Stereotypes: Crippling Standards

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By Zachary Terrillion

Stereotypes are a fixture of human society. Groups always look towards other groups and create pictures of their surfaces before exploring their depths. They are snapshots that have molded entire perceptions. These snapshots in their narrow borders have been hard to escape. They are often a burden, sometimes a blessing, but for me, they are an ideal to reach. I have always forced myself to fit these societal polaroids. For better or worse, I have been defined by these delusional struggles.

To begin, what comes to mind when you think of a gay man? Flamboyant? Outgoing? Sassy? It is these depictions that make up most of the representation, whether it be in dated 90s sitcoms or even recent gay produced works, such as Ru Paul's Drag Race or Queer Eye, both of which I still adore. I am not saying these contemporary, effeminate representations are insensitive or even inaccurate, but they are a single story that has come to dominant the gazes of the heterosexual mainstream. They encompass a vision of a "traditional" gay man. How he walks, talks, and acts. To be considered genuinely gay, I must be fabulous and extroverted, just like the ones on TV.

Before I held myself to standards of queerness however, I dealt with standards of masculinity. I was never one for sports, which can be difficult as a little boy wanting to fit in with all the other little boys. When my parents thrust me into the world of peewee soccer, I rejected the ball and ran about the field, pretending to be a Jedi. My parents, to their credit, realized manly sports were not my forte, and my overactive imagination was put to practical use within the realm of theatre, an environment in which many gay people thrive. It was here where my queer and creative facets came to fruition, as a supportive space was provided for these

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elements to emerge without fear of derision by society. Stereotypes and expectations were not a

player in the fluidity of improv or amateur playwriting. Still, because of being exposed to such

loving communities from such a young age, I never felt the need to speak up for myself. Thus,

my introversion grew, and my burgeoning queerness became withheld, as no reason was

provided for it to arise and be defended. It was a presence in my life but not readily embraced or

expressed. It was a strange median between self-hatred and love. Self-tolerance is how I would

describe it.

I expected my queerness to finally manifest in all its rainbow-colored flamboyance in

high school. But, like the soccer fields of yore, I was the odd one out. The gay culture present

was the same confident, expressive vision glimpsed on TV. Gays who preferred reading in

corners or sitting on their phones at the edges of dance floors proved a rare find. I was not just

clashing with standards of masculinity as most gay men do, but also gayness itself. I somehow fit

into neither societal trope. I loved to "spill the tea," I adopted the feminine gestures shows and

films so love to emulate, but I also enjoyed videogames and superheroes, familiar tropes of

generalized masculinity. I could not connect with others from either spectrum of sexuality, as I

seemed to inhabit elements of both, but resided in neither. Because of these stereotypical divides,

my introversion would soon devolve into social anxiety and immense insecurity, dreading

rehearsals and classes that were once highlights of my week. I figured the only way to achieve

social success was to emphasize my queerness above all else. To play right into the tropes

society had established for me, even if it did not connect to my personality.

My anxiety peaked the summer before my sophomore year when I attended a sleepaway

program for the first time. Here, my plan to play up the gay would take effect. I escalated my

flamboyant mannerisms, exaggerated my tone of voice, and emphasized that I was, in fact, very

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gay. My earnest attempts backfired spectacularly. My anxiety only worsened by the end of the program, with not a single friend gained and even more insecurity to top. I wondered whether I was genuinely gay or just some poser. Was I worthy of being in the company of Johnathan Van Ness or was I just some guy who liked other guys.

Through all these struggles however, one aspect of my identity that society could not pin down remained constant. That being the creativity that bloomed on the soccer field, theatre, and, currently, my writing. Through writing, I had a voice true to myself, finding a diverse community of people through which I could thrive and depend on. A community discovered not by playing up parts of myself to adhere to the rules of stereotypes, but instead through the expression of my multifaceted truth. All my interests and traits, both masculine and feminine, could be put into highly dynamic works of prose and poetry. These were pieces that explored the nuances of queerness that the media could not.

Overall, I have never taken stereotypes as villainizing in the conventional sense. I have not suffered through discrimination or oppression instigated by their hand. Instead, they worked to force me into a box, a servant following the will of a director in a performance society mandates. However, through honing my traits, those too complex and niche to be generalized, these stereotypes no longer must apply. One can discover their truth through distinction in the face of generalization. We must encourage our marginalized youth to explore the nuanced parts of themselves in order to evade standards and achieve authenticity. Only then, will the maligned snapshots of yore fade away, so more layered, accommodating portraits may come to the forefront.

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