

12-30-2018

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Recommended Citation

Baker, Kourtney (2018) "MY BIG FAT CATHOLIC QUEER WEDDING," *Comparative Woman*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: [10.31390/comparativewoman.1.1.03](https://doi.org/10.31390/comparativewoman.1.1.03)

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/comparativewoman/vol1/iss1/4>

MY BIG FAT CATHOLIC QUEER WEDDING

Kourtney Baker

Identity politics is complex for a number of reasons; it is difficult for nearly everyone to figure out their sexual or gender identities. However, finding a concrete sense of self can become even more difficult and taxing for those who have studied feminist theory. Feminist theory is based on fundamental gender equality, and raises the question of how social institutions can be changed in order to create a more just world, where there is equal representation and visibility for all genders. Historically, feminism was focused on biological women's rights, a very radical cause in a time when women were seen as inferior to men. Women did not have rights to vote or make their own decisions, therefore early theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, emphasized that the essential differences between women and men were socially constructed, so that no sex was superior to another. However, as women became more visible and gained autonomy, the concept of the gender binary came to be questioned. With the emerging queer movement, more people were seeing gender as a wide spectrum, not just a set of static characteristics. As a result, an important goal of contemporary feminist theorizing is to include those sexual and gender identities that were previously ignored in academic scholarship.

A sense of tension is created by the different schools of thought within feminism, because some writers fear losing the focus of women as an under represented class. However, post-modern theorists have worked to recognize the multiplicity that exists in complex identities. An example of what it means to have a modern sense of personhood is the reality of a self-identified feminist enjoying practices that go against their political beliefs in equality. Today, because feminism has become mainstreamed by the popular media, a larger population than ever before is learning what it means to be a feminist and how they can incorporate feminist or queer ways of being into their own lives. Granted, this can lead to negative consequences within feminist circles, namely people critiquing others for enjoying something that is problematic or for not looking at a practice through a feminist lens. Judging someone's level of feminism in this way can be harmful because it can lead people to thinking that in order to call themselves a feminist, they have to forgo some aspects of life that they previously enjoyed or had hoped to experience in the future. Feminism is not meant to make people feel inadequate, rather, it is meant to make people feel more empowered and have a deeper sense of self than ever before. Some contemporary theorists have done a fantastic job of explaining what it is like to feel this inner conflict, as if you are neither one nor the other, but something that goes beyond the typical distinctions of feminist-queer or traditionalist. One such example is Kathy Davis' writing on the dance of tango and the sheer joy that she feels while partaking in something that is deeply opposed to her academic and ideological beliefs as a feminist.

Davis is a very experienced tango dancer, and she enjoys it from the depths of her soul. As a feminist who is well aware of how damaging tango culture can be to gender equality, she had found little support for her passion within her academic feminist circles. The tango is all about the perpetuation of binary gender roles, with the dominant, assertive man leading the passive, sensual woman through the steps. The woman is not allowed to lead and must instead blindly follow the man wherever he leads her around the dance floor. It is understandable why some with a purely feminist ideology would not understand how such a practice could ever be enjoyed if one knew the issues it symbolizes. However, Davis is able to study tango as a part of her feminist scholarship, on the grounds that there is a distinct difference between ideological beliefs and activities of passion. Passions, Davis says, are "about losing oneself, while coming

home” (Davis 15). This means that if you are passionate about something, it is a part of your inner most being, it is an aspect that is at the root of your origins, and it should not be denied. How does one reconcile this feeling with the knowledge that these very unique aspects of your identity could be problematic not only to your inner conscious, but to other people that you respect? The answer, Davis would argue, is to use your own confusion as a place to begin feminist theorizing. The goal of all feminist and gender work should be to inspire others to embark on their own journey of self-discovery. It is only through academics, like Davis, being unafraid to share personal experiences that gender theory can grow into a more complete discipline that truly represents diverse marginalized groups.

With this thought process in mind, I believe that it is crucial to the formation of my own feminist politics that I share my personal narrative. The multiple identities that I struggle with daily include those of being both Roman Catholic and queer minded. I have a great love for my Catholic faith, however it is constantly at odds with my queer self. The Catholic Church is very much against any version of LGBTQ+ politics imaginable, as much as they may never publicly make such a statement. Therefore, it is impossible for me to enjoy my faith and the traditions that it upholds without upsetting the queer side of myself. The Catholic side of myself, likewise, is made very uncomfortable when I attend LGBTQ+ oriented events or do anything politically radical. It has been a formation of my identity to desire the fairy tale, to be Cinderella and marry my Prince Charming in a huge Catholic church surrounded by all of our family and friends. I want the fairy tale and everything that it implies, down to the voluminous ball gown and glass slippers. Naturally, these ideas make my feminist and queer selves cringe because I know what they signify to the rest of society: patriarchy and hetero-normativity, two ideals that my queer self wants no part of. However, it is not my Catholic side’s fault for having these desires. What makes this duality all the more difficult for me is how I experience these two sides of myself culturally and socially. Most LGBTQ+ identified people do not understand what it is like to actively desire a Catholic, full blown fairy tale wedding. Because it goes so strongly against their queer sensibilities, they are even cruel to people that could have such desires, such as myself. They may consider me to be an inauthentic queer and therefore not see my presence in queer spaces as necessary or legitimate. Alternately, the Catholic community clearly does not understand my desperate desire to live beyond their definition of normal, loving relationships. I have had to make the decision to keep both sides of my personality completely separate from one another, which has understandably caused me much emotional turmoil. Consequently, it became my self-appointed mission to work with queer youth and help them find a sense of oneness with their identities, so that they do not have to feel the fracture that is central to my very existence.

Upon reading Davis feminist analysis of the tango, I first realized how I could use feminist theory to come to a personal understanding of myself, perhaps an even deeper understanding than I had ever previously imagined. Davis writes, “Passion is not a fixed entity, but rather an active process by which a person develops an intense attachment to something” (Davis 15). This means that it is possible for me to work through my identity struggles without having to feel like I am making an unchangeable choice between the two selves that I feel so strongly about. If having my fairy tale wedding come true is one of my passions, then I can make that a reality without denying my queer side. What I love most about doing academic analysis on Gender Studies literature is that there is always a way to rediscover what we know as foundational and concrete and apply it to new ideas that fit with current politics. With this thought process, combined with my personal feelings of being split between my Catholic and queer selves, I find some integral feminist writings deeply troubling. One such theorist is

Adrienne Rich, who advocates for a lesbian separatism in all spheres of life, including sexual experiences. Rich's central argument is that having a lesbian existence, completely devoid of men, is the only way for a woman to truly be a feminist and deny patriarchal institutions. She outlines eight ways in which heterosexuality is harmful to women, including the claim that men will "control or rob them of their children [as well as] confine them physically and prevent their movement" (Rich 184). This entire notion seems bizarre to me; however, I do think that some of Rich's critiques of heterosexuality are valid. She says that women tend to make themselves sexually attractive to men because men "hold the economic power and position to enforce their predilections" (Rich 186). This statement is certainly true of a capitalist economy, and although women today have more economic freedom than Rich implies, men still hold a large amount of influence over financial matters. For instance, because men are typically in professional positions of power, such as being executives of their own companies, they can dictate workforce policies and the overall workplace environment in a way that easily puts women at a disadvantage. They could require that women wear certain feminine or revealing clothes or even pay women less than the other employees. This gender wage gap is a battle that women are still fighting in today's society, signifying that Rich's claims about the gendered nature of the economy are in fact legitimate.

Nonetheless, the majority of Rich's claims and her general way of portraying heterosexuality make me very uneasy as a feminist queer Catholic. She says in particular that women have not only "obeyed the institution [of heterosexuality] but our [women's] feelings—and our sensuality—have not been tamed or contained within it" (Rich 197). This is problematic to me because Rich is assuming that all women are suffering as a result of heterosexual ideologies, when in reality, some women may actually be quite happy with those belief systems. She neglects to acknowledge a spectrum of what it means to be queer, alienating those of us that do not completely fit into one linear belief about queerness or heterosexuality. Rich would adamantly be opposed to a Catholic, Cinderella-like wedding because it is conforming to her every expectation of what mainstream sexuality looks like. What Rich does not understand is how a Catholic, fairy tale wedding can also be very queer depending on who is involved in the ceremony. I believe that we do not stop being something just because we are doing an action that seems counter to who we are. The aspects of what is important to us shape who we are meant to be, and what we think is important does not change with specific actions that we take. As a result, it does not in any way change whom I am as a person if I have a fairy tale wedding. If I am fundamentally queer, then my wedding will be queer because it is an extension of myself. By putting my queer self in the environment of the Catholic Church, with its rituals and traditions, I am making a political statement of queering my religion.

With this altered understanding, I want to use my knowledge of feminist and queer theory, as well as what I know of my faith, to create a new theory that encompasses my lived reality of being queer and Catholic. The theory of Adrienne Rich needs to be updated to focus on more universal and personal experiences of people that have many facets of identity. It is nearly impossible for someone like me to feel comfortable with Rich's definition of what it means to be a feminist, and I imagine that other readers have felt just as isolated by her words. In lieu of Rich's lesbian separatism, I would suggest that the views of queer theorist Kate Bornstein more adequately represent the dueling passions that I feel for things both queer and Catholic. I first became familiar with Bornstein's work when she came to give a talk at my university. Although her work mainly focuses on trans issues, I found her idea of transgressing the binary applicable to many concepts beyond gender identity. I then realized after reading more of her work that

transgressing what society considers the norm can even apply to what is expected in the queer world. Most importantly of all, Bornstein taught me that being a freak by other people's standards is something to take pride in. She believes that we are all freaks in one way or another; we just do not typically realize what makes us unique. In her book *Gender Outlaw*, Bornstein makes some incredibly insightful remarks about being a spiritual 'freak' of sorts. She says, "the in-between place itself was the truth that I was made aware of: the existence of a place that lies outside of the borders of what's culturally acceptable" (Bornstein 94). The moments where you are troubled with your identity give you great spiritual insights and send you on a radical journey of self-discovery. Without times of discomfort, you cannot evolve into the whole person that you are meant to become. From my perspective, this is what is fundamentally lacking in Adrienne Rich's writing: she is far too comfortable with her identity as a lesbian. Moreover, she sees the principles of feminism as binary, either you follow them, or you do not. Kate Bornstein would shatter all of Rich's regulations, choosing instead to see the beauty in the puzzles of identity formation.

Bornstein's perspectives of identity particularly apply to my vision of a queer Catholic wedding because she emphasizes the dissolution of concrete parts of self in favor of a mutually beneficial union. She says that shedding the paradox of your opposing identities (for myself, being queer and Catholic) is worth the pain because of the new person that you will become. She proves this by saying "The value of the paradox is its ability to tie together two seemingly opposing forces or ideas – to bind two edges of a torn and bleeding wound" (Bornstein 96). The allusion of being wounded is powerful to me because I have often felt that exact way about the different parts of my identity. In fact, I used to hate that the Christian and queer parts of myself are so distinct, that they never seemed to mold together as one, no matter what I would do to make both sides of myself content. I even became severely depressed because I could not find a way to fuse my mind together as one complete person, not a broken soul that I did not recognize as myself. However, because of queer theorists like Bornstein, I now realize the importance of my shattered selves, why it is that I was meant to feel this pain. It is through having these multiple selves that I am able to help others the most, because I am not the average feminist or the typical Catholic, and I never will be. I am meant to go beyond that and be a third or fourth identity that I cannot even imagine yet. The joy comes in learning to love the mystery of self, as Bornstein said, "The concept of the 'third' is the concept of the outlaw, who subscribes to a dynamic of change, outside of any given dichotomy" (Bornstein 97). By being Catholic and queer, I create my own ideology, spirituality, and tradition. I already possess the revolution that I need to feel complete in my Catholic and queer selves; it is within me.

In conclusion, what has all of this reflection on gender theory taught me about the power that comes with being an outcast in multiple communities? It has made me realize that if I am to have any chance of making a change in a world full of inequalities, I have to be proud of my status as an outlaw. In order for me to one day realize my dream of having my big, fat, Catholic and queer wedding, I must follow my own feminist politics of passion, as Davis would suggest. This extends to my relationships with other people: I must not settle for the normative relational webs that exist between people but rather form my own social networks and communities that do not adhere to any strict set of criteria. Of course, wanting to live this way can cause some controversy. The struggle lies in learning to adapt to a world of people like Adrienne Rich who teach you that you can only have one part of yourself live in the public, unashamed: the queer self or the Catholic self. Instead, I am inclined, as many others are, to break away from that

archaic way of thinking and theorize instead a utopian world where there is no one sense of self, just a multitude of interlocking identities, evolving as new parts of the psyche become unlocked.

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