

The excessive training that we give to boys and girls to transform them from anarchic, ungended blobs into gender automatons, then is (a) dangerous, and (b) not necessary, and (c) not actually consistent with lived reality. And as some girls grow up to become anorexics and some boys grow up to become bullies, many girls grow up to be overachieving micromanagers, and many boys grow up to be underachieving slackers, yet we still refuse to give up on the models of masculinity and femininity that have been established as ordinary and normal and good. And we spend very little time, relatively speaking, attending to the problems with this model of heterosexuality and figuring out how to fix them.

In university gender-studies classes, heterosexuality gets scant treatment, mostly because we all assume that we know all too



well how heterosexuality works and, therefore, by the same logic, what we really need to teach and learn about are all the fringe sexualities that become the targets for homophobic and transphobic policies and attitudes. When I taught an Introduction to Gender and Sexuality class, this was very much the approach I took. As a queer person, and a gender-queer person whose gender was indeterminate on a good day, I became exhibit A in the freak show that the class became. Every week, a mostly heterosexual lecture hall would be treated to fascinating information about gays, lesbians, transgender people, intersexuality, and so on, but the students would rarely be asked to think about how this information affected them and their own sexualities. And so, a couple of years ago, tired of being on show, I began teaching the same course, Introduction to Gender and Sexuality, as *How on Earth Does Heterosexuality Work?* OK, it was not actually called that, but that was the basic message of the class from start to finish. Using clips from *Desperate Housewives*, *The Sopranos*, *The Bachelor*, and other TV shows, I would act like an anthropologist visiting a strange group of people engaged in odd sexual rituals, showing the class what heterosexuality looked like from the outside.

In many ways, the “How weird is that?” approach to heterosexuality in the context of gender studies works much better than the “Try to be tolerant of these weirdos” approach showcasing queerness. It forces the very students who are deeply invested in norms, their own and other people’s, to face the music and look at their own investments, their own issues, their own struggles with what is supposed to come naturally. The focus on the strangeness of heterosexuality allowed us to think through eating disorders as a vicious side effect of adolescent misogyny; it forced men in the class to ask themselves about their own relations to masculinity, to other men, to women, and to homophobia. And it led women to notice the significant differences



between the ways in which they developed peer relations with other women (friendships often focused on food, clothes, and boys), and the ways men developed peer relations with other men (friendships focused on male bonding, drinking, and sports, but rarely stemming from long discussions about girls).

In these classes, I also used the example of pornography, not to berate men for turning their attention away from their flesh-and-blood partners and directing it toward online sexual imagery, but rather to reveal the stark differences in outcome of the sexual training of boys and girls. While girls experience sexual awakenings largely in the context of the matrices of prohibitions that I described earlier, and while in most girls desire is never actually given a chance to flow and weave itself around objects and fetishes, boys are quickly encouraged and incited to feel desire, to direct that desire, to indulge desire. Pornographic archives suggest the range and the depth of male sexual imaginaries (Chicks with dicks! Fat chicks! Muscle chicks! Hairy chicks!), and women's magazines illustrate the narrowness and restriction of female sexual imaginaries (10 things he really wants sexually but is afraid to tell you . . . 10 ways to please your man . . . 10 ways to be a complete and utter bimbo so as not to threaten your boyfriend and make him lose his mojo). While not all pornography is for men, and not all women's magazines are read by women, what we call "men" and "women" are bodies that have generally been trained in either the interruption of desire (women) or its free flow (men). By the time heterosexual romance begins, the formula of male persuasion and female deferral, male solicitations and female refusals, male randiness and female frigidity, has already established a large part of the male-female sexual script. And as men and women age, heterosexuality requires all kinds of aids to maintain this formula—Viagra for men and plastic surgeries for women.