

Rethinking LGBTQ+ Visibility

– Julia Serano



Anchor Distro
anchor.noblogs.org

Distributed by Anchor Distro in June 2023

This zine is the adapted version of an article written by Julia Serano and posted on her [Medium](#) in 2019.

Redistribute, adapt, shorten, and improve this text however you want.

Visibility is an often-stated goal of Pride celebrations, and LGBTQ+ activism more generally. Gay rights pioneer Harvey Milk championed the idea in his famous 1978 speech:

*We must continue to speak out. And, most importantly, most importantly, every gay person must come out. As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family. You must tell your relatives. You must tell your friends, if indeed they are your friends. You must tell your neighbors. You must tell the people you work with. You must tell the people in the stores you shop in. **Once they realize that we are indeed their children, that we are indeed everywhere, every myth, every lie, every innuendo will be destroyed once and for all.***

While visibility has played a vital role in enabling contemporary LGBTQ+ people to find one another and share resources, we should reject the premise that it automatically fosters acceptance.

Earlier this decade, people were celebrating the “transgender tipping point” — a period of increased visibility that included the success of actress Laverne Cox and the highly public coming-out of Caitlyn Jenner. As a trans activist, I routinely come across people in the straight mainstream who believe that this visibility signaled that transgender people are now fully accepted by society, when nothing could be further from the truth. These people are often surprised when I tell them about the onslaught of anti-transgender legislation, policies, and organized disinformation campaigns that have arisen in the years since. Or how the online harassment I face for being a public trans person has also grown considerably during those intervening years.

Sometimes being more visible simply makes you an easier target for discrimination. And the veneer of visibility may lull those who don’t personally face that discrimination into a false sense of progress.

This is not the first time that a period of increased LGBTQ+ visibility was immediately followed by intense backlash. Similar backlashes were evident in the homophobic reactions to the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s, and the flurry of same-sex marriage bans during the 2000s. Indeed, the idea that we are “everywhere” can seem quite scary to people who view us as aliens or abominations.

This is why calls for visibility almost always occur in conjunction with appeals to normalcy. The argument goes something like this: “It’s okay that we are everywhere, because *we are just like you*, except for our sexual orientation (or some other difference).” The problem is, this strategy only works for LGBTQ+ people who come across as “normal” in most other respects. It most benefits individuals who are white, middle-class, able-bodied, and relatively conventional in their lifestyle and politics. It also favors “straight-acting” LGB people, binary-identified trans women and men, and others who at least superficially seem to conform to most traditional gender and sexual norms.

In other words, when we invoke “respectability politics,” we are insinuating or

conceding that *some* LGBTQ+ people — those who are multiply marginalized, and those who offend or confuse straight sensibilities — are “unrespectable,” and thus undeserving of legitimacy. This not only disenfranchises many in our community, but it severely limits our potential progress. After all, if we petition for acceptance on the basis of our supposed normalcy, then the only things we can ask for are marriage equality, adoption within nuclear families, and legal recognition of binary transgender identities. I am not dismissing these important milestones, just pointing out that there are so many more societal changes that we should be striving to achieve.

Some critics of LGBTQ+ respectability politics have argued that, rather than assimilating into straight society, we should instead be visibly queer, and in doing so, we will subvert that system. While I am all for people being visibly queer, I don’t think that will bring on the end of our marginalization any more than behaving conventionally will. Most times when people transgress social norms, those norms remain intact. They may even become further entrenched or more strictly enforced, as we saw during the aforementioned anti-LGBTQ+ backlashes. Alternatively, initially rebellious acts may become normalized over time with little (if any) accompanying systemic change, as we are now seeing with the increasing appropriation of queer language, style, and art by the straight mainstream.

More importantly, LGBTQ+ people are heterogeneous with regards to our sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, relationships and desires, and in countless other respects. Thus, any strategy that presumes that we should all behave in some similar fashion — whether it’s in accordance with mainstream norms, or in purposeful defiance of them — strikes me as implausible.

Visibility is by no means a panacea for LGBTQ+ people. It can help raise awareness about our existence, but it may also lead some straight people to feel threatened. Visibility may provoke some to question their beliefs and expectations, while others will simply project their own misconceptions and stereotypes onto us no matter what we do. Rather than push for (or against) any one particular representation, we should instead promote the reality that LGBTQ+ communities are diverse in every possible way. Instead of calling for more visibility, let’s call for society to accept all consensual relationships and expressions of gender.