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“It’s Important to Show Your Colors”:

Counter-Heteronormative Embodiment in a Metropolitan Community Church

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The regulation of human bodies is central to organized religion, though it has received little academic attention (Smith 2008). Religious traditions have rich histories of controlling, for example, what we eat, what we wear, how we move our bodies, how we sing, and with whom we have sex. Religious leaders seem to understand the importance the body has in marking oneself as a member of a religious culture. Because religious identities, like all identities, are humanly created fictions, religious cultures regulate bodies in order to socially mark who is an insider or outsider. Thus, when worshipers adopt the embodiment codes of their faith and imbue them with meaning, they in turn feel more connected to their religious communities and traditions.

But what if your bodily practices contradict the religious tradition you grew up in? You could decide something is wrong with you and commit to changing your embodiment practices. If you decide changing is not possible or worth it, however, others may turn against you and make an example out of your bodily transgressions. While overtly challenging a church’s culture might create change, it could also lead to further isolation and stigmatization. Under such conditions, you might decide the organization is not for you and leave. This is exactly what some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) Christians have done.

The exclusion of LGBT people from some traditional Christian churches reflects these organizations’ embodiment norms regarding what kind of bodies should be physically intimate

and how people ought to embody gender. Christian churches often assert that God made men and women so differently that they should not act or look like each other. Despite such differences, so goes the story, God only approves of sexual unions between men and women. These churches often have other bodily restrictions targeting heterosexuals: no sex before or outside of marriage and no birth control or abortion. Moreover, Christian authorities generally define the violation of these prescriptions as physical transgressions, sins of the flesh, or bodily threats to the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and the patriarchal family (Moon 2004).

Such rules of embodiment reflect what social theorists call “heteronormativity” (Warner 1991). Heteronormativity refers to an ideology that assumes men and women are not just physically different, but that they are designed to be *socially* different. According to this ideology, girls and women should act in ways culturally defined as “feminine,” which includes being passive, nurturing, and appearance-oriented. In a complimentary fashion, boys and men should be assertive, emotionally reserved, and competitive. Also key to heteronormativity is a hierarchy of acceptable sexual behaviors: heteronormativity deems sex between males and females natural and normal, and sex between two males or two females unnatural and abnormal. Thus for most traditional Christians, heterosexual marriage and the patriarchal family represent the primary expressions of God’s will upon earth (Bartkowski 2001).

Heteronormativity is a way of thinking that may promote and justify socially created inequality between women and men as well as between heterosexuals and sexual minorities. Having faith in this ideology, for example, may lead politicians to deny equal rights to LGBT individuals, men to believe women should attend to their emotional and physical needs (but not vice versa), and people to believe violence against women and sexual minorities is sometimes

appropriate. True believers of heteronormativity can act in ways that cause others pain because the ideology itself provides an emotional shield. More specifically, because the ideology defines gender and sexual non-conformists as unnatural and immoral, adopting heteronormativity enables one to more easily ignore the suffering of those socially defined—and treated—as inferior.

Some Christian churches' tendency to promote a heteronormative worldview shapes how they respond to LGBT members. Church authorities often tell LGBT members that they must change their gendered and sexual desires or leave the church (Wolkomir 2006). Although 8.3% of Protestants and 8.4% of Catholics report engaging in homosexual activity at some point in their lives (Turner et al. 2005), many still assume that one cannot identify as a Christian *and* a sexual minority. LGBT communities have responded by fighting to make some churches more tolerant, and creating their own Christian organizations that define Christian and LGBT identities as compatible. These organizations represent a serious challenge to heteronormative assumptions permeating traditional Christianity (Moon 2004).

Research on LGBT Christians typically focuses on how they integrate their sexual and religious identities. Members of the gay Christian support group Wolkomir (2006) studied, for example, worked to construct gay-affirming interpretations of scripture, which offered its members relief from the shame and fear of living a life they previously defined as sinful (see also Thumma 1991). McQueeney (2009), however, found that many sexual minorities downplayed their sexual identities relative to their Christian identities, and emphasized discourses of monogamy, manhood, and motherhood to normalize LGBT Christian identities. McQueeney (2009) noted that while these members subverted heteronormativity by making it acceptable to

be sexual minorities *and* Christians, they simultaneously reinforced heteronormative family values and gender roles.

While these studies show how people use language to integrate sexual and religious identities, they neglect the importance of embodiment. In addition to language, we use our bodies to signify identities. By decorating our bodies with clothing and accessories, using nonverbal gestures, and managing interpersonal touching and personal space, we create images of who we believe ourselves to be (Goffman 1959; Stone 1981). Gimlin (2001) refers to how we use or mold our bodies to signify ourselves as social objects as “bodywork.”

In this chapter, we examine how members of a southeastern Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) we refer to as Shepherd Church (all names hereafter are pseudonyms) employed their bodies to resist heteronormativity and integrate their sexual and religious identities. Composed of over 300 congregations and 43,000 members, the MCC is an international LGBT Christian denomination, which arose in response to traditionalists’ marginalization of sexual minorities. Shepherd Church was in some ways unique during the period of observation because it did not possess a full time pastor. After losing their former pastor to another organization, members collectively managed the everyday operations of their congregation. As such, members ran the church themselves by taking turns preaching sermons, organizing events, and maintaining the property. Although they felt like second-class citizens in other churches, members created a safe and affirming space to worship outside of the closet.

Methods

We learned how members of Shepherd Church embodied their identities through ethnographic methods. As part of a larger project (Sumerau 2010), the first author spent over 18

months observing and participating in worship services, commemorative events, Bible studies, administrative meetings, choir practices, and a wide variety of social activities with members of the church. While in these situations, he jotted notes on what transpired, tape-recorded activities, and later used these resources to type up more complete fieldnotes. He also conducted over 250 informal interviews with members before and after events. The vast majority of the 80 active members were white, middle class, and middle aged. After spending fifteen years meeting in rental spaces and homes, they collectively purchased their first permanent church property just before fieldwork began. As the bisexual child of a gay man, the ethnographer was immediately welcomed into the church and treated as a friend and confidant.

We began our analysis by asking how members of the church embodied their sexual and religious identities in the course of their social interactions. After comparing and contrasting our answers to these questions, three main embodiment processes emerged, which we term queering fashion, embracing intimacy, and transgenering demeanor. Gradually we came to see how members' embodied practices subverted traditional heteronormative Christian culture.

Counter-Heteronormative Embodiment

What follows is an analysis of how members of Shepherd Church embodied their sexual and religious identities in ways that symbolically resisted heteronormative conceptions of Christianity. First, we show how members queered fashion, which refers to how they used fashion to counter the traditional gender binary and signify pride as sexual minorities. Second, we examine how members embraced intimacy, by which we mean how members used their bodies to physically connect with one another in ways that repudiated heteronormative rules, as well as more general embodiment norms restricting person-to-person contact. Third, we analyze

how members transgendered demeanor, which involved men using their bodies in feminine ways and women using their bodies in masculine ways.

Queering Fashion

Traditional Christian churches, like all institutions, have informal rules surrounding how one fashions the body. While there may be some regional variation, traditional Christians typically emphasize conformity and reservation in the decoration of the body, especially in terms of gender. Church traditions dictate that members wear their “Sunday Best” to show respect for their religious community. Members of Shepherd Church, however, fashioned their bodies in ways that expressed opposition to such traditions. We call such bodywork “queering fashion” because it subverted heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

While members did not talk about their dress as “resisting” heteronormativity per se, they did recognize that it contradicted what one generally finds in the “stuffy buildings” of traditional churches. Laney, for example, explained that coming to Shepherd Church “can be a bit of an adjustment” because,

[Y]ou grow up in stuffy buildings where everyone wears the same suit, dress, and Sunday Best each week, but it doesn't feel right. Then you come here and there may be men in dresses or women in baseball jerseys. It just shows there are different ways to be Christian and we don't all look the same. Rather than just trying to look the same, we just look for God.

By defining wearing one's “Sunday Best” as an exercise of conformity and emphasizing the freedom to wear clothes culturally associated with the opposite sex, Laney echoed others in valuing personal style. Statements like this also implied that subverting cultural expectations

surrounding gendered clothing was accepted, and focusing on God was more important than one's clothing. Ronald made a similar point before an evening service:

You like my new gym shorts? (He chuckles.) My legs are going to look good when I'm up there reading the scripture. Man, I don't know. (He chuckles and tugs on my sport coat.) I went with my sister to her church, and everyone looked so uncomfortable in their pretty dress suits, I just don't get it. Look at Jesus, the man roamed around in sandals talking to the poor and the marginalized. You think he would really care what type of suit you wear to church? I think we have the right idea, just come out and express yourself . . . focus your energy on God rather than looking like you've done well.

By defining traditional Sunday fashion as "uncomfortable" and something Jesus would not care about, Ronald asserted that Christians should instead focus on their faith. As Martina told a visitor minutes after a service ended: "Dressing in more casual, comfortable clothes is a small way of making the church feel more like a place [where] we really belong; it's kind of like that old hymn about coming to God just as you are." As all of these quotes imply, members defined their fashion choices as reflecting not only their personal preferences, but also their Christian identities.

Members also fashioned their bodies to explicitly convey their identities as LGBT individuals. For example, as the ethnographer approached the church one evening, Michael, wearing a faded t-shirt proclaiming "I Slept With Your Boyfriend and He Loved It," opened the door to let him in. As he stepped inside, an African-American woman named Margo, wearing a "Gay = OK" t-shirt, handed him some flyers for an upcoming drag show. Dan then walked over and asked for a sheet of paper as he flipped his feather boa in the ethnographer's face, saying,

“Sometimes I just got to let my own little dream girl come out and play.” As the members took their seats, a woman dressed in mud-stained work boots and a beat-up flannel shirt stepped to the front to start the service. Here we see how members used gender-discrepant clothing and messages on t-shirts to announce their sexual identities within the church.

Newcomers often learned it was acceptable to wear gender-discrepant clothing or clothing announcing one’s sexual identity when observing or participating in special events. As the following illustration shows, these practices also serve to affirm LGBT Christian identities:

Walking to the back of the room, Carla says, “So we found these wooden crosses, and we thought it would be great for everyone to have one during the Easter season.” As she began handing out crosses, she pointed to John who added, “Also, don’t forget that it’s important to show your colors, PRIDE is not that far off. And I think it’s important, especially for those visiting the church, to understand and see that we are serious about creating a safe space for LGBT people. We are having t-shirts made with the church logo, and we will be handing out more of the rainbow pins so everyone can have the chance to show their PRIDE everyday.”

By making church t-shirts for PRIDE events and handing out both rainbow pins and wooden crosses, members encouraged each other to use fashion to blend religious and sexual identities in counter-heteronormative ways.

This type of subversive blending was particularly explicit when the church put on “Gospel Drag Cabarets,” which helped raise money to support various causes and church programs. The following illustration provides a typical example of such an effort:

The crowd begins to applaud vigorously as Jenny steps to the front of the stage in her top hat announcing, “And now we have, fresh from their latest world tour, the girls of God singing their hearts out in the way that only the truly devoted can do. So without further ado, here are the girls.” Jenny steps to the piano, and begins playing an upbeat number. Clapping, hooting, hollering, and laughter erupt as Tommy, Allan, and Mickey step on stage wearing fancy dresses, colorful wigs, and high heels. Each one has a Bible in one hand and a microphone in the other. As the music reaches a crescendo, and Allan hikes up his skirt, the “girls” begin singing, “Our God is an Awesome God” to the delight of the hundred plus people assembled.

By combining the performance of hymns with unconventional gender displays, members embraced symbols of LGBT and Christian culture.

[Insert image 1 here]

As the above analysis and photograph shows, Shepherd members used bodily decoration to subvert heteronormativity while integrating Christian and LGBT cultural traditions. While every church member did not queer fashion in the aforementioned ways, all members affirmed those who did. Rather than subverting Christianity, however, members used Christian narratives to view their queering of fashion as evidence of Christian morality. Whereas Gray and Thumma’s (1997) study of a special Christian night at a LGBT bar showed how LGBT evangelicals created a temporary safe zone to express Christianity, Shepherd Church members created a more permanent sanctuary in which they used bodily decoration to signify both LGBT *and* Christian identities.

Embracing Intimacy

The embodiment culture of Christian churches reflects the larger culture in that there are implicit rules surrounding person-to-person contact. As Goffman (1971) pointed out, there are norms regarding people's "territories of self," which include the body. This can be seen in the lessons taught to children, such as "keep your hands to yourself." But person-to-person touch can also be seen as a "tie-sign" (Goffman 1971); that is, it indicates that people are connected to each other, as is the case with parents and children or lovers who hold hands in public.

Part of how heteronormativity works is through the regulation of person-to-person contact (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In heteronormative settings, for example, it is generally acceptable for men and women in relationships to use touch to signify romantic involvement. In addition, while some forms of touch, such as hand shaking, are acceptable, full body contact between acquaintances of the same or different sex is generally deemed inappropriate. An assumption underlying these rules is that such body contact should be interpreted in a sexualized manner.

Shepherd Church members subverted heteronormative rules surrounding person-to-person contact by embracing intimacy. They primarily accomplished this by hugging everyone they could get their hands on. Neither gender nor romantic involvement mattered. In opposition to the heteronormative culture of traditional churches, giving full-bodied hugs was the norm.

The ethnographer encountered this during his first visit to the church:

Michael grabs me by the arm, and gives me a big hug saying, "We hope you come back and study some more, we'd like you to see a real caring community." Turning to Marcus, he hugs the big man and plants a kiss on his cheek. Marcus tells me, "Don't be alarmed, you'll be seeing a lot of kissing and touching in this place." Smiling, I survey the room

finding members embracing all over the place. A group of lesbians are gathered in the corner giggling, talking, and hugging while looking at photographs from a recent trip. Beside them, two men are dancing together and posing with hymnals as a female-to-male transgendered person takes photographs, and an older lesbian laughs saying, “Come on we have to get these hymnals put up before we go grab lunch.” Heading toward the back, I am embraced by nine different people expressing their desire to see me return to the church.

Similar scenes repeated each week for the entirety of the fieldwork. Such hugging did not include sexual innuendo or appear sexual in nature; in fact, members described it as a way to express caring and build community. As Wiley explained one afternoon: “Sometimes everyone just needs to feel comfortable in the arms of another and in the heart of a community.

Sometimes we all need a hug, and people here understand that.” Thus, members were not only embracing bodies, but also using their bodies to create deep connections and the foundation of their community. In doing so, they subverted the heteronormative assumption that close bodily contact should be interpreted as sexual.

During services church members also engaged in bodily contact in ways that signified they were in romantic relationships. For example, many couples spent each worship service holding hands, snuggling in chairs, occasionally sharing little kisses on the cheek or forehead, or rubbing each other’s shoulders or knees. Often these couples spoke of, as one member put it, the “wondrous joy” of being able to worship without having to hide their relationships. Thus, such bodywork intertwined their religious and sexual selves.

Embracing intimacy also became an integral part of formal rituals such as communion, which involved people coming to the front of the church to sample the blood and body of Jesus Christ. Unlike communion rituals in traditional churches where individuals typically walk to and from the altar in single file in a reserved manner, at Shepherd Church members often walked up as couples and in groups while engaging in frequent body-to-body contact and intense emotional expression. As the lights went down each week, members walked to the front as individuals, couples, or groups. Often, couples signified their relationships by holding hands, sharing kisses, or walking arm-in-arm to the front. As they reached the altar, they were given a wafer and wine before embracing, praying, and often crying with both the person serving them and any partner or friend performing the ritual at the same time. Members often augmented these movements by patting each other on the back, rubbing the shoulders of those overcome with tears, or swaying back and forth with other participants. As Whitney explained one morning while setting up the altar: “Communion is probably the most important thing we do, it allows people to come together openly, like really connect, heart, body, and soul, and it’s a way to express ourselves in worship as Christians, as couples, as friends to show how we feel.”

Whereas previous scholarship demonstrates how female rugby players (Ezzell 2009) and male-to-female transsexuals (Schrock et al. 2005) use or mold their bodies to reinforce heteronormativity, here we see how people can use bodily contact to subvert heteronormativity. In the context of the church, body-to-body contact not only helped integrate Christian and LGBT identities, but also fostered feelings of connection. In addition, embracing intimacy powerfully evoked feelings that members defined as spiritual. Sometimes all one needs is a hug to feel valued and part of a larger religious community.

Transgendering Demeanor

As mentioned earlier, a crucial aspect of heteronormativity inside and outside of churches is maintaining clear boundaries between women and men. While clothing accomplishes much of this work, people are also generally held accountable to move and position their bodies in ways that are culturally coded as appropriate for one's presumed sex category (Butler 1999; Henley 1986; West and Zimmerman 1987). Men tend to embody dominance by taking up more space, gesturing in assertive ways, and avoiding the expression of emotions (except anger). Women tend to embody subordination by taking up less space, gesturing in non-threatening ways, and openly expressing emotions (except anger). In our daily lives, we often expect people we label men to engage in culturally defined "masculine" demeanor, and people we label women to engage in culturally defined "feminine" demeanor (Butler 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987). These expectations are a reflection of the larger heteronormative culture of embodiment.

Shepherd Church members, however, countered heteronormativity by creating a more inclusive embodiment culture. Specifically, members who moved or postured their bodies in ways that are culturally defined as more appropriate for members of the so-called opposite sex – what we term "transgendering demeanor"—were not only tolerated but affirmed as moral Christians. Whereas "transgender" is an umbrella term originally created by activists to refer to both transsexuals and crossdressers (Schrock et al. 2005)—which now also includes people who identify as "gender-queer," "bi-gendered," and as a "third gender"—we use it here as a verb that refers to how people move and posture their bodies in ways that breach culturally defined rules of gendered demeanor.

Several members believed that they had constructed Shepherd Church as a safe space for individuals who regularly transgender demeanor. Tonya, for example, said:

Just because I like punching people out in the ring and working on my Mustang . . . doesn't make me any less of a woman or a Christian. It makes me a person capable of filling a whole lot of roles when I'm given a chance. And here [at the church] I think we try to give women and men that chance.

Here Tonya suggested that the church was a place where worshipers could engage in gender-nonconforming demeanor without stigmatization. She later mentioned that the church provided members an opportunity to “express” themselves instead of trying to “fit into some kind of box.”

Members also said it was acceptable to embody both masculinity and femininity. As Carla explained to the ethnographer one afternoon while repairing a church water pump:

Some of us just aren't into the whole role playing thing, like Whitney and I are both somewhat masculine and somewhat feminine, and I think most people are that way. But in many churches you have to be one way. We have people who play roles here too, but the idea is that we want a place where fitting into a woman's role is not required. And that's what we're doing here.

Constructing a culture where one did not have to embody gender “one way” subverted the assumption that one should act masculine *or* feminine, a key feature of heteronormativity.

Members defined the freedom to embody gender any way one liked as part of a divine plan. As Dante explained to a transgendered visitor one morning, “Don't worry about how you look or act here sugar, God made us in all kinds of ways so just be your beautiful self.”

Women also transgendered demeanor by engaging in masculine practices such as taking up more physical space than is typical of women. For example, many women sat with their legs spread rather than close together during worship, opened their arms wide when talking with others or performing scripture readings, and moved around the sanctuary when preaching or performing musical numbers. Women also embodied assertiveness by sometimes playfully punching people in the arm, forcefully grabbing people for full-bodied bear hugs, smacking others on the butt, or physically reenacting moments of athletic triumph.

As the following illustration shows, women often accomplished these bodily engagements in the course of their interactions:

Jamie tells a group of women about a recent softball game. As she speaks, she pumps her fists in the air while running her hand through what's left of her hair (she had it shaved with the rest of her teammates for the big game). Spitting her gum out on the grass, she punches two of the other women in the arm in celebration, and begins pounding on her chest saying, "It's good to be the toughest one on the field my friends, it's so good!" By "pounding on her chest," spitting, pumping her fists, and punching friends in the arm to celebrate victory, Jamie engaged in stereotypically "masculine" behavior. Moreover, others accepted her transgendering of demeanor without hesitation.

Likewise, men sometimes transgendered demeanor by using their bodies in ways culturally defined as feminine. This involved, for example, taking up less space by sitting with their hands in their laps or crossed over their waists or walking with their hands close to their bodies. Several men minimized assertiveness by vocally announcing their presence before giving hugs, tentatively extending their hands to new members, or gesturing toward their bodies

as they spoke. Moreover, many cried openly during worship services, offered wide grins in response to the simplest statements, or giggled when talking about clothes and shopping trips.

Men's feminine gestures were observed regularly during informal interactions before and after services. For example, one morning Timmy skipped up to a group including the ethnographer, snapping his fingers and singing softly before announcing, "I think I have discovered the perfect boy. I'm going to cook for us tonight and—oh my God—he will hopefully be my king!" He then flipped his hair, snapped his fingers, and danced through the side door. At this point, Leon turned to the ethnographer, and said, "Don't write that down or I'll have no chance of winning queen of this week," before beginning to giggle and following Timmy and saying in a hyper-feminized tone, "No, no sugar, come back, you gotta tell me about this man of yours." Another man then chuckled and said, "All they need is some ice cream and a pillow fight and those two will be in heaven, don't you think?" Rather than the reservation often required of men within traditional churches, Timmy enacted physical behaviors culturally coded as "feminine" by "skipping," "snapping his fingers" over a boy, "singing softly," "flipping his hair," and giggling over the "perfect boy" while expressing his desire to "cook" for his "king."

While theoretical and empirical work often suggests that people "do gender" in ways that reinforce heteronormative codes of femininity and masculinity (see e.g., Schilt and Westbrook 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987), members of Shepherd Church resisted heteronormativity by doing and affirming gender nonconformity. In doing so, they created a more inclusive embodiment culture. In this culture, they could openly use their bodies to signify integrated gendered, sexual, and religious identities without fear.

Conclusions

As our analysis reveals, people may strategically employ their bodies to signify their religious and sexual identities in the course of ongoing social interactions. While studies of LGBT Christians typically emphasize how they use language to integrate sexual and religious identities (McQueeney 2009; Thumma 1991; Wolkomir 2006), our findings suggest that this may only be half the story. By dressing in ways that subverted the gender binary and signified pride as sexual minorities, physically connecting with one another to signify sexual and non-sexual relationships, and breaking traditional norms of gendered demeanor, Shepherd Church members employed their bodies to signify LGBT Christian identities.

While researchers have shown how sexual (Rosenfeld 2009) and gendered (Ezzell 2009; Schrock et al. 2005) minorities employ their bodies to conform to heteronormative ideals, we have shown how embodiment can resist heteronormativity. By queering fashion, embracing intimacy, and transgendering demeanor, Shepherd Church members created a group culture that countered heteronormative conceptions of gender, sexuality, and religion. While members of traditional churches may think that Shepherd members' embodiment practices were profaning the "sacredness" of Christianity, the facts suggest otherwise. As shown in our analysis, members imbued their embodiment practices with religious meaning, often citing biblical stories about Jesus' nonjudgmental acceptance of outsiders. In doing so, they in effect constructed their counter-heteronormative embodiment as sacred.

It is important to point out that using the body to integrate sexual and religious identities and subvert heteronormativity may vary widely among MCC churches. Within the U.S., for example, the power structure of a church (e.g., whether hierarchically or horizontally organized) and the size, history, and political strength of the surrounding LGBT community may influence

how MCC members locally embody their identities. Future researchers should consider comparing congregations in distinct geographical locations (e.g., San Francisco, CA and Alexandria, OH) to better unpack how historical, social, and political context impacts embodiment. Cross-national comparative research would also help us move beyond the limitations of our case study. More specifically, because heteronormativity itself has culturally-specific forms and the legal rights and stigmatization of GLBT people can vary widely from nation to nation (see, for example, Collins 2009; Ward and Schneider 2009), counter-heteronormative embodiment in MCC churches would also likely take on culturally-unique forms and be practiced more or less overtly.

Regardless of our particular social or historical context, we all act in ways that affirm or resist heteronormativity in the course of our daily lives. However we define our sexuality, like Shepherd Church members, we may actively affirm or engage in counter-heteronormative practices. Doing so may help create safe spaces—whether at school or work, in families or social groups—to freely use our bodies as tools for self-expression. In contrast, we may act in ways, regardless of intentions, that pressure others to conform to heteronormative standards. We may also expend much energy trying to regulate our bodies to fit ideals created long ago by powerful others. Such regulating often comes from our fear of how others might react if we do not conform, which ironically reproduces a fearful existence for non-conformists. Successfully resisting heteronormativity thus requires a bit of fearlessness from us all.

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