

Not Born this Way: Exploring an Alternative Discourse of Surprise in Once-Heterosexual-Identified Women's Narratives

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I am a lesbian and it was a later-in-life recognition. . . . Some people would say, well, you're living a lie and, you know, the truth is—not at all. This has only been for the past seven years.

—Actress Meredith Baxter coming out on *The Today Show* (Marikar)

Life threw me a surprise party. . . . I was looking for something fun and chic. I didn't think it would redefine me as a person.

—Comedian Carol Leifer on falling in love with a woman at age forty (James Donaldson)

I had never met a woman I was attracted to [before Christine]. And maybe if I'd met her when I was 20, I would have fallen in love and only dated women. But maybe if I'd met her at 20, I wouldn't have responded at all. Who knows?

—Actress Cynthia Nixon on falling in love with her wife at age thirty-eight (Breen)

The above quotations, all published between 2009 and 2010, are part of a recent surge of public discourse in the United States about lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and/or unlabeled women who were once heterosexual-identified. While a typical coming out story features a protagonist who describes feeling different as a child and then acknowledges her LGBTQ¹ identity by adolescence, Baxter, Leifer, and Nixon tell stories that stress surprise—the possibility of being ambushed by same-sex desires after a lifetime of feeling

heterosexual and partnering with men. Stories about women coming out in midlife or women leaving male partners for female partners emerge in many areas of contemporary American culture, including anthologies of personal narratives, self-help books, women's magazines, talk shows, blogs, and major network news outlets. Stories like those told by Baxter, Leifer, and Nixon render identity as unpredictable, even as the assumption that sexual identity is stable over life course continues to inform the political strategy of LGBTQ movements describing sexual minorities as “born this way.” This powerful assumption, what I refer to as “born gay” discourse, shapes the contemporary coming out genre, and unconventional stories of surprise might seem confusing or politically dangerous to many audiences in comparison.

In this article, I examine how once-heterosexual-identified women articulate an alternative discourse of surprise that troubles “born gay” discourse, but they do not depart from dominant discourse entirely. Instead a discourse of surprise tangles together supposedly antithetical notions of identity. Sexual identity can be both innate and unpredictable in these stories. It might be tempting to think of our contemporary moment as

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defined by “born gay” discourse, but it is crucial to recognize that multiple discourses about sexuality circulate simultaneously in any single historical moment.² Furthermore, these multiple discourses interact with each other, sometimes overlapping in contradictory ways. However, not all narratives about sexuality are received equally, and in the latter half of this article I explore a larger cultural context in which once-heterosexual-identified women who tell stories of surprise are framed as what Ken Plummer refers to as “incredible”—heard by audiences as confusing, ridiculous, or irresponsibly playing into homophobic rhetoric. I argue there is a tendency to displace cultural confusion about sexual identity onto once-heterosexual-identified women—to infer that such women are baffling—rather than to recognize that contradictory notions about the stability and fluidity of identity function more broadly in American culture. My intention is to highlight the diverse ways LGBTQ people might make sense of their identities—a diversity that the dominance of “born gay” discourse elides—and to speculate how a discourse of surprise might offer politically transformative discursive resources for LGBTQ social justice movements.

Although a conventional coming out story will provide clues of a stable LGBTQ identity in the past, stories of surprise allow for unresolved disjuncture in narrators’ lives. This is significant because the way a coming-out story is told is never simply a matter of personal choice, but instead narrative constructs identity and has real-life impacts. John D’Emilio argues that under the condition in which one is thought only to be authentically “gay” if one was “born that way,” gay people may “filter out our heterosexual impulses and experiences or we render them inauthentic” when telling their coming out stories (161). Thus, “born gay” discourse may obscure or explain away inconstancies between an individual’s heterosexual past and LGBTQ-identified present, influencing what one chooses to tell and what one remembers as relevant to identity development. Such (perhaps unconscious) labor is done in service to “shap[ing] [our stories] to achieve our main purpose—building ties of community

among a group whose links are, frankly, tenuous” (D’Emilio 161). The risk of telling an unconventional coming-out story is to break these “tenuous ties,” losing recognition as part of a community of LGBTQ people unified by the shared experience “born gay” discourse provides. Once-heterosexual-identified women who tell stories of surprise call these risks into relief when they express feeling like illegitimate LGBTQ people because their stories complicate “born gay” discourse.

Such feelings of legitimacy should be understood as part of a larger cultural context in which women who shift sexual identities as adults are framed as incredible, heard by audiences as unbelievable or even dangerous. Plummer argues that sexual stories can only be heard as “credible” when “key social worlds await the telling, when an audience is ripened up and ready to hear,” and without the right social and cultural conditions some sexual stories are “incredible,” “awaiting their historical moment,” unable to be heard without hostility or disbelief (26–27; 35). Stories of surprise are largely received as incredible in contemporary American culture because they draw audiences’ attention to contradictory or confusing explanations of identity that the clear linearity of “born gay” discourse obscures. Once-heterosexual-identified women become perplexing subjects because they illuminate paradoxical thinking about sexuality which circulates all around us, but which there is a cultural mandate to ignore or to simplify.

This article begins with a brief overview of the historical and political conditions within which “born gay” discourse has emerged as the sole LGBTQ-affirming way to discuss sexual identity. I then unpack the workings of a discourse of surprise in relation to “born gay” discourse, highlighting how this alternative discourse merges notions that are supposedly opposite of each other. I analyze stories of surprise in anthologies of interviews and personal narratives published since 1990. These anthologies center women coming out after being married to men, in midlife, and/or women leaving male partners for female partners (Cassingham and O’Neil; Abbott and Farmer; Walsh and André). I chose these collec-

tions because they are specifically organized around women shifting sexual identities in adulthood, and the form of personal narrative offers rich, detailed examples of how a discourse of surprise functions. I then show how once-heterosexual-identified women who tell unconventional stories are rendered incredible in contemporary American culture, and I assert that this act stigmatizes such women for articulating contradictory thinking about sexuality which functions on a larger cultural level. I conclude by speculating on the political potential of surprise to revitalize dominant LGBTQ rights rhetoric and to provide a greater range of discursive resources for individuals to articulate their sexual identities.

The History of “Born Gay” Discourse in the United States

“Born gay” discourse has become the primary method of advocating for LGBTQ civil rights, and conversely, discourses about identity that suggests fluidity, choice, the influence of environment, and other nonbiological explanations for sexual identity are viewed by many LGBTQ people and their allies as playing into homophobic rhetoric (Whisman; D’Emilio; Weber). The notion that one could make a choice to eliminate same-sex attraction is the central logic behind reparative therapy programs and ex-gay movements, and studies show that those who believe that sexual orientation is a biological drive are more likely to support LGBTQ civil rights (Whisman; Dunn). Before considering how once-heterosexual-identified women interact with “born gay” discourse, one must understand the historical context for why this discourse has become ubiquitous among LGBTQ people and their allies in the United States over the past thirty-five years.

The popular notion that LGBTQ sexuality is an inborn trait has roots in sexology literature of the late-nineteenth century. Shifting away from viewing same-sex desire as merely a taboo behavior, sexologists popularized the concept of the “con-

genital invert”: the idea of the homosexual as a specific type of person with an inborn deficiency or difference (Foucault; Faderman; Vicinus; Weber). Early proponents of homosexual inclusion in Western societies championed this new scientific sexual identity category and argued that homosexuality should be tolerated because it was a natural trait.³ Yet, scholars also note that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century attempts to locate the origins of homosexuality in biology always overlapped with seemingly contradictory discourses about same-sex desire as a product of environment (Terry, “Anxious Slippages”; Allen). Notably in the 1930s and 1940s, the medical opinion that homosexuality was the product of environment and improper childhood development prevailed, and as a result this era saw a widespread institutionalization and “treatment” of those with same-sex desires and/or nonconforming genders (Terry, *An American Obsession*; Faderman).

Gay liberation activists in the 1960s challenged these pathological understandings of homosexuality by arguing that all people have the potential to experience “polymorphous” desire (D’Emilio 155). This political rhetoric dovetailed with the popularity of Alfred Kinsey’s theories that homosexuality functions as a varying range of behaviors and feelings, rather than the homosexual being a discrete category of person (Terry, “Anxious Slippages” 130). Gay liberation activists argued that identities such as “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are the product of oppression, and that people have a greater capacity for love and attraction than these terms suggest (D’Emilio 155). Similarly, 1970s lesbian feminists theorized the idea of the “political lesbian,” arguing that any woman could choose to be a lesbian as a political commitment to other women (Echols; Faderman; Stein). Lesbian feminist discourse also argued that compulsory heterosexuality prevents women from actualizing their true connection to other women, suggesting that women’s same-sex love is innate (Rich). However, this idea of lesbianism as natural did not invalidate the notion of lesbianism as a political choice, even if these two ideas sometimes existed in an uneasy tension together (Stein 100). Over the course of the 1980s, these radical rheto-

rics fell out of favor as LGBTQ movements responded to an increasingly conservative political culture (Stein; D’Emilio). Significantly the late-1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the religious right in American politics. Their tactics included waging anti-gay and -lesbian municipal and state legislation, and public campaigns characterizing homosexuals as sexual predators who “recruit” children (Fetner). It is within this political climate that “born gay” discourse has taken hold as *the* LGBTQ-affirming discourse.

“Born gay” discourse prevails in the contemporary moment because it has proven effective for dominant gay and lesbian movements in responding to anti-LGBTQ rights legislation and the increasing influence of the religious right in US politics. Tina Fetner argues that since the 1970s, the religious right has successfully highlighted issues that incite public anxieties about sexual minorities, including same-sex marriage, military service, and making sexual orientation a protected legal category (xv). Thus, gay and lesbian movements from the 1980s to the present have been placed in a defensive position, working to meet “short-term electoral goals” (Fetner 97). Such goals often appear best addressed by normalizing tactics making gays and lesbians seem the same as heterosexuals, rather than highlighting the diversity of LGBTQ communities, especially issues that are pertinent to trans people, bisexuals and sexually fluid people, and people of color (Fetner 96–97). In this context, “born gay” discourse appears preferable or more effective because it does not incite anxiety that heterosexual people can be “recruited” by LGBTQ people.

Thus, we come to this moment in which the rhetoric of choice is a mainstay of the religious right’s attacks on LGBTQ rights, and any explanation of sexual identity that does not rely on biological determinist thinking—any explanation that suggests fluidity, agency, the influence of environment, even if one does not articulate one’s identity as a “choice”—is tainted as supporting homophobic agendas (Whisman; Weber). “Born gay” discourse may be commonly supported among LGBTQ people and their allies, but this discourse contains significant limitations, includ-

ing reinforcing the heterosexist notion that no one would be LGBTQ unless it was something they could not change (D’Emilio 164). In addition, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cautions against uncritically embracing biological explanations of homosexuality as less homophobic than arguments that purport homosexuality to be the product of environment. Sedgwick argues that any desire to conclusively *know* the origins of gay identity—be those origins “nature” or “nurture”—must be suspect, as these theories do not challenge the “aegis of a culture’s desire that gay people *not be*” (43, emphasis original). Shannon Weber argues that the dominance of “born gay” discourse is harmful to many LGBTQ people because it “disenfranch[izes] certain queer people from fully participating in an accurate articulation of their experiences in political and popular discourse” (685). Individuals who view their same-sex desires as an outcome of choice, sexual fluidity, or environment have more difficulty expressing such experiences in this moment when “biological determinism [is rendered] as *the* acceptable pro-gay discourse versus *the* unquestioned treatment of ideas about sexual choice and fluidity as anathema” (Weber 685, emphasis original).

Yet in the midst of this “born gay” vs. “choice” binary, once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories implicitly ask why notions of stable and fluid identity must be antithetical to each other. A discourse of surprise merges supposedly contradictory ideas, often invoking an innate sexual identity, but then paradoxically highlighting the unpredictability of identity. This alternative discourse allows narrators to voice inconsistencies in their lives that “born gay” discourse would explain away. Hence, these stories reveal a broader spectrum of LGBTQ experiences than dominant discourse suggests.

Exploring a Discourse of Surprise

Stories of surprise refuse to resolve or ignore contradictions in an individual’s sexual identity

development, and offer messier coming out stories than people are generally accustomed. Once-heterosexual-identified women employing a discourse of surprise complicate a key demand of “born gay” discourse: continuity and the need to tell one’s story as if one was always coming toward exactly where one is in the present. Katherine Bond Stockton argues that continuity in coming out stories is maintained via what she refers to as the “backwards birthing mechanism”(7). Stockton notes that a typical coming out narrative uncovers signs of the queer self in childhood and engages in a “the hunt for the roots of queerness” (7). The queer child is not merely remembered, but constituted through attempts to find the queer self in childhood, the time period that is culturally marked as the most significant to sexual identity formation. Stories of surprise do not easily reproduce this “hunt” for the “roots” of the narrator’s present-day LGBTQ identity. For example, Gale (Sky) Edeawo’s coming out story hinges on a radical surprise when she suddenly feels attracted to women, with no discernible reason for this change. Edeawo states, “I remember the first time I caught myself looking at a woman’s legs and ass in the ‘wrong way.’... I was looking at Donna daily, constantly, with pure lust. I did not know what the hell was wrong with me” (50). Edeawo does not describe feeling “different” as a child as in a typical coming out story—instead she notes being “boy crazy” as a teenager (47). Edeawo’s story offers an example of how a discourse of surprise might forgo backwards birthing and in such stories the emergence of same-sex attraction is a complete surprise. However, other stories of surprise function differently by acknowledging “clues” in adolescence that might be understood as evidence of a narrator’s lifelong LGBTQ identity, but narrators refuse to frame their stories in terms of “born gay” discourse. These stories suggest that desire might be static over life course, but the meaning of desire and how desire informs one’s identity can change. Thus, stories of surprise forgo, complicate, or outright reject the backwards birthing mechanism, even in cases when narrators

embrace the notion of an essential, innate LGBTQ identity.

Veronica Masen’s story illustrates how surprise complicates the backwards birthing mechanism when she paradoxically explains her gay identity as a sudden development, but she also asserts that her gayness had been “dormant” for most of her life (63). Masen states that she has experienced same-sex attraction since childhood, but that her orientation changed in midlife when such desires took on new significance in her life. Masen explains that her experience coming out as a middle-aged woman with a husband and children countered her assumption that those who come out in midlife had always known their authentic sexuality:

I truly believed that coming out later in life was more of a choice to reveal something known, not the unexpected appearance of something new. Most of my gay friends had always known they were gay. . . . Somehow I had made it to adulthood without understanding that one could *not know*. . . . (57, emphasis original)

Masen’s emphasis on “not knowing” suggests that gayness could be “the unexpected appearance of something new,” that is, new capacities for desires and attractions that the individual did not know she could feel. This kind of sudden surprise does not replicate a familiar coming-out story with a protagonist who knows their LGBTQ identity because it had “always” been part of their sense of self.

Even though Masen backwards births her gay identity, Masen’s story departs from “born gay” discourse when she describes her shift in identity as a surprise and a change in orientation. Masen backwards births her gay self early in her narrative, stating she wanted to kiss girls as a child, and joking about other signs of a “dormant” gay woman she sees in hindsight. She remembers her teenage crush on Kelly McGillis and states, “I know. That plus the fact that I later drove a Subaru and listened to the Indigo Girls should have tipped me off” (56). Masen calls upon these desires and interests as evidence of an authentic gay identity lurking within her, invoking ideas of an innate, stable identity. Yet, Masen’s story differs from the conventional logic of “born gay”

discourse in the way she argues her orientation, not only her self-identification, changed from heterosexual to gay: “I thought sexual orientation was hardwired. Honestly. I didn’t get that it could change” (57). Despite her lifelong desires for women, Masen insists on employing a discourse of surprise, even if it might be possible, and would perhaps be easier, for her to adhere to “born gay” discourse.

Masen’s story allows for the possibility that feelings which did not seem significant to one’s identity before—such as her early desires to kiss girls and her attractions to women—can suddenly become central to one’s self. She suggests we might be surprised by our desires as they take on new meanings in our lives, if not new forms. And such surprise does not have to signify that we misunderstood the true meaning of those desires, but rather that the meaning of desire can change over life course. A discourse of surprise complicates “born gay” discourse by allowing for seemingly impossible notions in the same story: identity is stable and innate but certain desires might suddenly, inexplicitly change who we are. Masen uses a discourse of surprise to explain her identity in a way that feels accurate to how she lived it, rather than minimizing contradiction in her story to fit “born gay” discourse.

Even as “born gay” discourse would appear to be antithetical to the possibility that identity can change, stories of surprise may call on both ideas. This startling overlapping is visible in Katherine A. Briccetti’s story that does not backwards birth her lesbian identity but then concludes by embracing the notion that identity is biologically determined. Briccetti states that she was ambushed by a sudden attraction to a woman, and she is confused by how her surprise contrasts with dominant sexual development identity theories. Briccetti asserts that after she kissed a woman for the first time, “I didn’t feel ‘gay,’ and I didn’t think being gay happened like this, so immediately. Everything I’d read suggested that people suspected they were gay at least by adolescence, and that was not my experience” (171). As Briccetti’s feelings emerged “so immediately,” she questions if her departure from the theories she read disqualifies her from

“being gay.” Briccetti attempts to backwards birth a gay identity, shifting through her past, but comes up lacking any clues about her capacity to love a woman. Briccetti notes her childhood attractions for boys and male celebrities (173), her “boy crazy” teenage years and her history of dating men (171), and she notes that even after establishing a same-sex relationship, she still had sexual fantasies about men and rarely found herself attracted to women other than her partner (173). Considering all of these factors, Briccetti’s story might initially suggest that she thinks her identity is shaped by situational factors—that she believes meeting the right person can influence identity. In this sense, Briccetti’s surprise that she could fall in love with a woman undermines the inherent stability of identity purported by “born gay” discourse.

A discourse of surprise might encompass notions about the stability of identity even as it simultaneously undermines the certainty of such stability. Briccetti reveals this contradiction when she concludes her essay by stating that she believes that she changed sexual orientation due to a hormonal flux, and she thinks “sexual orientation is probably biologically determined” and that scientists will soon discover that “fluctuat [ions]” in hormones that might cause “some of us to take detours off our genetic map” (174). Thus, Briccetti engages “born gay” discourse, but she refutes the idea that her experience is wholly reflected in it; instead she articulates a discourse of surprise that conflates concepts of biological determinism and chance occurrence. Briccetti states that her experience “didn’t feel like a choice for me, nor did it feel like I was following biological inclinations. It did seem like a predetermined path, though, a spiritual blueprint” (175). The messy slippage between surprise, biology, and spiritual destiny in Briccetti’s story creates a confusing coming out narrative that troubles any easy binary between the stability and the fluidity of identity.

The notion that identity might be (spiritually, biologically) predetermined surfaces in other stories of surprise, even as these stories ultimately convey the wild unpredictability of identity. Beth describes her surprise of falling in love with a

female friend, stressing that while a complete surprise, her new desires for a woman felt “natural” and meant-to-be:

Suddenly I felt this depth of connection to Judy that also became sexual and very much a surprise. It was as natural as anything. I had no idea that this depth of connection could be possible. It was like discovering that water was good to drink. It was so easy and natural. I thought, “This is a life partner that I have been looking for—for thousands of years.” (Cassingham and O’Neil 51)

Beth does not backwards birth her desires, but she stresses the naturalness of her new capacity to love a woman, the way that her new relationship seemed to fulfill some heretofore-unknown essential need within her. Erin Mantz describes a similar wholly surprising desire for a woman that changed her formerly untroubled identity as a heterosexual wife and mother. Mantz stresses a sudden rupture in her sexual identity, stating: “Then I fell in love with a woman. I was shocked and I was immediately absolute. I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life” (22). Like Beth and Briccetti, Mantz argues that this radical surprise occurred without any clues in her past, but that once her desires for a woman surfaced, she was clear and certain that she had “found [her] soul mate” (23). Such stories drawn on powerful cultural conceptions about finding the one person who you are destined to love, and the inevitability of becoming “who you really are.” In this way, such stories are consistent with “born gay” discourse, telling a story of realizing the authentic self. Yet, these stories of surprise will not perform an uncomplicated rendition of “born gay” discourse, and instead narrators leave lingering confusions in their stories.

Although “born gay” discourse would allow a narrator to argue that she had merely misrecognized her past heterosexual identity as her true self, narrators employing a discourse of surprise draw their audience’s attention to ambiguities in their present-day identities. Mantz finds herself reflecting on old boyfriends and asking, “Was I the same person then?” (23), without coming to an answer about how to reconcile her heterosexual past with her present. Beth’s story also ends

without piecing together a stable, coherent LGBQ identity, and she argues that after the dissolution of her first relationship with a woman she is focusing less on if she should date men or women and more on finding the kind of intense emotional connection she had with her female partner (Cassingham and O’Neil 52). A discourse of surprise inflects familiar stories about fulfilling your destiny to love the person you are supposed to love and becoming the person you are meant to be, and this inflection results in coming out narratives which leave intact confusion about identity that “born gay” discourse would explain away.

While many stories of surprise implicitly challenge “born gay” discourse, occasionally narrators overtly reject the assumption that their identity is essentially inherent to a core self. This is evident in Amelia Sauter’s story which pointedly refutes that her gay identity has been there all along: “You won’t find me rewriting history to say that I was gay all along. I was straight. Now I am gay. I won’t insult my past by saying I was in denial or confused” (242). Sauter speaks back to the assumption in “born gay” discourse that she must have been “gay all along,” arguing that sexual orientation can shift unexpectedly for some people, and that to suggest that such people were “in denial” or “confused” before that shift does a violence to their history. However, as Sauter explains her shift in orientation, she notes that she had sexual experiences with women before she came out, but she sees these experiences as merely sexual experimentation of “a curious straight girl” (237), in contrast to her experiences with her current partner that comprise a significant change in her identity. Sauter actively fights against the assumption that her past same-sex sexual experiences are significant to her present-day identity, and in doing so she raises a direct challenge to “born gay” discourse.

A discourse of surprise allows narrators to tell parts of their life stories that seem incommensurable within “born gay” discourse. Sauter refuses to embrace a notion of continuity in her story, even as other narrators might, and instead she explains her coming out in terms of the unpredictability of identity: “I am a textbook example of the fluidity of sexuality. I always thought I

couldn't change. I was wrong, and that freaks out a lot of people who are scared to imagine that one day everything they think is true and permanent could change" (242–43). Within the context of "born gay" discourse, it might be possible to for Sauter be a curious straight girl, or to have been a gay woman all along, but not to be a curious straight girl and a gay woman within the same lifetime. Yet, a discourse of surprise allows these supposedly contradictory life experiences to exist within the same story. As such, Sauter's story, like the others I have cited here, inflects the coming out story with far more contradiction and inconsistency than is conventional, and it does so in service to narrators articulating their experiences in ways that feel the most genuine to them.

However, the pressure to produce a narrative of a single, stable identity is powerful, so much so that even narratives that ostensibly refuse "born gay" discourse cannot escape that pressure entirely. A discourse of surprise produces coming out stories that seem strange or paradoxical when compared to "born gay" discourse, and this incites feelings of illegitimacy and defensiveness for some once-heterosexual-identified women. I argue that contradiction in stories of surprise does not reflect once-heterosexual-identified women's illogical thinking, as is implied in much cultural visibility of such women, but instead these stories illuminate widespread contradictions within understandings of identity that are usually ignored.

Feeling Like an Imposter: Surprise and Illegitimacy

In this section, I examine the tendency in American culture to make once-heterosexual-identified women incredible—to present them as delusional, misguided, or in collusion with homophobic rhetoric because they do not neatly replicate "born gay" discourse—and how telling incredible stories may cause some once-heterosexual-identified women to feel like

illegitimate LGBTQ people. The telling of sexual stories is an "everyday and grounded matter" (Plummer 28), and how one tells a story (or if one tells a story at all) produces real-life effects. D'Emillio stresses that the potential risk of not adhering to "born gay" discourse is losing a secure place in LGBTQ community (161). This loss is reflected in Briccetti's and Masen's stories when they describe feeling like "imposters" as gay or lesbian women because their experiences deviate from a coming out narrative in which the protagonist knows her sexuality by adolescence. Masen compares herself to her other gay friends and asserts that she never had clarity about her identity like they had: "[S]ince I lacked the sort of brazen knowledge about my sexuality that they possessed, since I wasn't *sure*, that I must, by default, be straight. That if I *knew*, I would *know*. And since I didn't *know*, I must not be" (57, emphasis original). Because her experience did not take the form of a conventional coming out story in which the protagonist *knows* in some definitive way that she is gay, Masen felt for many years that she was "straight by default." Masen argues that her lack of "brazen knowledge" stopped her from sexually "experimenting" with women because she "didn't want to be an imposter. I didn't want to take something so real and so personal and trivialize it by trying it on like a costume" (57). By this logic, if Masen did not know her sexual identity from childhood onward, she must be "an imposter," merely playing around with an identity others felt to be "so real and so personal." Briccetti similarly describes feeling as if she is not a real lesbian, although she identifies as such and has been partnered with a woman for more than 20 years: "I still feel different from some of my lesbian friends, I feel as if I've never been a legitimate member of the Lesbian Club; that I've been pretending to be someone I'm not, my internal voice chanting, *imposter, imposter*" (174, emphasis original). Because Briccetti never finds clues of same-sex attraction in her past heterosexual life, the abrupt rupture between her past and present selves causes her to question the authenticity of her lesbian identity. These feelings of being an imposter and an outlier in LGBTQ

communities call into relief the risks of telling a story that deviates from “born gay” discourse.

Even once-heterosexual-identified narrators who do not express feeling illegitimate still gesture to a cultural context in which others will question the authenticity of their LGBTQ identities. For instance, Sauter finds herself in a defensive position, compelled to react to “born gay” discourse. Sauter anticipates how her audience might not believe her or might judge her, and pre-emptly her critics by stating that she finds the notion that she was previously “in denial or confused” about her identity “insulting” (242). Similarly, she anticipates that by conceptualizing her identity in terms of sexual fluidity she “freaks people out” because she makes them reflect on how their own identity could change (242–43). In such moments, Sauter seems aware that as she tells a story of surprise she will be an unbelievable or an unlikable narrator to audiences who expect a coming out story to align with “born gay” discourse. Yet by having to react to “born gay” discourse and to anticipate naysayers, Sauter demonstrates the power of dominant discourse, how even those who would claim to be breaking free of “born gay” cannot entirely do so.

Feelings of illegitimacy and defensiveness in once-heterosexual-identified women’s coming out stories exist within a larger cultural context in which women who tell stories of surprise are rendered incredible. For instance, in an April 2009 episode of daytime talk show *The View*, the hosts prepare to interview comedian Carol Leifer by discussing Leifer’s curious act of falling in love with a woman at the age of forty after having been heterosexual-identified all her life. Leifer’s experience is framed as part of a growing trend of “more and more women over forty are taking female partners.” The hosts debate why women like Leifer would suddenly partner with women, offering different reasons for such seemingly inexplicable behavior, including that perhaps women are drawn to other women for “true intimacy and companionship” as opposed to being motivated by sexual desire, or because “Maybe it’s easier for two women to find a relationship after forty than to find a man,” or that “They have been faking it

for thirty-nine years and they’re tired of doing it” (“‘View’ Sounds Off on Lesbian Love”). Thus, once-heterosexual-identified women telling stories of surprise become incredible in the sense that they are received by audiences as perplexing subjects in need of explanation, and confusion about such women is what makes them newsworthy.

Numerous other examples exist in which once-heterosexual-identified are rendered baffling in popular media because they suggest that sexual identity might change. When actress Anne Heche made statements that she “was not gay before” she met Ellen DeGeneres, news media generally represented Heche’s understanding of her identity as delusional. Upon her breakup with DeGeneres and subsequent marriage to a man, Heche’s same-sex attraction was largely represented as disingenuous and merely attention-seeking.⁴ In a more recent example, actress Cynthia Nixon faced a blogosphere backlash in 2012 when she argued that after falling in love with a woman in midlife she does not identify as bisexual but rather as gay by choice.⁵ Both Heche and Nixon were met with hostility from gay and lesbian pundits because their understandings of their sexual identities centered surprise, fluidity, and choice, and thus they were accused of playing into homophobic rhetoric. More generally, mainstream media coverage treated Heche’s and Nixon’s explanations of their sexual identities as impossible, and each of their stories of surprise was contained by imposing a socially legible identity label on them: Heche represented as heterosexual—a fake lesbian—and Nixon was compelled to release a statement clarifying that she is “technically” bisexual and that people cannot choose their sexual orientation (Grindley). Thus, it is all too easy and too common in American culture for once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise to become incredible.

The tendency to render once-heterosexual-identified women as incredible merely displaces larger cultural confusion about sexual identity on to women who shift sexual identities as adults. Once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise knot together supposedly antithetical ideas about the stability and unpredictability of

identity, and this leaves them vulnerable to being rendered as incredible. Yet, while this contradictory mix of ideas becomes especially visible in stories of surprise, it is at work in discourse about sexual identity in American culture more generally. As Sedgwick notes, “minoritizing” and “universalizing” views of homosexuality—the idea that homosexuality is a stable, discrete identity that impacts a small group of people and the idea that homosexuality is a diffuse, unstable set of desires that could affect anyone—operate simultaneously in Western cultures. Sedgwick argues that these contradictory views of homosexuality are crucial in shaping ideas about sexuality—for instance both operate simultaneously in the “homosexual panic” defense⁶—and yet this contradiction is largely ignored (9). Furthermore, D’Emilio points out that having experiences that are incommensurable with “born gay” discourse is not unique to once-heterosexual-identified women, as many LGBTQ-identified individuals may have “heterosexual impulses and experiences” that are more significant to their sense of self than they would readily admit (161). What is unique about once-heterosexual-identified women’s stories of surprise is not that they contain contradictory ideas about sexual identity, or that such women have inconsistent sexual histories, but that these stories actively call audiences’ attention to contradiction and inconsistency. Rather than viewing a discourse of surprise as evidence that multiple, mutually contradicting understandings of sexual identity co-exist, it is more common for once-heterosexual-identified women to take on the burden of being incredible even as the paradoxes they call attention to are not unique to them.

Conclusion: The Political Possibilities of Stories of Surprise

Stories of surprise offer opportunities to imagine LGBTQ rights rhetoric in different terms than

the reductive “born gay” vs. “choice” binary—a binary that has painted many LGBTQ rights advocates into a corner over the past 30 years, making their rhetoric dependent on biological determinism and normativity (Warner; Duggan; Fetner; Walters). Instead of fearing how a notion of surprise might be co-opted by homophobic proponents, I propose that we imagine surprise as one discourse with which to advocate for LGBTQ rights among many, including “born gay” discourse.

Over twenty years ago Sedgwick asserted that instead of getting caught up in debates about if homosexuality is the product of “nature” or “nurture,” a better strategy is to celebrate a vast diversity of “gay origins” (44). Those of us who agitate for LGBTQ rights would do well to heed Sedgwick’s call to affirm multiple understandings of LGBTQ identities, rather than approaching individuals who deploy a discourse of surprise as incredible subjects. As I have shown, for some individuals surprise is the most accurate way to describe their experiences. Voicing and validating stories of surprise expands the discursive resources we have available to talk about sexuality, and creates more language that reflects the unpredictability that living entails. Of course, even if stories of surprise become more socially legible there will continue to be individuals for whom “born gay” discourse most accurately describes their experiences. “Born gay” discourse in and of itself is not inherently flawed, rather, it is the dominance of a single discourse with which to make sense of LGBTQ identities that is harmful to individuals and stifling to LGBTQ movements.

Widespread perception prevails that even if some LGBTQ people understand their identities as outcomes of choice, fluidity, environment, or surprise, LGBTQ advocates and allies should invoke “born gay” discourse in public forums, since these other discourses are too confusing or dangerous to be politically effective. However, the perception that “born gay” discourse is the only effective discursive tool for securing LGBTQ civil rights is not correct. For instance, Weber highlights how the notion of choice has been successfully employed for LGBTQ political gains,

when choice has been used to liken sexual orientation to religious freedom. This LGBTQ-affirming use of choice asserts that even if individuals choose their religion, they are still legally entitled to be protected from religious discrimination, and likewise, even if an individual chooses to be LGBTQ, it is unconstitutional to discriminate against them (697). Weber notes that same-sex marriage in Iowa was won using similar arguments that stated that even if individuals could choose their sexual orientation, “queer people’s experiences are so central to their identities that denying them access to the rights of heterosexuals unless they change their sexuality is unconstitutional” (696–697). While an LGBTQ-affirming discourse of choice offers different possibilities than a discourse of surprise, I offer this example to speculate how surprise might revitalize LGBTQ rights rhetoric and provide effective tools for political organizing. The increased cultural visibility of stories of surprise may offer opportunities to change the conversation around LGBTQ rights, to move away from the “born gay” vs. “choice” binary. What if instead of viewing LGBTQ equality as necessary for a discrete group of sexual minorities, we viewed LGBTQ equality as necessary for all people, because desire is unpredictable and life is uncertain? What if instead of solely fighting for our present-day selves we were fighting for our potential future selves as well? Such a rhetorical move takes the impetus off of LGBTQ people to prove that their identities are essential and stable, and envisions expansive LGBTQ rights movements that involve people of various sexual identities, people who may have the capacity to embody many sexual identities over the course of a lifetime. Political rhetoric shaped by a discourse of surprise may seem dangerous in this current moment because it challenges the heterosexual/homosexual binary, a challenge “born gay” discourse evades. However, rather than relying on “born gay” discourse because it seems more reliable, a discourse of surprise offers more transformative political potentials to create LGBTQ social justice movements that give voice to the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways people understand their sexual

selves, and such movements might create solidarity between an expansive web of individuals.

Although stories of surprise are rendered incredible in American culture, at the same time these stories are gaining visibility, perhaps becoming more credible as possible stories to tell. Alternative understandings of identity as unpredictable are bolstered by increasingly popular scientific research arguing that women are inherently more sexually fluid than men (Peplau; Chivers et al.; Diamond). More cultural criticism is needed to investigate the gendered implications of the fact that women are commonly believed to be more sexually fluid than men yet authentic LGBTQ identity continues to be defined as stable throughout life course. In addition, more research on individuals who tell unconventional coming out stories would further illuminate the construction of LGBTQ identities in the contemporary moment.

Once-heterosexual-identified women’s alternative discourse of surprise draws attention to the cacophony of “scripts” of sexual identity in this era (Vicinus). Being reminded that a diversity of discourses about sexuality circulate in any single era compels us to hear more varied ways of being LGBTQ. For scholars, stories of surprise raise the challenge to investigate and document contemporary American culture while accounting for contradictory, overlapping conceptions of sexual identity that constitute this moment.

Notes

1. The narratives in this article are told exclusively by cisgender lesbian-, gay-, bisexual-, queer, and unlabeled-identified women. I refer to these narrators as “LGBTQ” to avoid conflating transgender women’s experiences of sexual fluidity with cisgender women’s experiences. I will use the term “LGBTQ” when referring to broader movements that include trans people and issues. I will use “LGBTQ” or “gays and lesbians” when referencing texts or movements that only focus on these groups.

2. Martha Vicinus reminds us of this fact by showing how several different “scripts” of lesbian identities co-existed in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. Vicinus argues that historians must construct a lesbian history that can account for a wide array of conflicting, incomplete, or confusing scripts of lesbian identity, as opposed to crystallizing single scripts as the definitive model of lesbianism in a particular era.

3. For example, many scholars note the ways that Radclyffe Hall aligned her iconic 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, with Havelock Ellis' theories of congenital inversion (Newton; Faderman; Vicinus; Weber). Vicinus argues that theories about homosexuality as "an innate, and therefore unchangeable, defect" were desirable to Hall because they carried "the status of scientific veracity" (488).

4. For instance, Heche was treated as incredible during her 1997 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Heche's comment, "I was not gay before I met [Ellen]," was met by Winfrey and audience members with bewilderment (lolluzza91). Some gay and lesbian activists and cultural workers perceived this comment as controversial, see "The Happy Couple" (Vilanch) and "Chasing Anne" (Koehl and Gordon). After Heche's breakup with DeGeneres, she became an easy joke as a fake lesbian, such as in a 2009 *Advocate* article which quipped: "While Vanessa Redgrave and Anne Heche both starred in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, only Redgrave went on to win an Emmy. Some people are just better than others at acting like lesbians" (Kilmer-Purcell).

5. In a January 2012 *New York Times* interview, Nixon stated that she received resistance while giving a speech at a gay rights event which included the line, "I've been straight, and I've been gay, and gay is better" (Witchel). Nixon elaborated on her comment in the interview, stating, "[the event organizers] tried to get me to change it, because they said it implies that homosexuality can be a choice. And for me, it is a choice. I understand that for many people it's not, but for me it's a choice, and you don't get to define my gayness for me" (Witchel). Nixon's comments incited a flurry of responses, including critics who accused her of playing into homophobic rhetoric about gayness as a reversible lifestyle choice (Aravosis).

6. The "homosexual panic" is a legal defense in which a heterosexual defendant argues that the sexual advances or flamboyant behavior of a homosexual victim triggered a violent attack. The perpetrator's defense upholds the heterosexual/homosexual binary by suggesting that no heterosexual man could withstand homosexual advances without being compelled to violence. Yet, this defense also points to an underlying uncertainty about the stability of sexuality, suggesting that a heterosexual could be turned by the sexual advances of a homosexual, hence, why violent force was necessary as protection (Sedgwick 19–20).

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