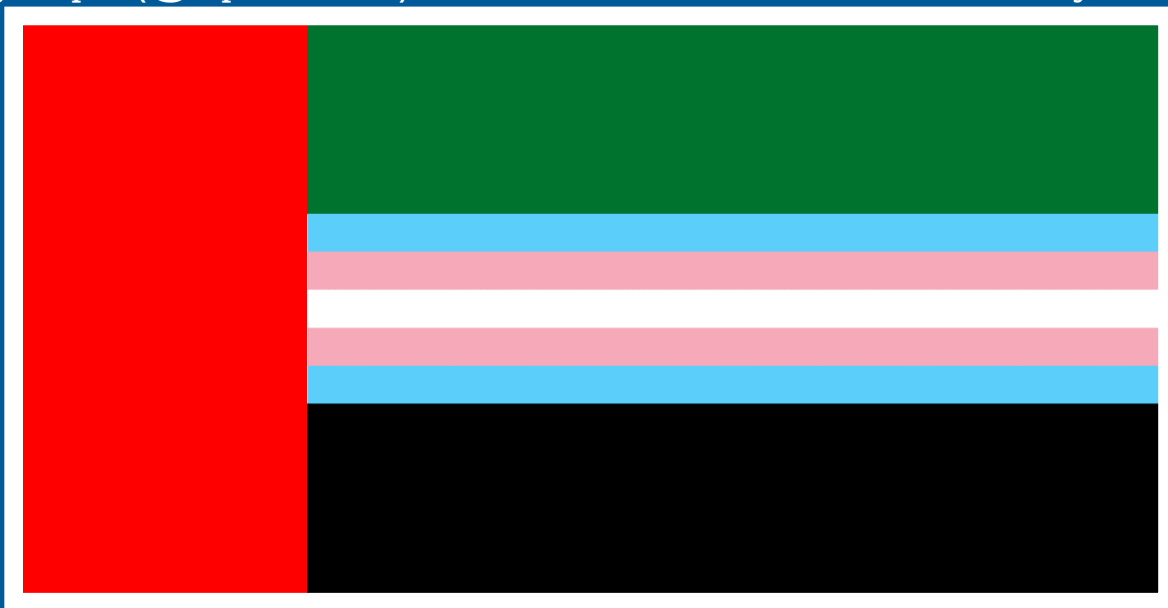
## About Next Issue

As Lapis takes on more responsibilities in her daily life, Poliwhirl is again taking up responsibility as the go-to Editor for Blue House Monthly. Lapis helped transform BHM into a more professional and polished piece of collaborative work, and Poliwhirl will work to maintain the quality and quantity that has become the standard for BHM. Lapis will still function as Co-Editor with Poliwhirl while also contributing her own pieces.

Additionally, an example article has been published to accompany the submission criteria on [bluehouse.lgbt](https://bluehouse.lgbt) to help guide potential writers.

## Hiding in Plain Sight: Trans in the UAE

By Lapis (@lapis\_lazuli.) in collaboration with Rania and Maryam



Situated where the unforgiving desert of the Arabian Peninsula meets the turquoise waters of the Persian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates is a nation of stark contrasts. Many people know of the country because of its reputation as a playground of the rich and famous, where trust fund babies drive speedboats made to look like luxury cars and celebrities play tennis on helipads on top of skyscrapers. Some will recognize places in the country like Dubai from seeing Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt climb the tallest building in the world with only suction cups and grit in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*. Still others will know of Abu Dhabi where Vin Diesel as Dominic Toretto uses a sports car to jump between two skyscrapers in *Fast & the Furious 7*. What most people won't know the UAE for, however, is its track record of human rights abuses, persecution, and the oppressive regime that buys its legitimacy through oil exports.

Following the 'Trans in Hong Kong' interview from the March issue (Vol. 3 Issue 1), this month I had the incredible opportunity to interview Rania and Maryam, an LGBT couple from a part of the world that a lot of people in the west have some misconceptions about and do a third installment of my international trans spotlight series. We talk laws, Islam, censorship and more. This is *Hiding in Plain Sight: Trans in the UAE*.

*IMPORTANT NOTE: Per request, the names of the individuals being interviewed, and certain non-substantive minor details have been changed to help ensure their safety and prevent their identification by the government of the United Arab Emirates.*

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**Lapis:** First off, thanks for agreeing to do the interview. For the first question to provide some context for the people reading this, would you two mind introducing yourselves?

**Rania:** I'm Rania, I am 20 years old, I'm a citizen of the UAE, I grew up here. I'm non-binary and I identified as a lesbian for a long time but I'm questioning in recent days. That's pretty much it.

**Lapis:** Maryam?

**Maryam:** I'm Maryam; I'm 21 years old. I'm also a citizen and I go by she/they. I guess I'm transfem; I'm in the same category of questioning sexuality wise.

**Lapis:** Gotcha. And what's the relationship between you two?

**Rania:** We're engaged.

**Lapis:** Congratulations. I'd call that a big win.

**Rania:** We are actually trying to talk to her mom about we are going to go about the marriage because we don't want to go through the legal route right now, but we do want to go through the religious route- the nikah<sup>1</sup> attires so we can do a bunch of things we wouldn't be able to do if we weren't married without the legal



*Figure 1: A woman in traditional nikah attire (14)*

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<sup>1</sup> "Nikah is a traditional Islamic wedding ceremony that has been celebrated for centuries. The word Nikah is derived from the Arabic word naka, which means "to unite." ... When it comes to dress attire for the Nikah ceremony, the bride and groom typically wear traditional Islamic dress. The bride often wears a hijab, or headscarf, along with a long, flowing dress or abaya. The dress is typically modest and loose-fitting, and may be embellished with intricate embroidery or beadwork. The color of the dress may vary depending on cultural traditions, with white or gold being popular choices." (1)

catastrophe of all the paperwork and everything.

**Lapis:** Do you anticipate that conversation going well?

**Maryam:** I still have some stuff to prepare in regards to that conversation, I have to get my thoughts together but I'm confident that it will go well.

**Lapis:** Still, that's exciting right?

**Rania:** It is!

**Lapis:** So how did you two come to join Blue House? How did you find Blue House?

**Maryam:** One of my friends is in the community and one day she wanted me to translate some Arabic stuff, so I got invited.

**Rania:** There was a discussion about Islam, and I got invited in for the convo. I was kind of all over the place but I kind of just stuck around.

**Lapis:** Oh yeah! I think I was there for that. That was the night you and I first spoke right? That was a good conversation.

**Rania:** Yeah!

**Lapis:** Do you guys feel like you've settled in well? Do you like it here?

**Rania:** I like here

**Maryam:** I like it a lot. [Laughing] I do have the overbearing knowledge my sleep schedule will be ruined but...

**Rania:** [laughing] Yeah, the time zones are wild but I like it here, I guess though sometimes my beliefs can be a bit more on the conservative side apart from the LGBT issues for example on relationships and certain other things in life.

**Lapis:** Well we're glad to have you. ...To pivot a bit- how long have you been out? Are you out?

**Maryam:** I'm not out. I don't really have the knowledge and safety to be out. Like every time I want to tell someone about everything- who I really am- I feel like I have to vet every person.



*Figure 2: Revi from Black Lagoon (15)*

**Lapis:** That's very reasonable. ...When did you both come to the realization that you weren't straight or that your gender identity might not line up with the one you were assigned at birth?

**Rania:** I realized fairly early on, I guess I just didn't know it was something we could do or were allowed to do. My school was pretty liberal in views and I think the realization came from how my school ran things versus how our country ran things because in school we were allowed to express ourselves how we wanted but that's not how our country sees it. So it was kind of a weird distancing in that regard? I guess after you graduate it kinda hits you that the country does not in fact function how your school has. In school a lot of people were very openly gay which shut down any homophobia around. I grew up in a friend group that was aware of what gay people were and a lot of them were gay. I guess it was normal for me to be around gay people but I guess I first realized I was gay when I watched *Black Lagoon* when I was maybe 12<sup>11</sup>. I saw Revi and she made me realize "holy shit I think I like girls". I got outed to my parents by someone and that went horrible and my mom to feel better just pretends like it never happened and that I'll stop it and [laughing] "stop the gay". In middle school when we started to have that bigger divide because everyone was hitting puberty I started to feel really othered for being intersex and a lot of

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<sup>11</sup> *Black Lagoon* is a manga that was adapted into an anime series in 2006. Per IMDB, "A Japanese businessman, captured by modern-day pirates, is written off and left for dead by his company. Tired of the corporate life, he opts to stick with the mercenaries that kidnapped him, becoming part of their gang [the Lagoon Company]." (2) The series, characterized by its violence, gore, and vulgarity, is considered a classic by much of the anime community.

guy kids found out when we went to get our medical checkups from the nurse's office on my file. It said I had F/NA and they said, "what the fuck is that about?". So, they started joking about me being a guy and guys started asking me if it was gay to like me, if I was a boy, and a bunch of weird questions. It made me feel weird about what my gender was. I knew I was "meant" to be a girl but being a girl didn't exactly feel, correct? I also didn't like that these people were kind of throwing the "guy" label at me for no apparent reason. Through puberty I started to feel dysphoric about my body so like having a female chest, having more feminine proportions... it kind of started getting to me mentally and I didn't understand why. I thought I was like insecure so I tried to dress more feminine and that made it worse. At some point I just kind of realized through time that those don't define my gender. It took a while. If you ask Maryam it took a while. If you put me in traditionally feminine clothing I probably would have cried. It kind of took me a while to disassociate the clothes from what my gender was. The physical dysphoria never exactly went away but the gym helped a lot. It kind of hit me that the average woman doesn't question if their female features feel right or not.

**Lapis:** Maryam, how about you?

**Maryam:** Well, I think I started to question my sexuality first. I think it was around the 8th grade that I started to question if I was bisexual, and it was an interesting thing to question. It always kind of sat there but then it got shut down later because I don't really live in a progressive area and one of my classmates left but before they left someone had exposed them for being gay and the backlash and the mistreatment [they received] kind of shut me down for a very long time and it shut me down from questioning things. People that were friends with this person for ages suddenly just turned around, acted disgusted, and started reframing everything they had ever done as ...something horrible y'know?

**Lapis:** Like making them out to be a predator? Or somehow malicious?

**Maryam:** Yeah, and making them out to be a freak.

**Lapis:** Maryam, you mentioned you were planning on talking to your family about it and you also mentioned your father. Would you mind explaining a little bit about what your family situation is like?

**Maryam:** I don't think they'll be supportive. I'm not telling them anything about my gender identity or anything. Luckily from an outsider's perspective since we are both closeted, it appears to be "straight" to people. It's a very lucky and privileged position to be in. I don't think I'll ever tell them about my gender identity. I think at most I will tell them once I've been able to completely separate myself because there is no real safety net for me. Especially since I'm a citizen of this place.

**Lapis:** The middle east is widely considered to be a pretty dangerous place to be LGBT, right? To my understanding in your country, the UAE, consensual same sex relations are highly illegal and while rarely prosecuted they carry a minimum of 6 months in prison with no ceiling on the kind of sentence that can be handed down. Regional laws can be even harsher. Abu Dhabi for example outright criminalizes crossdressing. You talked about safety a moment ago... do you feel safe in day-to-day life? Are you safe?

**Maryam:** I feel as safe as I can be but with the way things are I get legitimate anxiety hearing my [chosen] name and not my deadname in any type of public setting. I remember being scared when someone I never met called me by my name and I realized I'm not in control of telling people about my identity and this can come to bite me at any time. It scares me if this gets to the wrong people you know.

**Lapis:** There was a rather high-profile case in 2005 that garnered international attention when Abu Dhabi arrested over two dozen people for what amounted to crossdressing and planning to celebrate a gay wedding. Over half were handed down sentences of or in excess of five years<sup>III</sup>. I know you two are planning on getting married soon in a religious style wedding. Are you concerned the government may try to intervene? Are you planning on taking any precautions?

**Maryam:** In regard to that case I will just say that its really messed up and its one of those things where they prosecute cases like these to set an example like [they are trying to say] "this is gonna be you next." Since we are closeted to the outside, we look... cis het?

**Lapis:** Hetero-normative?

**Maryam:** Yeah, we look hetero-normative. That's the word I was looking for. We look very hetero-normative so just going through the religious marriage we don't have to bring in additional people to officiate the stuff. Obviously, the people that know us know how we are.

**Lapis:** Is there an active LGBT community in your country? Rania talked a little about the schools being more liberal but as adults is there a gay scene? Or a queer community that's active?

**Rania:** Okay so this is only alleged since I haven't been to any of these places because I'm under 21 but allegedly there are gay bars but they are very underground and very covered up so people can't find them online. There is only certain ways to get to them. People throw house parties for pride month but they don't specifically say that its for pride and as long as no outsiders find out nothing usually gets done. So shit only happens because this country operates with this like "if you don't disturb the public peace we wont hunt you" kind of thing. I think they could care less if a bunch of gay people are being gay in a house.

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<sup>III</sup>[https://web.archive.org/web/20060224224853/https://www.news24.com/News24/World/News/0%2C%2C2-10-1462\\_1879726%2C00.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20060224224853/https://www.news24.com/News24/World/News/0%2C%2C2-10-1462_1879726%2C00.html)

The issue comes when someone complains. Stuff only really happens when people are explicitly uncomfortable because now they (the government) need to go out of their way to punish people as harshly as they can to set a standard, you know what I mean? It all depends how bad people are mad about it. If people didn't care about you doing these things and leave you alone then the government and police won't touch you either. If people start reporting it that's when they get involved. About the gay scene, we do have a few group chats here and there but people avoid doing things like public servers because anyone can join and if someone reports that people can be turned in. [The government] are trying to play both sides where they want the tourists not to be too upset, so they still come. That's why all the websites are blocked out that talk about how bad it is to be gay here, because they want the tourists to still show up, even the gay ones. But if you are a citizen they can't let you act "too gay" and too deviant of the social norms because then the locals won't be too happy about that. They are trying to play into the we are conservative country act while still attracting a lot of American tourism.

**Lapis:** I might be wrong and maybe there is a more tactful way to phrase this, but it's fair to say the UAE has the policies it does because of how most of the people there interpret Islam right? I know you've said before that you are Muslim. How do you reconcile being LGBT and non-binary with your Muslim faith?

**Rania:** I actually left the religion for quite a bit because I saw a lot of violence being done in the name of religion and I questioned if the religion is truly good why people can commit violent acts and use Islam to justify them. I noticed a ton of people held these horrible values and I concluded there was something wrong with the faith, but then when I delved into the politics, I noticed that there was only a specific sect that was committing these acts. In this country being a Shia<sup>IV</sup> is very much frowned upon. If you wear the sword necklace<sup>V</sup> around your neck you can get harassed. People can treat you extremely horribly for your beliefs because they view that sect as disgusting and they'll (the Wahhabi/Salafi<sup>VI</sup> community) treat them like shit. My family is of that sect, but we are very closeted about

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<sup>IV</sup> Shia is one of the major branches of Islam, constituting between 10 and 15 percent of all Muslims. Sunni is the other and larger of the two, which makes up between 85 and 90 percent. Each branch, at its core, is defined by who they believe succeeded the Prophet Muhammad upon his death in 632 A.D. The Shiites (Shia) believed the Prophet's successor needed to be someone from his bloodline while the Sunni believed all that was necessary was for the successor to be pious and a loyal follower of the Prophet as opposed to a blood relation. (3)

<sup>V</sup> "The Zulfiqar sword [also called the sword of Ali] is a significant symbol in Shia Islam, representing the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Imam Ali." (4). A sword of Ali necklace is one of the ways a person denotes they are of the Shia faith.

<sup>VI</sup> "Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam and is practiced in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, although it is much less rigidly enforced in the latter." Salafiyya, also referred to as Salafism, is a "more general puritanical Islamic movement that has developed independently at various times and in various places in the Islamic world." Wahhabism is largely considered to be a form of Saudi Salafism that has been around since the 18th century. (5)

that living here. I noticed you never see a Sufi terrorist<sup>VII</sup>. It's always the Salafi or Wahhabis. There is a reason all the terrorists grew up in madrasahs<sup>VIII</sup> funded by Saudi<sup>IX</sup>. I was like "is this what Islam is about or is this something Saudi is trying to push?" because they have stated they want control over all of the middle east and they suppress other Islamic groups that disagree with them by prosecuting them and claiming they were part of a terrorist group even when they had nothing to do with terrorism whatsoever. I started realizing these things and going "okay something has to be up here because that doesn't make any sense". I did research into the religion and noticed there was reference of men who had no sexual interest in women in the Qur'an and talking about how they were allowed to see women's hair. I went "wait a minute!" because we were never taught that we were told only girls can do that. I realized there were whole other identities in Islam that were pretty much erased historically because it did agree with Salafi or Wahhabi perception of religion which says it doesn't exist or if it does exist it is bad and damned. That kind of pushed me into doing my own research into the religion and the story of Lut<sup>X</sup> being used against gay people. When you look at the actual reason, they were being punished it was not because they were gay its because of the crimes they committed. They had wives and were married but would rape young men. I started to realize "hey this doesn't sound like gay men it sounds like-"

**Maryam:** Rapists?

**Rania:** Yeah, like a lot of Romans and Greeks had at the time. This has nothing to do with love and romance this has everything to do with very specific practices. Your average gay man does not do that kind of shit. I was taught marriage is between one man and one woman for love only but my research into Islam taught me "nope there is different types and purposes for marriage and nikah. That made me question everything and I went "oh my God nothing I was taught was real" and I had to relearn everything for myself. My Islamic teacher in school was really nice but he unfortunately had to follow a specific system we were given and that system that stated things as definitive fact rather than leaving things open for interpretation. [That realization] made me come back to religion and it made me genuinely love it a lot. I also found subreddits of people who were likeminded and was like "wow so there is quite a lot of us out there we just aren't allowed to be vocal about it".

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<sup>VII</sup> Per Britannica, Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism where "Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world. Islamic mysticism is called *taṣawwuf* (literally, "to dress in wool") in Arabic... Sufism derives from the Arabic term for a mystic, *ṣūfī*, which is in turn derived from *ṣūf*, "wool"" (6) While the majority of Sufi are Sunni, some consider themselves to be Shia. (7)

<sup>VIII</sup> Per Britannica, a madrasah is a Muslim educational institution but the term in Arabic in modern times has come to be synonymous with "school", secular or religious. (8)

<sup>IX</sup> IMPORTANT NOTE: BHM has not verified if all terrorists are Salafi or Wahhabi and does not assert this as fact nor an opinion of the publication or its staff. This is an unsubstantiated claim made a subject being interviewed and should be treated as a potential generalization.

<sup>X</sup> Lut, who in the bible is referred to as Lot, is known in Abrahamic faiths for the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (the prior being the origin of the term "Sodomite" in the English language) (9, 10)

**Lapis:** Do you consider your generation to have a more enlightened perspective on all of this, kind of like you do?

**Maryam:** It is much better. People are more accepting, and people are more understanding. There are still quite a few people who aren't, but I came out to my cousin and he is a very religious man but he was okay with it. I think it's because the new generation has been able to see the entire world which is linked to people having perspectives beyond what our education system tells us.

**Lapis:** If your generation is a bit better on all of this, do you think things will get better in the UAE in the long run for queer people and trans people?

**Maryam:** No, but in the middle east in general yes. We do run into the very big issue of this country not being democratic. In this country the opinions of the people aren't considered as much, but I do believe things will get better in the middle east overall. Rania, do you have something you want to say about this?

**Rania:** The world is changing. For example a lot of people in Lebanon are openly gay, even if the government disagrees there. They have gay bars and stuff. Parts of the Levant<sup>XI</sup> especially are changing. Anything in the Khaleeji<sup>XII</sup> area is subject to how Saudi functions. Unless Saudi changes it won't change and that's the sad part. Parts of the Levant definitely but Qatar and the UAE? Nope.



*Figure 3: The Levant (11)*

<sup>XI</sup> Per Britannica, “Levant, (from the French lever, “to rise,” as in sunrise, meaning the east), historically, the region along the eastern Mediterranean shores, roughly corresponding to modern-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and certain adjacent areas.” (11)

<sup>XII</sup> “Khaleeji (meaning ‘of the Gulf’ in Arabic) denotes a socio-political regional identity that is shared by citizens of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.” (12) The six GCC states are Saud Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. (13)

**Lapis:** You'd mentioned you plan to maybe untether from family stuff so you can present [as female] or at least be more yourself. Have you considered fleeing the country? Maybe moving somewhere more liberal or more western? I feel like a lot of western readers that are reading this are going to think to themselves that you should just get out of there. I'm guessing it's not as simple as that? I'd love to hear your perspective.

**Maryam:** It isn't that simple. I have considered fleeing. I think moving to another country does seem like the best course of action and it's great that these [western] countries are more liberal in that regard, but these countries have their own issues and their own unique sets of problems. The western world has its own can of worms like the middle east, like east Asia. Every place has its own can of worms. I think especially as someone who is a citizen leaving is a lot more than just going "I'm in a different country now, I can be free." It means giving up a lot of stuff because while obviously I don't like how this country treats people like me-

**Rania:** and the racism

**Maryam:** and the racism, yeah. The racism is a big issue. But this country really prioritizes citizens thriving such as trying to guarantee them jobs, giving them land, international studies are paid government sponsorship programs and benefits like these make me feel like I'm giving up a lot of support and support systems I would have if I just stayed here closeted.

**Rania:** We do plan to leave at some point, it's just a matter of when.

**Maryam:** Yeah

**Lapis:** The government of the UAE is known for its censorship. It restricts access to many websites and has been known to monitor chatrooms, instant messaging, and blogs. More worryingly, western companies, to preserve their access to the nation's market, have increasingly been cooperating with the government's demands. Most notably, Amazon has blocked results for searches on its site for over 150 terms including "lgbtq", "pride", and "closeted gay"<sup>xiii</sup>. Discord, which I'll state for the readers is where we are having this conversation right now, we're on a call, is actually restricted in your country to my understanding. Some ISPs (internet service provider) like Dubai based Etisalat outright bans the site as it falls under the country's VOIP (voice over internet protocol) policies. I remember you once said you use a VPN? Are you worried your online activity is being monitored or that you are on a list? And I guess more generally I'd love to hear your opinion on the country's surveillance and censorship apparatus.

**Maryam:** First of all, one small clarification- discord's messaging service itself is completely fine, though if you try to use the voice protocol it just fails completely. I guess

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/business/amazon-lgbtq-uae-emirates.html#:~:text=Amazon%20moved%20to%20restrict%20items.by%20The%20New%20York%20Times>

that's a consequence of this country not necessarily having a sense of net neutrality as the policy was made to benefit the ISPs as they are the major phone providers in the country. Censorship is a really big issue. Trying to look up and research things, like if there is conversion therapy here for you know, my own safety to know whether these things exist, nothing turned up. Like nothing turned up. I remember trying to look up certain sources before that seem innocuous enough when you aren't working from the same frame of mind as people here. I click on a link; I try to go to a website and "oh look its blocked". There are a lot of blocked websites.

**Rania:** Tell her about the gay rights one

**Maryam:** oh yeah

**Rania:** We tried to look up the UAE's policy on gay people and it just wouldn't even let us open it because they [the government] didn't want us to see how horrendous it was because you know, that will cut down on tourism. They are trying to make sure the tourists don't see that when they enter the country.

**Lapis:** Well, that's kind of dystopic.

**Rania:** yeah

**Lapis:** Do either of you plan on medically transitioning? If you do how would that work? I imagine that it can't exactly be easy there. For example, how do people source HRT? What is that process like?

**Maryam:** Well, the process isn't something I'm necessarily the most enlightened on. Well technically it is allowed if you get a gender dysphoria diagnosis and you can get [HRT] prescribed because this country follows the ICD-10, or the international statistical classification of diseases from the World Health Organization, if you do try to present and you do try to go out you will just be punished for other shit like crossdressing or they will find some way to arrest you.

**Rania:** If you haven't had bottom surgery basically, they are gonna go after you.

**Maryam:** This country is one of the few countries that treat hormones for HRT as a controlled medication so it's much harder for people to go the DIY route if they have nowhere to turn and can't leave. I would really love to do more research for my own personal reasons on how to get gender affirming medication in the country.

**Rania:** There is a way I think. You know that guy that distributes performance enhancing drugs for athletes behind the scenes? He also does hormones. I know some people get hormones through people like that where its treated kind of like a steroid for the most part. The ones I've talked to are pretty chill. I know people who have done performance enhancing drugs which is how I found out about this. This isn't legal and its not exactly safe, but it is an option.

**Lapis:** What advice do you have for other LGBT people and queer people in the UAE and more broadly in the middle east?

**Rania:** Maryam, you go first

**Maryam:** I would say first of all, stay strong, stay safe, and try to find community. Try to find other queer people. I guess in situations like these the best way to enjoy your life even if you can't do much until you leave is to find other people to be with.

**Lapis:** Rania?

**Rania:** If you are stuck in the middle east, move to the Levant. Go to Lebanon. Go to Jordan, go anywhere there. Its not the best but its miles better than what most people in the Gulf are stuck with. I recommend going to a country where its not as bad. Even if you can't make it out [of the middle east] or don't want to, find community in countries like the ones in the Levant. Also go to conventions, go to places in your university where you know there will be a lot of other queer people and make friends. This one might be a little [weird]... but become friends with people in the police. I've had friends in the police and its helped me get out of a lot of shit. In countries like where we live, connections mean everything. You can get pulled out of just about any situation if you have a good connection to someone else. They will save your ass one day.

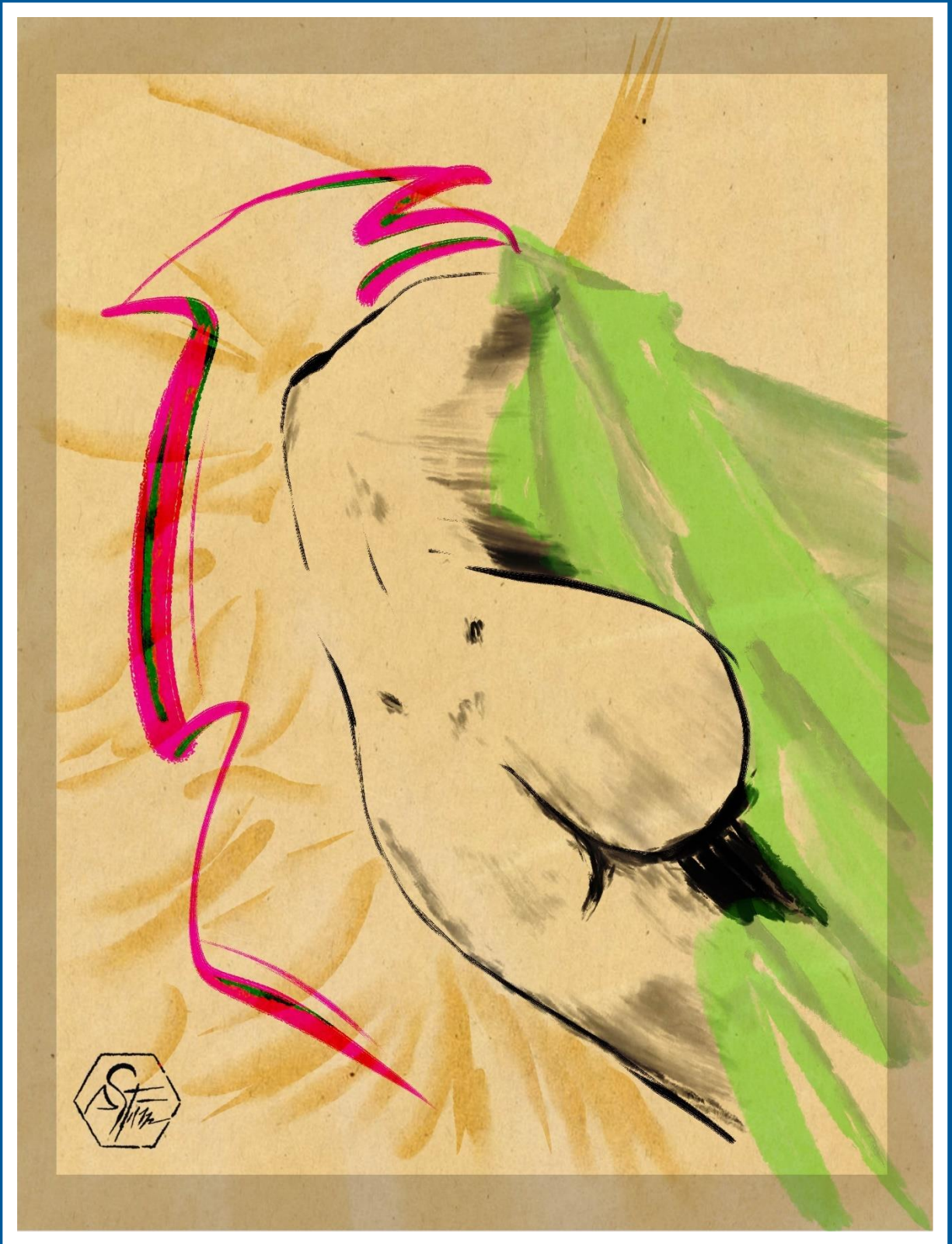
**Lapis:** What advice do you have for trans people and LGBT people in the west? In places like for example the US, UK and Canada?

**Maryam:** I would say religious acceptance. For a lot of people here moving to the west means trading religious acceptance for queer acceptance. If that tradeoff was less of an issue then people wouldn't have to worry as much with moving over if they wanted to go that route. I would also say to try to help a lot of the people coming over. They have to deal not just with navigating being out but existing in an entirely new country and they have to grapple with for example a completely different medical system than the one they grew up with. They need to stay afloat, you know? That's a lot to juggle.

**Rania:** Some personal advice I'd have for people in the West is that queer Muslims are not your enemy. A lot of people put their hate for Islam onto gay Muslims. They are not the problem ones. They are the people suffering due to those problems. Being nice to them is a better route than having an immediately hostile response to their faith. They are not the people taking people's rights away, they are the victims. Be nice to them. Be a little more open-minded.

**Lapis:** I think that's great advice from both of you. Thank you again for sitting down for this interview I think people are going to find it really enlightening. △

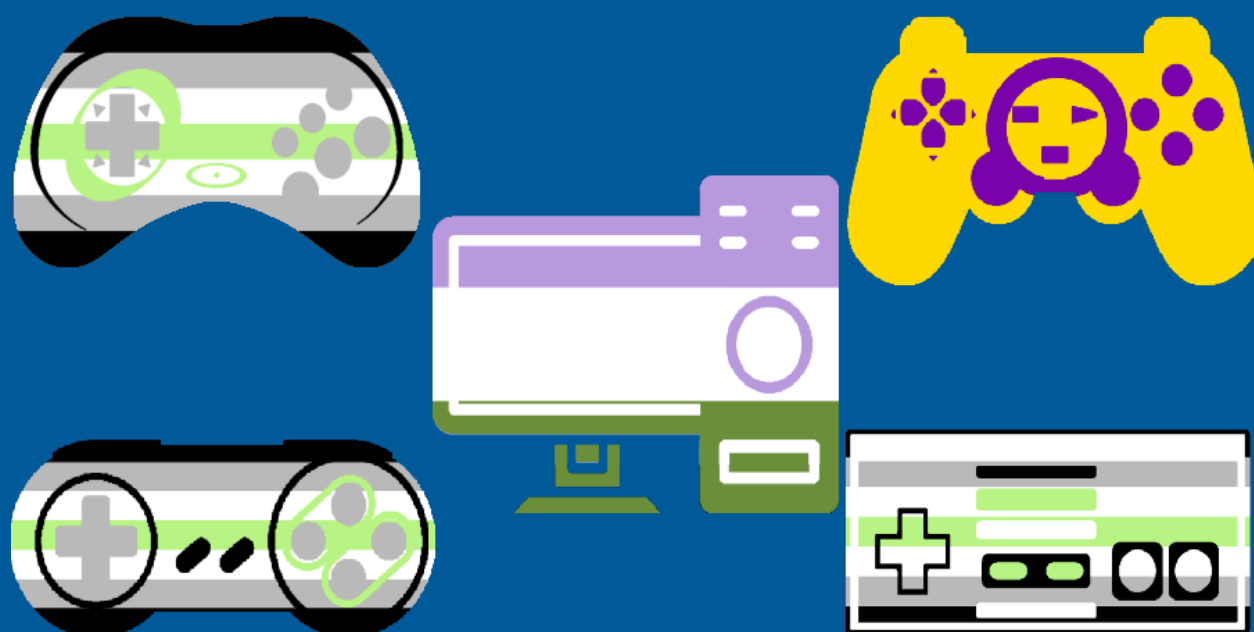
*Source material for this article can be found starting on page 39.*



*Catnap - "When lazing under morning sun, sometimes the best moments are spent hiding." Digital, Procreate. June 2024. Model: Anonymous. by Atethrie (@atethrie)*

# Agender, Genderqueer and Intersex Representation in Pre-2000 Video Games

By Daya (@dayasan)



My two-part article [Transgender Representation within Pre-2000 Video Games](#) unearthed a few mentions of non-transgender but also non-cisgender representation. I was originally going to include it as an extra paragraph within it, but I felt the topic deserved its own small article.

## POST-2000 OVERVIEW

Characters who do not fit into cisgender or transgender descriptions have even less representation in video games than transgender characters. There are some notable inclusions in mainstream video games more recently, this decade has a few in high profile games already. Notably Baldur's Gate III introducing the character Omeluum, who is a

Mindflayer, a cephalopod-like genderless species with it/its pronouns(1). Other non-binary characters also have also recently been introduced in Xenoblade Chronicles 3(2), Star Wars: Squadrons(3) and even Crash Team Rumble(4). Guilty Gear Strive(5) also retroactively made an existing character non-binary.

Games in the 2010's introduced a number of non-binary characters. Borderlands 3 introduced the openly non-binary character FL4K(6). Apex Legends(7) introduced Bloodhound, a Nordic-themed hunter/tracker character. Destiny 2 introduced Nimbus(8) and Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege introduced the series' first non-binary character Sens(9). The creator of Binding of Isaac's has also confirmed the main character is genderfluid(10).

Unlike transgender representation specifically, inclusion as applicable to this article was already established in the 2000's, a notable example Liara in Mass Effect(11), who is a member of a uni-gender species called the Asari. And there are the slightly problematic tribe of Magypsies in Mother 3, who seem to play into Japanese stereotypes(12). Other notable examples are the Elder Scrolls having intersex inclusion with the demigod Vivec(13) and Final Fantasy IX having the first non-binary playable character in the series(14).

## PRE-2000

The gaming media pre-2000 had almost no knowledge of this topic at all, not showing up as the punchline of a jokes, just being ignored entirely for the most part. This is despite there being a few possible examples of representation I will investigate below.

## TOAD



*Figure 1: Toad, as depicted in Super Mario Advance (55)*

A topic I have seen occasionally brought up is the gender of Toad, from Super Mario Bros. A 2014 interview with the producer of Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker was one of the things which started the debate, stating that '...Nintendo never really settled on a specific gender for the Toads...' and 'Toads are a genderless race that take on gendered characteristics'. This came out of what feels nowhere, I did not recall ever seeing anything hinting at this, or

this ever even being raised before, Toad (the character) implied to be a male member of a two-gender species, with Toadette being an obvious example of a female.

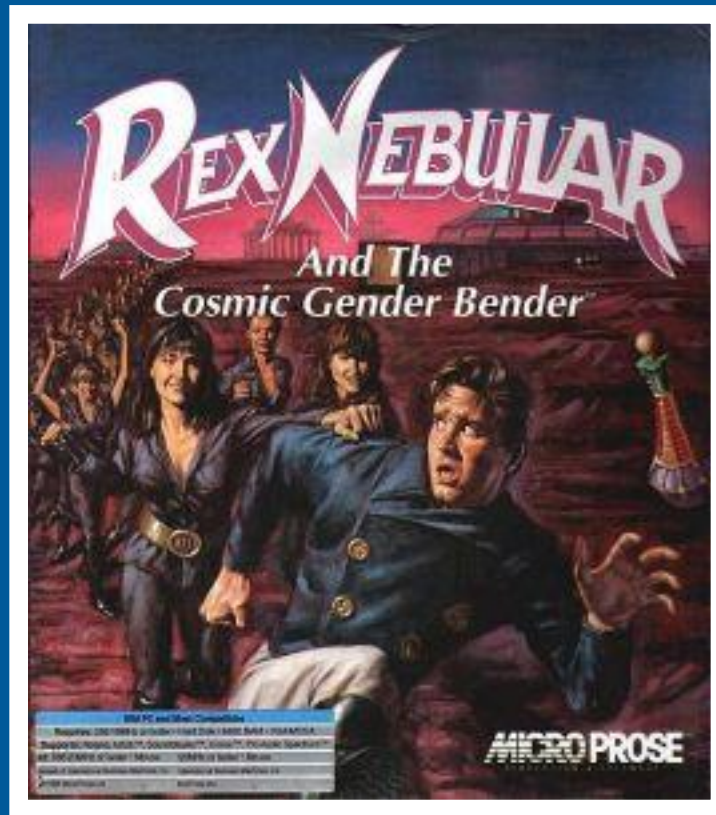
However, this is not an entirely new discussion, for example American video game magazine *Electronic Game Monthly* in 1997 having a multi page (light-hearted) article tackling the question of what gender the character Toad was. The argument for the former was ‘...overwrought behaviour leaned more towards the feminine...’ (15, p.157), and in *Mario Kart 64* his ‘...distinctly feminine voice’ (15, p.158). The argument for him being male was ‘...extreme strength and dexterity’ and Nintendo using male pronouns (15, p.158). Most of these arguments being somewhat outdated today, however I did check previous official Nintendo media pre-2000 to see what pronouns were being used, though of course wary of relying on this entirely due to the Birdo situation mentioned in the article I did for transgender representation.

The western manual for Toad’s first playable appearance, *Super Mario Bros. 2* in 1988, uses male pronouns to refer to him in the manual (16, p.8), as does the rebundle a year later in *Super Mario All-Stars* (17, p.15). The 1994 release of *Wario’s Woods* (18, p.16) and *Super Mario All-Stars & Super Mario World* (19, p.15) bundle also doing the same. The popular *Mario Party* in 1998 used male pronouns for Toad (20, p.15) as did other printed media such as the official *Mario Mania* book (21, p.12). In the *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!*, within a small segment Toad is called someone’s ‘son’, then their father and grandfather are referenced with multiple uses of male pronouns (22, 7:50-8:07). It is not just Toad and their family are gendered Toad’s pre-2000, Wooster is also gendered with male pronouns in the official comics<sup>xiv</sup>. With no indication at all of Toad, the character or the species, being genderless, Nintendo in fact used male pronouns repeatedly for multiple members of the species and mentioning male gender family members. All of this over multiple media types and over an extended period, the only indication of a lack of gender being the previously mentioned 2014 interview with a video game producer. Nintendo still today makes no indication of this, still using male pronouns such as on the Nintendo website itself (24). Due to this, Toad the character is still considered male, of a binary Toad species, the interviewee most likely making comments he had not the authority or judgement to make regarding assigning genderless status on the Toad species.

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<sup>xiv</sup> The comics did not have page numbers, however this is in the ‘Cloud Burst’ comic, on the first page (23)

## Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender



*Figure 2: Cover art for Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender(56)*

This incredibly named game came around in 1992, a point and click adventure released for the home computer. A female vs male war on a planet wiped out the males, and to ensure the species didn't die out the women invented a machine, called the Gender Bender(25) which would change the gender of some of the women for breeding purposes. The game's box notably saying that the effects of this gender changing machine are 'grotesque'(26), a word also used to describe it in a gaming magazine(27), another instead using the word 'monstrous'(28, p.353). This game shows up on some LGBT representation lists and I am not sure it should be. Yes, the game has a 'grotesque' gender changing machine, but that in no way makes the game's character any kind of LGBT, the game only once indicating anything other than horror from the main character about the change, when he once states 'I feel differently, I think differently, I act differently'(29, p.12), but overall nothing about this game really indicates the main character (or anyone else in it) is anything other than cisgender, the machine being developed to deal with a species-critical emergency, and not due to gender identity issues.

## Chrono Trigger



*Figure 3: Mayonne/Flea from Chrono Trigger (57)*

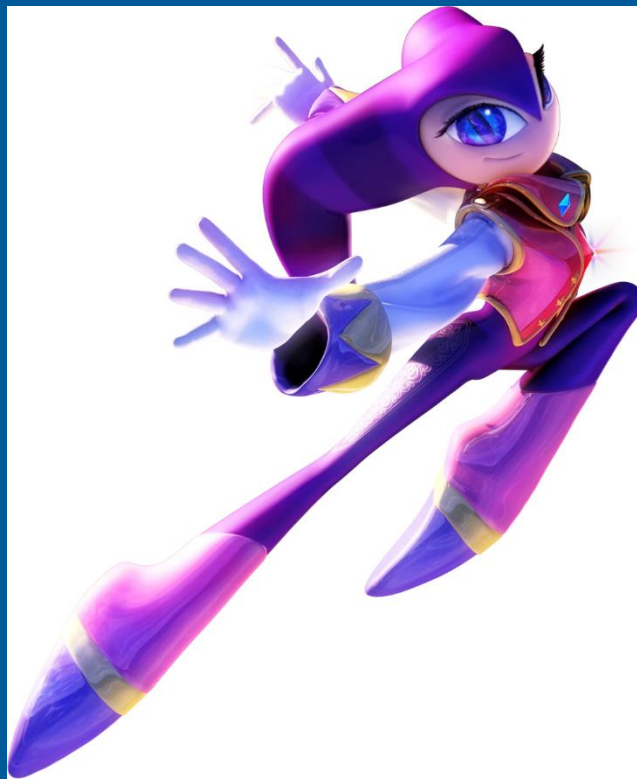
So far this article has covered Toad and the bizarre Gender Bender machine game, neither of which I consider real representation. Mercifully, 1995 brought along Chrono Trigger, a game for the SNES that IGN called (in 2008) the 2nd best video game ever made(30). The game was ported, with no changes, to the Playstation in 1999 to Japan, with further releases in the West and also for other consoles in future. It's inclusion here is down to a character called Mayonne in Japan, or Flea in North America. Flea turns up a few times as a minor boss throughout the game. Within the game itself, in the Japanese release 'Flea uses the personal pronoun -atai-, a colloquial feminine pronoun...' (31, p.72) as well as ending sentences with 'yone...which makes flea sound a bit girlier.' (31, p.119) both of which are lost in the American localisation. However Flea does retain an interesting bit of dialogue in translation, stating 'Male...female...what's the difference? Power is beautiful, and I've got the power.' (32, p.48), but in the same conversation outright advises 'Im a guy' (32, p.55).

In written media, the official Japanese strategy guide says Flea '...looks like a beautiful woman...but is a demon man.' (33, p.37). An American guide does not directly approach the topic of Flea's gender, but does place an (!) after every usage of a male pronoun when discussing Flea (34, p.42). More recently, Flea is referred to with many different terminologies, such as a 'man playing at womanhood' (32, p.72), and even when discussed

at length and called transgender, they are sometimes still referred to with male pronouns in the next sentence(35).

Flea has also been called Genderqueer(36) and in my opinion this is probably the best descriptive for them, as Flea themselves self-references with female pronouns, whilst also calling themselves a guy, whilst presenting feminine and combined with the ‘what’s the difference’ line of dialogue. However, it is a somewhat missed opportunity. Square Enix could have made the situation a little less vague and created a valuable moment of inclusion, at a time where there was very little. Instead Flea is left somewhat ambiguous, usually considered male-to-female transgender, a cross-dresser, or genderqueer, in my opinion the latter being the most likely given all the above.

### **Nights into Dreams**



*Figure 4: Nights, the main character of Nights into Dreams(58)*

1996 bought along one of the most unique games I have ever played, Nights into Dreams, released worldwide for the Sega Saturn in 1996. Not an easy game to describe. It’s easier to say it is kind of like a flying action-adventure game. The main character, Nights, is the reason for its inclusion here. For reference, Nights is humanoid, wearing predominantly purple clothes that seem a mix of royalty and jester. Nothing is given away in terms of gender from appearance. Checking the manual, it seemingly takes great effort to avoid gendering Nights, calling it ‘...a being...’(37, p.5), then stating ‘Whatever he, she or it is...’, with further references to Nights being equally genderless, such as ‘...a Nightopian...’ and ‘The creature...’(37, p.6). This already reads different to many instances of non-cisgender

representation, Sega has gone to great lengths to avoid gendering the character, and also specifically advising the player of it's unknown gender.

The European manual is equally vague<sup>xv</sup>, the Brazilian manual removing the He or She statement but does retain gender neutral pronouns(39, p.5). This then is a deliberate and sustained choice to not gender the main character, Nights. However the gaming media at the time presumably did not read the manual, extensively using male pronouns<sup>xvi</sup>, only once could I find a mention where it seemed like they went out of their way to not gender Nights, instead saying 'that being'(46), right after gendering another character as normal. However Sega became guilty of losing control of the gender narrative, its official Sega magazine using male pronouns (47, p.73). Additionally an official strategy guide by Prima Games also did so(48, p.8). A Nights comic series, licensed by Sega, used male pronouns on Nights on a few occasions(49, p.3 & p.5), this kind of being a slightly sour note for what was seemingly Sega making the character Nights Agender.

In 2007, the designer of the game, Takashi Iizuka, hosted a Q&A session with various gaming websites, in it he specifically states 'Nights is neutral, and therefore has no gender'(50). In a subsequent interview in 2010 with a Nights fan website, the programmer and producer, Yuji Naka, elaborated on this with 'Men or women, we all have dreams, so I thought that the residents in the dream world shouldn't have a gender...' and 'It is understandable that questions about gender would arise, since European languages have gender specific words '(51). These two interviews confirm Nights as an agender character, the interviews not from a single producer of a recent side-game like Toad was, but by two of the key people involved in the original Nights video game. The information given matching what was said in the manual and since then the game has gone through some re-releases, the media since catching onto the gender neutral status of the main character(52).

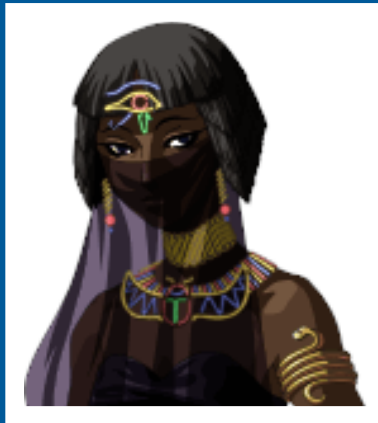
Nights was a genuine inclusion, the main character being agender and their unknown gender being prominently mentioned in the manual, the character design too being rather androgynous. No deliberate pushback was given but the male pronoun usage from third party media is unfortunate, possibly due to Sega themselves having some lapses over it. A single line of dialogue within the game though would have resolved this, a refusal to use pronouns or their lack of obvious gender being pointed out for example. The information from both the designer and the programmer-producer since does make sense with original information, but Nights does feel like a missed opportunity.

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<sup>xv</sup> It's English, German, Spanish, Italian and Dutch entries more or less mirroring the above statement (38, p.5, p.27, p.71, p.93 & p.115) though for reasons I do not understand, that seem on the whole unimportant, the French entry differs slightly and removed the 'He or She' statement(p.49).

<sup>xvi</sup> (II) Publications in USA(40, p.58), UK(41), Germany(42), France(43, p.74), Czech Republic(44) and Poland(45) all use male pronouns.

## Persona 2: Innocent Sin



*Figure 5: The Sumaru Genie(59)*

Appearing on my transgender inclusion list, albeit for the entirely wrong reasons due to being transphobic jokes, Persona 2: Innocent Sin is back again here. Released in 1999 in Japan for the Playstation by Atlus, possibly the video game company with the worst record regarding LGBT topics. In the game is a character called Sumaru Genie, a fortune teller who is a moderately important part of the story. The game introduces them as having a ‘ハスキーボイスが’, a husky voice. As far as I can see little else is mentioned (more on this later)

Whilst it falls outside the article parameters, I will skip forward to 2011, the game released outside Japan for the first time with a worldwide PSP release. It is here that in the western version, we see a character called Sumaru Genie, a fortune teller who is a moderately important part of the story. Upon first meeting her, the game introduces her as ‘A husky-voiced fortune teller’, the Japanese release also using the husky voice line (ハスキーボイスが) as it did in the original. However later in the game, she advises the player ‘Im actually an intersexed worker at a club which caters to that sort of thing’<sup>xvii</sup>. However, in both the PSP and the Playstation version of the Japanese release I have been unable to find this line of dialogue, however this does not mean it is not present, I possibly did not fulfill the criteria to unlock the dialogue.

I can find no mentions online of sourced Japanese specifics about what they are portrayed as in that release, Wikipedia however does state what is roughly translated to ‘At night, she works at a transsexual pub under the name "Anita".’<sup>xviii</sup>, whilst unsourced one can only imagine this information comes from somewhere in the Japanese release, no specific mention of intersex however. So the simplest answer is that Sumaru Genie is most likely male-to-female transgender in the Japanese release, and specifically noted as intersex in

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<sup>xvii</sup> (III) The exact phrase used is ‘ハスキーボイスが、美人を連想させる占い屋’

<sup>xviii</sup> (IV) the exact phrase used is ‘夜は「アニタ」という名前でニューハーフパブで働いている’

the western release. However this does make the assumption that intersex was used deliberately, in its intended meaning. Since the first transgender representation in the West, which was 1987, we have only seen transgender referred to within the game or manual as 'Travesti' (Transvestite) or Sexchanges, no mentions at all of either transsexual or transgender, transgender status being implied from conversation or retrospective information released. This being the case, it is somewhat possible Sumaru Genie is transgender, and Atlus localisation botched the word use (in either translation or as new dialogue). If translation, I would imagine this unlikely, the translation of the 'husky voice' line was kept fully intact, and I find it unlikely they would use the very specific term intersex over using the word transsexual for example.

At the very least, Sumaru Genie is intersex in the 2011 western release of this game. However if they are as such in the original 1999 Japanese release I cannot be sure, which is the scope of this article, it is certainly possible. Given Atlus' poor track record on LGBT issues, I see it as unlikely the localisation team came up with this as an entirely new line of dialogue, which would presumably make it present in the Japanese PSP release, especially as some content was cut in localisation for various reasons, I would deem it unlikely anything was added. The game's main story itself is more or less unchanged from the original, plenty of upgrades to graphics, voice and a new quest, but dialogue within the main game was the same, so again it is probable that dialogue in the Japanese re-release was in the original. If so this would make Sumaru Genie the first intersex video game character, instead of Vivec(13) in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, released in 2002.

## CONCLUSION

With transgender representation in pre-2000 video games being rather minimal, as per my 2 part article on the topic, it should maybe be little surprise that Agender, Genderqueer and Intersex representation is even rarer, absent almost entirely. Toad, first appearing in 1985 but first major appearance in 1987, being said to be the first due to what seems to be an over zealous producer giving an interview and calling Toad from *Super Mario Bros.* (both the person and the species) agender, which goes against previous and current information.

*Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* being said to be the first example of genderqueer representation, but I see no information indicating this is the case at all within the game or manual, merely some bad jokes and a gender changing machine invented for storyline purposes not relating to wanting to change gender, just a requirement to ensure species survival. Flea from *Chrono Trigger* has been called many things, but I agree with the description of Genderqueer due to comments within the game itself, making them most likely the first Genderqueer character in video games.

Nights was quite deliberately portrayed as agender, with Sega refusing (in almost every case) to use pronouns on them, even raising the issue of their gender not being known within the manual, then in more recent interviews confirming them to being agender/genderless, making them the first example of this. Sumaru Genie then, as discussed, may possibly be the first intersex character in a video game (and pre-2000) but

obtaining information about this is seemingly impossible and I have yet to recreate their line of dialogue in the original Japanese Playstation release which would confirm this.

Eagle-eyed readers may have noticed an omission of Kirby. However Kirby's differs in a few ways, their gender being teased repeatedly as 'unknown'(53) within Japan and not in fact agender/genderless. In addition to being gendered male in the West, for example in the manual for the first Kirby game(54, p.4). Kirby presumably does not show up on most LGBT representation in video game lists/articles for this reason. Nintendo teasing with the gender in Japan, gendering them male in the west and making no attempt to portray them as genderless throughout the 32 years of Kirby's existence.△

*Source material for this article can be found starting on page 40.*

# Happiness in Unhappy Times

By Poliwhirl (@poliwhirl61)



*Figure 1: The Summer 2024 Blue House Group Photo, featuring a nuclear war /Fallout theme.*

If you look at the news, there's not much to be happy about. There's a perpetual impending sense of doom lingering around every corner, behind every news update, beneath every social interaction, and flowing through every step you take. There is a threat of a new war every month, and updates on the current wars almost every day.

It's natural to for on-lookers to see someone enjoying their life while objectively terrible and preventable events are transpiring every day and harass them for of their apparent apathy towards the world's bad news. "How can you be happy when there's a war in..." or "How can you justify having a dinner like this when ..." or any other excuse for someone to rain on your parade.

It's due time to remind these perpetual worry warts that making oneself unhappy does not make the world a better place. Emotionally self-flagellating yourself will never improve the world, it will never feed a child; it will never un-drop a bomb. Perpetually weighing yourself down with self-imposed burdens from across the globe does a disservice to those afflicted by the worst that the planet has to offer.

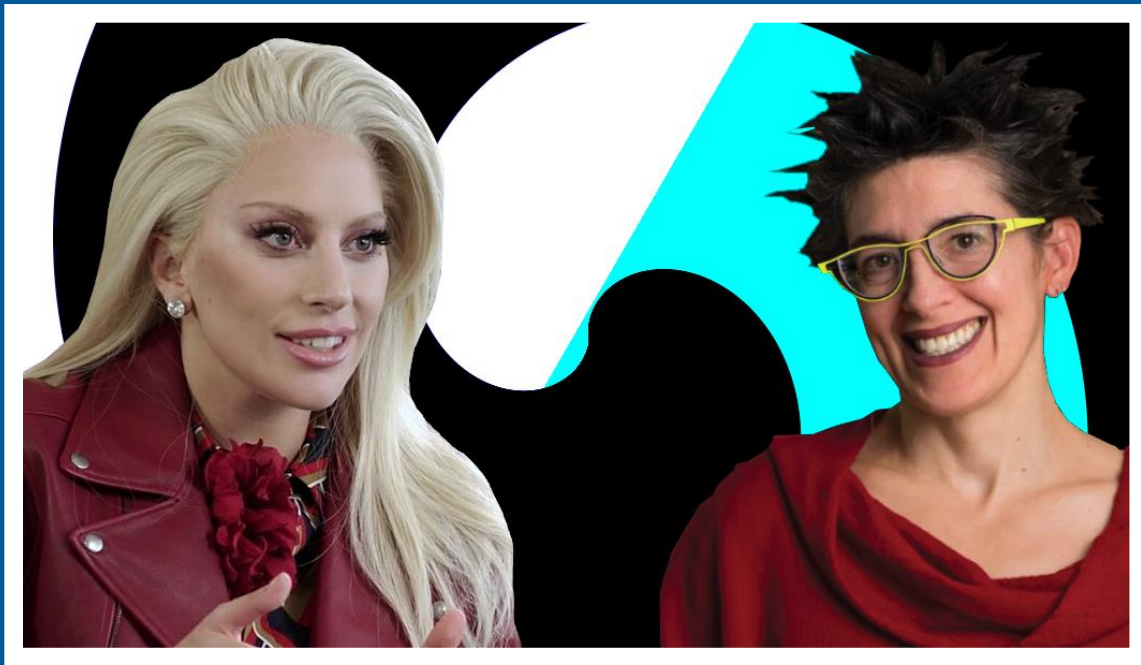
It's much like the "Thoughts and Prayers" approach to activism. A tragedy happens, and out of the woodwork, doves come out to say that they're keeping the victims in their Thoughts and Prayers. This is always just as effective as doing nothing at all. So too, is the cousin of the thoughts and prayers method of activism. This method involves consistently worrying about tragedies across the world, and allowing these tragedies to interfere with not only their own happiness, but the efforts of everyone else to enjoy their lives. And this helps everyone just the same as Thoughts and Prayers. It's perhaps even worse, as not only does it objectively do nothing to assist the situation, but makes the person who takes on this emotional worry burden miserable in the process.

Embracing a small daily dose of absurdity is a perfectly healthy way to stay sane. Whether you're worried about a potential World War III, a disastrous climate, a collapsing economy, or any other horrific event, choosing to remain happy is the best first step to keep yourself sane.

And that's exactly what this season's group photo is meant to be about. It was billed to everyone as a "Summer BBQ" image. Of course, that is what's happening: it's Summer, and everyone in the photo is getting barbecued. We're not pretending that no one is not in danger. Some are safer than others, some are just going to get unlucky with whatever happens in life. At least in the face of whatever dangers and tragedies happen, you'll have been alive, enjoyed your time the best that you could, and perhaps a little record of your happiness will still survive.△

# The “Born This Way Argument” & Why We Still Need It

by Mia (@Zorceress)



*Figure 1: Lady Gaga, co-writer and performer of “Born This Way” and Dr. Lisa Diamond*

In February of 2011, an obscure pop artist named Stefani Germanotta, best known for her work as “Girl At Swimming Pool #2” in *The Sopranos*, released a song called “*Born This Way*,” the title track of her then upcoming album. The song is loud and ostentatious with booming futuristic synths and a thumping bass drum. What really makes the song unique, and what has allowed it to stand the test of time, is not the instrumentation, but the lyrics. For example, here is the chorus:

*I'm beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret, just love yourself, and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way (born this way)*

These lyrics reflect a sentiment that queer activists have been expressing for decades, generations in fact: That LGBTQ people do not choose their orientation or identity, and that our queerness is an innate and intrinsic part of ourselves.

However, the “born this way” slogan seems to have fallen out of favor in recent years. There are some who view it as counter-intuitive to achieving full queer liberation. Before I had encountered this line of thought, I had always taken the idea that we were born this way as a given. To my knowledge, it was something that the queer community and our allies had collectively agreed upon. The only ones I could ever see disagreeing with it were the bigots and fundamentalists, whose opinions I felt were unworthy of any serious consideration. To see fellow queer folk disputing the “born this way” narrative was understandably rather shocking.

After some thought, I realized that I shouldn’t be surprised. The queer community is not a monolith, and has continually argued amongst itself on almost all aspects of what it means to be queer. Lesbians have disputed the validity of he/him lesbians, trans people have argued over whether you need dysphoria to be trans, and just about everyone has shared their yearly hot takes about kink at Pride. One could argue that the controversies behind these issues are a distraction from full queer liberation, which may be true to a certain extent.

Ultimately however, discourse and debate are necessary for understanding not just queerness itself, but other people’s relationships with it. In fact, Blue House itself is a good example of this diversity of thought. Everyone within has their own internal narrative through which they understand their identity. These narratives may be different from you or mine, but this does not make them any less valid. For this reason, it would be best to explain why someone would dispute the born this way argument before defending it.

## **DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH**

In 2018, TEDx released a talk by Dr. Lisa Diamond, a professor at the University of Utah who specializes in developmental psychology, health psychology, and gender studies. The talk is titled *“Why the ‘born this way’ argument doesn’t advance LGBTQ equality,”* and it is probably my first exposure to this line of thinking. In her talk, Dr. Diamond’s provides three reasons for her she has for her position, which I will now do my best to summarize:

1. The “born this way” argument is inaccurate, because orientation is fluid, and saying people are born queer invalidates those who discover their sexuality later in life. In addition, sexuality is impacted by factors that aren’t genetic.
2. The “born this way” argument is not legally useful for forwarding queer rights, because when a court is deciding whether a trait should be protected from discrimination, the immutability of that trait is not the sole or even the most important factor. What’s more important to the courts is whether that discrimination is rational and moral or not.

3. The “born this way” argument is unjust, because telling anti-LGBTQ bigots that “We didn’t choose this, it’s not our fault” implies that it is a fault in the first place and that queer people should be pitied instead of hated.

Now let me make this point very clear: Dr. Diamond has a PhD in this stuff, I don’t. She was the Editor-in-Chief of the APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology. She earned her PhD in 1999, and has been doing work and research in her field for longer than I’ve even been alive. At the end of the day, I’m just a trans girl with an internet connection, and I can’t speak with the same authority as her. Any authority I can speak with comes solely from the strength of my arguments. However, someone can be very well qualified and still be incorrect or have a skewed perspective. I have noticed some gaps in her arguments, and I firmly believe there are aspects to this debate that she did not address. Using Diamond’s three points as an outline, I will go through each of them and do my best to refute them.

## COUNTERPOINT ONE

**The “born this way” argument is inaccurate, because orientation is fluid, and saying people are born queer invalidates those who discover their sexuality later in life. In addition, sexuality is impacted by factors that aren’t genetic.**

So right away, there’s a kernel of truth here. Yes, there is no one factor that determines someone’s sexuality. There is no one singular “gay gene.” In reality, it’s most likely a bunch of genes, as well as epigenetic and possibly environmental factors as well. In 2022, the European Molecular Biology Organization published a review citing various studies of homosexuality from the last 30 years. While the cited studies present various factors that possibly determine one’s sexuality, the review concludes that none of these factors are a smoking gun. Rather, it is most likely a mix of all of those factors, be they genetic, epigenetic, or environmental that determine one’s sexuality. As Diamond says in her talk, “If sexuality were totally locked down by genes, well then if you had two identical twins and one twin was gay, the other twin would be gay 100% of the time... Your genes do not provide the last word on every sexual feeling you’re going to have.”

In addition, there very much are people who only discover they’re queer later in life, and as Diamond says, such people are unfortunately often subject to scrutiny. “People will say things like ‘How could they not have known all this time?’ ‘Are they sure that they’re really gay?’ Just imagine how it feels to hear that from someone that you just came out to.” This is a real problem, and something I sympathize with. I myself only realized I was trans around the time I started high school, and when I came out to my parents they were

initially skeptical. I certainly didn't fit the narrative of a trans girl who played with Barbies and wore dresses from a young age. As far as they were concerned, I had shown zero signs of being trans and this was a very sudden change. This leads to an important question though: *Does this mean I suddenly became trans, or was I trans all along?* What if it was merely my perception of my gender that changed, and not my gender itself?

I feel that Diamond ultimately conflates the fluidity of identity with the fluidity of one's knowledge or perception of it. This is not to say that identity cannot be fluid at all, but a distinction between the two must be made. I used to think I was a gay boy, then a bisexual boy, and now I know I'm a bisexual girl. That does not necessarily mean I was ever gay or a boy. While I may have thought I was those things, there were definitely some signs that I wasn't either of those things. For example, I thought I was gay because I had a crush on another boy at school as a kid, even though I had a crush on a girl before. People are wrong about themselves all the time, and that's okay. In fact, it's inevitable! We spend so much of our lives trying to figure out who we are, and realizing you were wrong is an important step on the road to self-discovery.

This isn't to exclude anyone whose identities or sexualities are intrinsically fluid. While there's a lot of trans women, myself included, who see themselves as always having been women, there are some who disagree with that notion. Some trans women see themselves as having been a boy, and are now no longer. It is no one's place to tell those people they're wrong about themselves. The issue is that regardless of whether identity is fluid or not, Diamond's arguments never address if there is a difference between perception and identity.

## COUNTERPOINT TWO

**The “born this way” argument is not legally useful for forwarding queer rights, because when a court is deciding whether a trait should be protected from discrimination, the immutability of that trait is not the sole or even the most important factor. What's more important to the courts is whether that discrimination is rational and moral or not.**

Again, there is some truth here. Most of the legal victories we've won aren't based on whether our queerness is inherent. After all, even if it was definitively proved that we are born queer, there would still be people who discriminate against us. Racist people exist even though race is something you're born with, for instance. Overall, this is the point I have the least issue with.

That being said, this does not mean the “born this way” argument isn't useful for advancing queer rights at all. In 2018, the analytics company Gallup held a poll asking Americans if sexual orientation was determined by nature or nurture. This was not the first time they had asked this question, the first time being in 1977 when the gay rights movement was in

its infancy. At that time, only 13% of the sample size said people were born gay, with 56% saying that it was the result of upbringing or environment. This is in stark contrast with the results in 2018, where 50% of the sample size agreed people are born gay or lesbian. This increased percentage is largely made of those who are on average more sympathetic to LGBTQ causes - *“young adults (aged 18 to 34), college graduates, Democrats, liberals and those who seldom or never attend weekly religious services.”* Of that percentage, 88% of them supported same-sex marriage.

This data suggests that the “born this way” argument has been an effective means of garnering acceptance for garnering support. However, I don’t believe this is the only reason it is useful from a rhetorical standpoint. Namely, I believe it attacks one of the central cornerstones of queerphobic ideology; that queerness is not an innate or inextricable characteristic.

In Episode #1895 of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, Rogan interviews Matt Walsh, a conservative Christian pundit associated with The Daily Wire. To say Walsh is a controversial figure would be a grave understatement. He is one of the most prominent opponents of transgender rights, making him rather infamous in the eyes of the queer community. In the episode, Rogan actually challenges Walsh on the subject of homosexuality, asking the following question: “Why would God make people gay in the first place?”

Walsh seems to struggle to answer this question, and Rogan rephrases and expands on the question several times before Walsh says that he does not believe God make people be born gay, but that he does not know where that proclivity comes from. *“To say that someone’s born gay,”* Walsh elaborates, *“I have issues with that that go beyond theology, because now you’re talking about... If you’re born with any sexual proclivity, then that means we’re talking about gay infants.”*

There are many problems with Walsh’s answer. For one, he seems to believe that having an innate sexuality means that that sexuality will be expressed from the moment of birth. The bigger problem, however, is that Walsh neglects to provide any alternative answers as to why people are gay. I believe this is because he does not actually want to. He does not want to consider the possibility that people are born gay because of the problems it presents for his ideology.

For people such as Walsh who believe queerness is a sin, being queer is something one *does* rather than something one *is*. It is a verb, not an adjective. It is not an inextricable part of one’s self. If it is however, what does that mean for Walsh’s worldview? If gay people are born that way, then why would homosexuality be a sin? Why would a benevolent God make people that way just to say that it’s wrong? For people like Walsh, these questions present some disturbing religious implications. Dangerous, even. If religious fundamentalists are wrong about homosexuality being a sin... What else could they be wrong about?

Of course, not all who oppose queerness do so for religious reasons. Moving away from the topic of sexuality to gender, there is the self-described gender critical movement, or TERFs

(trans-exclusionary radical feminists) as their detractors call them. They are a largely secular and oftentimes liberal movement that opposes what they call “gender ideology,” the conception that gender and sex are separate. For them, gender identity is a misogynistic construct that undermines the importance of sex and sex-based rights. While TERFs have been willing to collaborate with conservatives in the past, it is important to distinguish them as two separate ideologies. To claim that a TERF is transphobic in the same ways and for the same reasons as someone like Matt Walsh (or even someone further to the right) would be at once both extreme and irresponsible. However, this does not mean that queerness (specifically transness, in this instance) being innate does not present similar problems for gender critical ideology.

On May 25th, 2022, gender-critical author Helen Joyce appeared on *Wine With Women*, a podcast posted by fellow gender-critical figure Helen Staniland, and made a statement that prompted some controversy. At the 4:12 minute mark of the episode, Joyce says the following:

*“We can’t win this by saying, you know, there’s sixty X million people in this country and we’ve got to persuade all of them or a great majority of them. We’ve got to get through to the decision-makers. And in the meantime, while we’re trying to get through to the decision makers, we’ve got to try to limit the harm. And that means reducing or keeping down the number of people who transition. And that’s for two reasons – one of them is that every one of those people is a person who’s been damaged. But the second one is every one of those people is basically, you know, a huge problem to a sane world. Like, If you’ve got people – whether they’re transitioned, whether they’re happily transitioned, whether they’re unhappily transitioned, whether they’re detransitioned – if you’ve got people who’ve dissociated from their sex in some way, every one of those people is someone who needs special accommodation in a sane world where we re-acknowledge the truth of sex. And I mean the people who’ve been damaged by it – the children who’ve been put through this – those people deserve every accommodation we can possibly make, but every one of them is a difficulty, you know? And I mean I know that sounds heartless, I’m trying to say exactly the opposite of sounding heartless. I’m saying every one of those people for fifty, sixty, seventy years is going to need things that the rest of us don’t need because the rest of us are just our sex. So the fewer of those people there are, the better in the same world that I hope we will reach.”*

Almost immediately, these comments were accused of being genocidal rhetoric, or at the very least an endorsement of conversion therapy. This is rather understandable from the perspective of a trans person, but Joyce herself most likely does not feel that way. When she calls for reducing the number of people that transition, to her that is the equivalent of deradicalization or cult deprogramming. Transness is, as she would describe it, a social contagion. In fact, gender-critical ideology hinges on this belief. To rephrase a point from earlier, they believe being trans is something you *believe* and not something you *are*.

...But what if it is? If gender identity is a real and natural phenomenon, that creates some serious problems for the gender-critical movement. It robs them of a great deal of legitimacy and plausible deniability. The TERFs want to portray themselves as defending

women and girls from a dangerous movement that seeks to harm their sex-based rights, but transness being innate means that's not true. It would mean that they are actively trying to make life harder for a group of people who can't help being who they are. It would mean they're just like any other bigot.

Neither Matt Walsh nor Helen Joyce want people to think of them as irrational bigots, but the average person will if they believe being gay or trans is something you're born with. People will make comparisons to other forms of bigotry based around inherent characteristics. They will see Helen Joyce calling for reducing the amount of people who transition and think of the Third Reich or Jim Crow. As one could imagine, this would not be beneficial to their cause.

While Dr. Diamond may be right that the "born this way" argument isn't useful from a legal standpoint, to say that it "doesn't advance LGBT equality" as the title of her talk says would be inaccurate. It is incredibly effective at both garnering acceptance of queer people, as well as delegitimizing the ideologies of those who would stand against us.

### COUNTERPOINT THREE

**The "born this way" argument is unjust, because telling anti-gay or anti-trans bigots that "We didn't choose this, it's not our fault" implies that it is a fault in the first place and that queer people should be pitied instead of hated.**

According to Dr. Diamond, the born this way argument was first used:

*"over 50 years ago, when the hatred of gay people was more widespread, so it seemed impossible at the time for us to argue 'Hey, we're not disgusting; we're actually awesome!' So instead, we said 'We didn't choose this, we were born this way. You can't punish us for something that is not our fault!' Now, do you see how that argument just goes along with the notion that being LGBT is a fault, that it's inherently sad and tragic? It's like we have this terrible disease, and we need to be pitied instead of punished."*

Out of all the points Diamond made in her TEDx Talk, this is probably the only one that genuinely irks me. This is not only a misunderstanding of the slogan, but also disrespectful to the activists who used it. When queer activists shouted "We're born this way", it was never meant as an apology. To prove this, it would be best to go over the history of the phrase. In order to do that, we need to talk about a woman named Bunny Jones.

Burnetta "Bunny" Jones was an African-American hairdresser, born in Harlem in 1917. She had spent the 1950's and 60's building up a chain of beauty salons and, as one could imagine, encountered many queer people along the way. Through her many friendships with gay people, she came to both admire their unapologetic nature and resent the

mistreatment they faced. In a 1976 interview with *The Advocate*, she stated that *“I began to feel that gays are more suppressed than blacks, Chicanos or other minorities. You hear of great designers or famous hairdressers, and that’s about as far as society will let gays go.”*

In 1965, Bunny did something one wouldn’t expect of a hair salon magnate; she decided to expand into the music business. She established several small record labels throughout the latter half of the decade, but they all only released one or two singles each. One might think this means Bunny’s musical endeavors were unsuccessful because of this, but considering the amount of competition she must have had in New York City, it is impressive that she was able to release anything. There is also the fact that not only did she have a songwriting credit on every single put out by her labels, she has credits for songs on larger labels like Buddah and A&M as well. Clearly, Bunny Jones knew how to write a catchy tune.

In 1971, she undertook her greatest effort yet; Astral Sound Studios, Inc. Though not her first record label, it was by far her most ambitious. She spent \$350,000 on a facility with three separate recording studios, each equipped with top-of-the-line equipment. The effort Bunny put into the studio was so impressive, that *Billboard* called it *“the first major recording studio owned and operated by a black woman.”* With this new label, Bunny hoped to provide opportunities for minority groups, hoping to uplift them and allow them to reach positions they otherwise would not have.

In a way, that is exactly what she would accomplish. Bunny remembered the queer folks that she had met in her life. She remembered their unapologetic nature, their perseverance in the face of hate and repression. It inspired her to eventually rename Astral Sound to Gaiee Records, explaining later to *The Advocate* that she wanted to *“give gay people a label they could call home.”*

And so, she decided to write a song about it. A song called “I Was Born This Way”, which begins with the following verse:

*I’m walking through life in nature’s disguise  
You laugh at me and you criticize  
Just because I’m happy  
I’m carefree  
And I’m gay  
Yes I’m gay  
‘Taint a fault, it’s a fact  
I was born this way*

There is something to be said about the fact that the *“born this way”* slogan was popularized by a song written by a straight woman. One could make the argument that the song is Bunny speaking for (or perhaps over) the gay community. This is a reasonable concern to have, given the spotty history of cishet writers representing queer people and their experiences. Considering the time period it was written however, as well as Bunny’s deep unabiding respect for gay people, this song is an extremely radical statement.

It is perhaps because of its radical nature that Bunny had a hard time searching for someone to actually sing it. It was only after seeing a Long Island production of the musical *Hair* years later that Bunny had finally found her singer, a young man named Charles Harris. Six years prior, Harris was a 17-year old gay black kid hanging out at a discotheque on Times Square called the Sanctuary. It was that he and his friend Nelson heard tell that a riot had broken out at the Stonewall Inn, and the two friends rushed over to Sheridan Square to see what was going on. “We caught the whole deal,” Harris would explain 50 years later. *“The bottle-throwing, the cops retreating—it was amazing. We had no idea at that moment that it was the beginning of a revolution.”*

Perhaps Harris was thinking of that day when he was recording “*I Was Born This Way*” using the stage name of Valentino. Perhaps he thought of the drag queens being dragged into police cars as he sang those words. Perhaps this song was the moment Valentino realized the importance of what he saw that hot summer day. No one can say for sure. What is known is that Bunny Jones believed in the importance of this song. She would sell 15,000 copies of the record on her own, largely out of the trunk of her car.

It is through Bunny’s efforts that the song caught the attention of Berry Gordy, founder of Motown Records. Motown hoped to encroach into the queer market, and Gaiee Records seemed to be the perfect opportunity for them. Gordy purchased the entire record label, allowing “*I Was Born This Way*” to reach a much wider audience. The single’s performance didn’t satisfy Motown however, so it would unfortunately be Gaiee Records’ sole release.

This was not the end of “*I Was Born This Way*” however. In 1977, Motown released a new version recorded by a gay gospel singer named Carl Bean. This disco-tinged version of the song was much more popular, and it is this version that Lady Gaga cited as an inspiration for her “*Born This Way*.”

Considering the history of the “born this way” slogan, Dr. Diamond’s reading of it as an apologetic plea for pity is both ahistorical and dangerous. It frames the queer activists of the 60’s and 70’s as followers of respectability politics, constantly apologizing for themselves in the hopes of being accepted. This is a complete denial of history, as it does not acknowledge the unapologetic nature of those activists. While there were certainly activists who did their best to appeal to heteronormative society, that was not the case for the majority of them, and it certainly wasn’t the intent of the “born this way” slogan either.

## ON THE RIGHT TRACK

The “born this way” argument came into being at a different point in queer history, but this does not mean it is obsolete or incompatible with a modern-day understanding of queerness. It is a steadfast declaration that we are who we are, and that we cannot be changed. I believe it is still an incredibly important slogan, and that we should be using it just as we did in the past. However, for all that I and Dr. Diamond disagree on, she makes a rather salient closing point in her closing statement:

*“In the end, how and why and when and for how long someone is LGBT may be fascinating to scientists like me, but it should have no bearing on whether their parents love and accept them, and it certainly should have no bearing on public policy.*

*... We all deserve acceptance or equality. We all deserve equality; whether you're gay, or straight, or bi, or trans, or all of the above, or none of the above, or whether you figured it out 20 years ago, or one year ago, or today during this talk. Our genes are not the issue: it is our lives that are at stake. Either we are a society that protects and defends all individual's autonomy, or we're not.*

*... So the next time you're talking to a friend, or a neighbor, or a teacher, or a doctor, or a politician, or a mother, and they say 'I support LGBT equality because, you know, they're born that way,' I hope that you'll say 'I support LGBT equality just because it's the right thing to do.'"*

I think she's absolutely right here. In fact, I think we're both right. While there may still be a place for the "born this way" argument in today's world, the inherent nature of our queerness should not be what determines our worth and dignity. Our worth and dignity should come from the fact that no matter how we are born, at the end of the day, we are still people. ♡

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Lastly, I would like to thank all of you for reaching the end of this article. For that, I am eternally grateful. Rest assured that this will not be the last contribution I make to Blue House Monthly.

Until then though, feel free to let me know what you thought of my article! You can dm me on Discord (@Zorceress), but I'm also in VC very regularly so you can talk to me about it then too!

Until next time!~

Mia

*Source material for this article can be found starting on page 43.*

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Blue House is a trans-centric, LGBT online community established October 2020. Blue House Monthly is the bi-monthly webzine created, edited, and published by our community.

Link to Blue House: <https://discord.gg/tttt>

Link to Blue House Monthly Site:  
<https://bluehouse.lgbt/blue-house-monthly>

Link to Blue House Server Status:  
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