

Marriage: The New Frontier
Jess Pettitt

I sit here just a month and a few days after my wedding. Even typing that sentence seems strange.

I am on an airplane; The Out & Equal Workplace Summit is in Chicago this year. I am a die hard, activist dyke. My students even went so far as to call me a “Fierce Dyke” which I wore with boastful pride in the streets of New York City. I do trainings, consulting, teaching, mediation, facilitation, all towards LGBT Advocacy and Inclusion. I have even worked professionally as “gay for pay” on college campuses as the point LGBT person for faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding community. It was there in my office, where I was and am today, a resource for others, that I met my partner; I met my husband.

Let me back up a second. I was born and raised in Texas and got out as soon as I could. I didn’t understand sex or gender or identity let alone the social construction of these concepts and how they in themselves uphold heterosexism, sexism, and heterophobia. I knew that gay (now I would say LG) weren’t treated equally. I started being a loud (and I mean a loud) ally in high school or maybe it was middle school. Even in college and graduate school, most of my research from on Ally Identity Development. When I came out as a Lesbian in my late 20’s no one was shocked except me. I started doing LGBT service work which led to speaking and consulting gigs and a number of typical and atypical lesbian relationships. It was the teachings of my students that really got me advocating for the BT. Fluidity of sex and gender made so much sense to me once I understood the terms and the social structures they dangle from like shiny ornaments on my grandmothers Christmas tree. I realized I am attracted to what I like to call “checked masculinity” and the folks I tended to be attracted too actually looked similar. (Oddly, they look nothing like any of the women I was in a relationship with – hmm, I should call my therapist, but alas, I am on a plane). So, one fateful day, before packing up the office and going home to the stereotypical U-Haul girlfriend at home, my appointment walked into my office and changed everything – but for this paper – changed my views on marriage forever.

Loren told me that he had started transitioning and had been on hormones for a month or so. He was doing fine, but wanted to utilize this campus resource to see if he had left anything out and if I had suggestions on how to navigate the name change process on campus records. Reading him as male, I assumed he was transitioning from male to female, at which I am sure he was flattered at this gender validation on my part. Motorcycles, Peace Corps stories, home cooked meals, and long dog walks, later, I can confidently say that I married the man of my dreams; dreams I didn’t know I had or even wanted to have for that matter.

We got married, legally, in Las Vegas as the true romantics tend to do. Nevada only requires a driver’s license for identification. He and I plopped out IDs on the counter of the court house, paid our money, and without hesitation, reserve, or even a second glance we got our marriage license. Somewhere between the woman behind the glass and Elvis’s counterpart (Elvis had the day off) marching us down a white gauzed aisle, something happened. We both grabbed this heterosexual privilege with such gusto that watching the wedding video saddens me in that I didn’t even have my dyke t-shirt on, or interrupt the service demanding equality for everyone. I cried; I said “I do;” I kissed the groom. I also became a member of an institution that is historically based to ownership, sexism, capitalism, dowries, property, enslavement, and other evils that I used or maybe I still use as synonyms for the institution of marriage.

I find that I am comfortable with the word “husband” as I thought maybe I would end up one someday. Like a discount bra, wife doesn’t seem to fit (yet). I associate the word – the name – “wife” with my grandmother that cleaned and cooked and doted on her husband who had a hard day at the office that “she just can’t understand”. I ask my dyke friends, quietly, the ones I could really trust, if it is bad that I like to do laundry, keep a clean house, cook meals, and pack a healthy lunch. They are surprised at my domestication, but then that seemed to be ok with both of us – because I certainly was still a dyke.

I am troubled now with using the word partner. Some LGBT folks feel that when an “ally” uses “partner”, they may be forgetting their heterosexual privilege and by saying husband or wife (or worse spouse); they are being

insensitive. What should I use? I am more comfortable using the words partner and we don't identify as heterosexual, but heteroqueer. Is language at my disposal or yours?

Upon the announcement of our marriage or maybe the 48 hour engagement, people were shocked to say the least. I really thought folks were surprised that we would do something so quickly, spontaneously, as suddenly. What I am finding out now, is that marriage is the new frontier of sex and gender politics.

Where his friends and family, and to a large degree he himself, are dealing with gender validation both legally and socially, I am being deserted – an excommunication of sorts. There was an article recently about butch lesbians transitioning and its impact of the lesbian community. I hear people talk about when “butch isn't enough.” One woman even had the audacity to refer to Loren when introduced to the fact that I was dating a transman, that I was really “just dating a butch who could cut it.” Transitioning, much like being LGBT or queer isn't something someone would necessarily choose in our society due to homophobia, fear, hate, bias, and other yummy elements instilled in western culture. It is arduous at best and painstakingly difficult with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. However, the once labeled lesbian becoming a man isn't deemed as much of a traitor as a Fierce Dyke legally marrying a man.

Now don't get me wrong, my partner and I aren't in some kind of gender pissing contest, all though that might be fun to watch, I just think it is fascinating that we are dealing with similar things but at different time. He has spent the better part of a year explaining to his family that he is the same person just not a sister but a brother or an uncle instead of an aunt, a man instead of a woman. I am still the Fierce Dyke that marched in New York. I would think it might even be easy to see how legally marrying a transman (that must be recognized in all states) could be an activist move for marriage equality or better yet, a political loop hole to show how stupid marriage laws are in the first place. I am not getting this reaction. I am getting jealous guilt thrown my way while my Dyke Card is being devalued or even invalidated.

If marriage is “only between a man and a woman” wouldn't it be more inclusive to ask what is meant by “man” or “woman” than just asking for man and man or woman and woman marriage. Marriage, even if you, like me, disagree with the whole institution, is the fundamental way folks socialized in the west are told they can validate to themselves, their partner, friends, family, community, church, etc., that “this is the one.” Obviously, this isn't inclusive of polyamorous loving couples or polygamists for that matter, but the validation tool exists. Whether we like to or not, marriage may not just be about tax breaks and insurance coverage, but about love, sacrifice, devotion, choice, and witness. Do I think everyone deserves the chance to express this – absolutely!

Biography:

Grounded in Social Justice and Diversity, Jessica Pettitt is a highly interactive, individualized, and flexible speaker, consultant, trainer, and facilitator focusing on gender and white privilege, specializing in audiences with low knowledge levels. For more information, visit www.jessicapettitt.com.

Pettitt, J. (2007) TransOhio: Bringing Together the Ohio GLBTQI Community, October 2007, 1 (2), 4-5.