

Generation Z Reframes Gender and Sexuality

This exhibition was conceived of in 2018 as part of an initiative by LaGuardia and Wagner Archives to shed light on historically neglected groups. In this case, the objective was to center the voices of LGBTQ students at LaGuardia Community College, a CUNY school located in Long Island City, Queens. Nearly all our students were born or raised in Queens, the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world. For the most part, they are low-income in background and the first in their families to attend college. Their stories are rarely told in the media or in popular culture, much less examined in a multidisciplinary exhibit. More than anyone else, City Council Member Daniel Dromm provided inspiration for the project. Dromm, co-founder of the Queens Pride Parade in 1993, donated his papers to the Archives in 2016. His archive was the basis of our 2017 Queens Museum exhibition *The Lavender Line: Coming Out in Queens*. It helped us expand the focus of LGBTQ history in New York City to include Queens. Dromm also often reminded us that “invisibility is the greatest enemy” of the LGBTQ community.

With Dromm’s point about visibility in mind, I began to recruit LGBTQ students for the exhibition. It wasn’t easy. I attended meetings at the Straight and Gay Alliance (SAGA) club on campus to talk about the project. I explained that the exhibit would involve their participation in a filmed oral history interview, conducted by me, and a photography shoot, done by a LaGuardia photography student, trained by co-curator Thierry Gourjon. Most weren’t familiar with oral history. No one had ever asked them to reflect about their life experiences. After a few discussions, several students volunteered to participate, excited and nervous at the same time. I had preliminary conversations with them. I noted the personal nature of the exhibit and explained that I wasn’t there to probe or interrogate but rather give them a platform to talk about gender and sexuality in a way they were comfortable with. As these conversations took place, more students contacted me to participate. Apparently, I was gaining trust and credibility.

The next step was to film the formal interviews. One of my objectives as co-curator was to explore intersectional identity. My questions were basic but complex: what’s it like to be gay and Latinx? lesbian and Black? gender non-conforming and Asian? These broad questions opened many doors. The students talked about family, religion, high school, pop culture, dating apps, and more. Pretty soon I realized that we were on the verge of a breakthrough. In interview after interview, students reflected about the fluidity and flexibility of gender and sexuality. To them, these aren’t fixed and static categories. They reject traditional binaries. They use gender-neutral pronouns. It became clear that their views reflect a sizable segment of their generation – Generation Z. More than previous generations, they are reframing the ways we understand gender and sexuality. I had my thesis.

I shared my oral history findings with Thierry, who was training his students in the commercial photography program to take portraits of the exhibit participants. Thierry required his students to view the oral history interviews. They then scheduled photo shoots in locations chosen by the subjects. As a mentor, Thierry stressed not only technique but the human element of the shoot. It was particularly important for the subjects to be photographed by their peers. This

elicited a level of trust. At the end of the shoot, both the photographer and the subject were still navigating their lives in New York City as community college students.

The results were startling. The subjects stare out at the viewer earnestly and seriously, or they're looking into the distance, questioning, seeking. Clearly, they have experienced strife and even rejection. They seem to be asking, are you complicit? But there's also defiance. We know they are not defeated. There is fortitude. They are young and bold. And here's a message to those who would rather they go away: we're here to stay; we are the future. What unites these photographs is that the subjects are reclaiming the gaze. They're individuals on society's margins determining how others see them. The photographers demonstrate their skills of seeing their subjects both as individuals and as representatives of broader cultural trends.

The exhibit opened to rave reviews at LaGuardia in June of 2019 during the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Thierry and I believe that this project deserves the biggest platform possible. It will spark dialogue, promote awareness, and increase visibility. And so, we are delighted that the prestigious Leslie-Lohman Museum is transforming the project into a digital exhibit. At last, the voices of our students will be heard off campus, in places all over the globe.

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