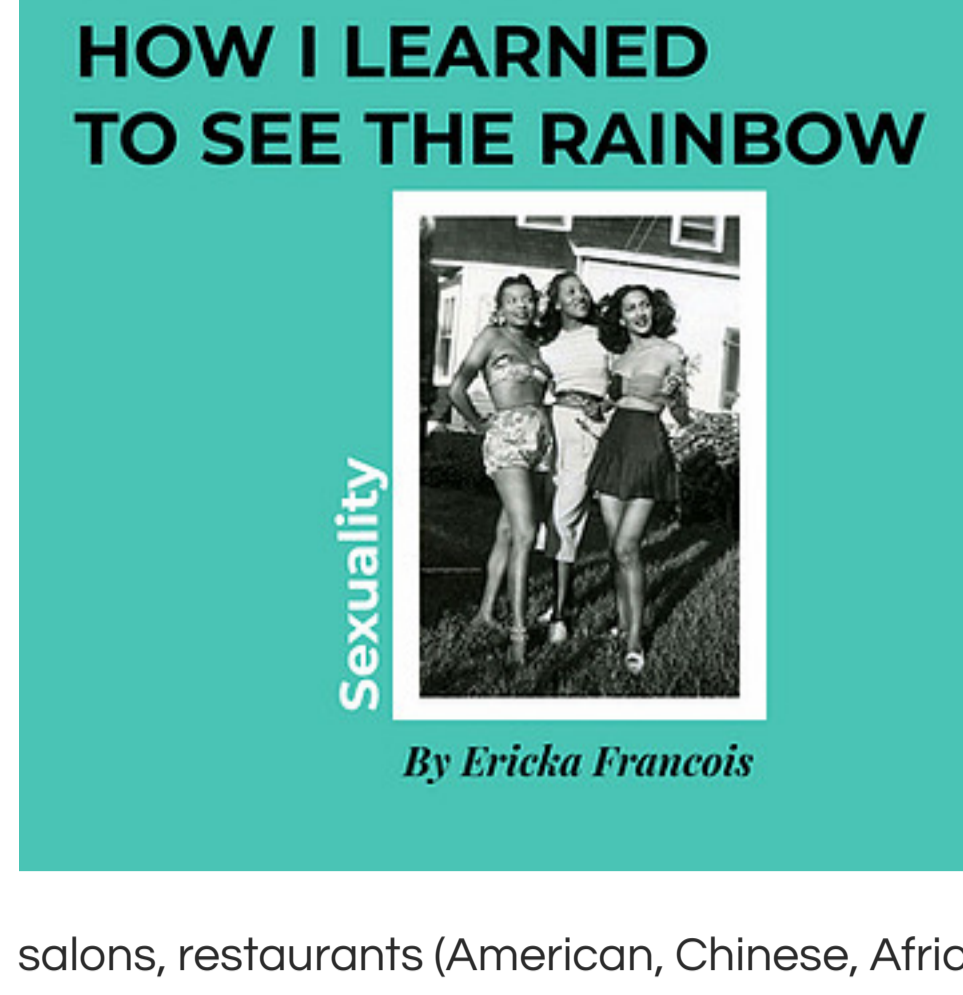


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HOW I LEARNED TO SEE THE RAINBOW

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I grew up in Brooklyn, New York and moved to different areas in my infant years. I was in East Flatbush until I was 11, and then I moved to Canarsie until I was 20. Flatbush was always busy and fairly diverse, although I'd grown up seeing more Hispanic, Arabic and black faces around.

NYC is a city where the streets are often crowded and busy. The smell of cinnamon pretzels wafting through the air as the roar of traffic fills pedestrians ears. The streets lined with corner stores, hair salons, nail

salons, restaurants (American, Chinese, African, Jamaican etc), furniture stores and plenty more, have all you ever need within walking distance.

During my countless strolls around my city when I was younger, I had on a few occasions encountered genderqueer people and felt uncomfortable, unsure of what I'd seen. Whenever my mother saw them, she'd catch my attention and show me in excitement, laughing as if they were some type of freak show. She would shake her head hysterically laughing, confused just as much as I was, but expressing it in a more troubling way.

She didn't understand what she saw even though she had been in the US for a long time, but neither did I as a pre-teen. She wasn't educated about gender expression, gender identity, race or sexuality, but neither was she educated on how to be a decent mother.

My mother is a Haitian immigrant and my father African-American, both racially identified as Black. They don't think about gender or gender fluidity, however they are aware of sexual orientations and representations--just ignorant about most of it.

My dad grew up in Virginia Beach, he was raised in an environment that embraced close-mindedness. I remember visiting my uncle down there and he told me,

“If there weren't any women on this Earth, man I'd kill myself. I just ain't living with all men.”

My father had lots of exposure to different racial groups growing up but my mother...not so much. They didn't have much exposure to gender expressions and identities different than their own until they both came to NYC. They immediately judged what they both had never seen or understood, as is often the case when ignorance is at play.

I have never spoken directly to my dad about non binary gender expressions, but we had debates on the way straight black cis male rappers dressed, Young Thug was one of the rappers whose sartorial choices we discussed.

“You can't be both a thug and a homo!” He insisted, When asked why, he could never give an actual logical reason other than reiterating his belief,

“The two don't mix!”

Eventually my dad became more educated about what he wasn't familiar with, and grew to be tolerant of different races and gender expressions, but not my mother. For as long as I remember, my mother has always been ignorant, persisting in stereotyping races.

My family comes from a very racially diverse background, so meeting others of different races wasn't anything new to me. The schools I attended were also very racially diverse and I appreciated being in an environment that tolerated different cultures.

I was confused about the concept of race for a very long time because while it was fine to make fun of different races in school, when a Black person was made fun of it was problematic. I never found it fair until someone told me that Black people can't be racist because they're systematically oppressed, we are only prejudice against other races, but not racist. The only people who can be racist were White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASPs).

I didn't know this was a thing because I believed that my own mother was racist towards her own kind. She always made a lot of derogatory and stereotypical remarks about people who were Black or Hispanic. She always told me growing up to make sure that my first boyfriend was White, because Black and Latino men didn't have respect for their women or properly father their children.

In school we were mainly taught about the accomplishments of white male figures, learning about black contributions only during Black history month. Sexuality and gender were kept simple when taught within the walls of our classroom. There were heterosexuals and homosexuals, no other forms of sexual orientation. And what a person appeared to be is what they were, either female or male.

I was never taught by my parents or any family relative accurate and vital things about gender, sexuality or race. Unlike those around me, I never laughed at or made a mockery of people different from me, even despite the biases I held to myself, I was always just curious to know more.

I just didn't have access to the right sources.

I went to a private all girls high school because my grandmother was frightened that I wouldn't cut it in the public school system. She worried that I would be easily distracted by boys, hang with the wrong crowd and inevitably become a statistic, a pregnant Black teenage drop-out.

Being around girls for all four years of high school, was an overwhelming learning experience as a straight cis black woman. Throughout my time there I watched as girls made out in staircases, dated each other and even fought over who belonged to whom. I paid attention to how girls were confused about their sexuality, there were those who knew with certainty their orientation and those who didn't, and I watched those who were uncertain, break the hearts of those who were.

Majority of the females identified as gay within the school walls because they were attracted to girls, but as soon as the last bell rang for dismissal, they had boyfriends picking them up. Being gay in my school appeared to me as the trendy, fun and cool thing to do (The irony of it was that it was only cool female to female, not male to male). So being straight, I was the target of mockery from some my classmates,

“Are you serious? You've never done anything with a girl before? You're so innocent!”

It made me feel like an outcast, as if I was abnormal.

At the start of high school, I met people from various backgrounds, gender identities and sexual orientations. Jade was one of them. I met her freshman year and grew to know her as a friend gradually. Our complexion, facial features and body type often had us mistaken for sisters.

As sophomore year came upon us, I learned that Jade identified as bisexual. Hearing this at the time, left me jarred.

I was nervous at the thought that a girl that I was fairly close to was gay. I worried that she was attracted to me and had befriended me with an ulterior motive.

It left me unnerved.

Unfortunately it didn't help that Jade--whom I thought was genuinely my friend--was sexually attracted to me. Certain I didn't like women, but curious and terrified, I let her do whatever she wanted to me during a visit to my home. I felt pressured and like I didn't have a choice. And when she was done, after she left, I cried and told my grandmother a lie about what happened, too ashamed to tell the complete truth, she just knew that I was harassed but not how.

My grandmother was raised in an environment that shunned the LGBTQIA community. She grew up a Methodist Christian and was taught that queer people were unnatural. She believed they had a chemical imbalance in their brain or perhaps even that the “devil” was hidden inside of them. Once I told her what happened between Jade and I, she became even more hateful of the community.

“Why would you let that trashy girl inside my house, didn't you know any better?”

Her response to me when I told her about what happened with Jade was when I learned to stop opening up to my family, to never communicate.

I was victim-blamed.

It reminded me why I had feared opening up about being raped when was 11. Four years before my experience with Jade.

It didn't stop there, I was often in situations where a girl in school would mention her sexual orientation, tell me that she was interested and try to coerce me to sexually engage with her. When I refused, I would be sexually harassed and assaulted, as if saying “No” wasn't enough, as if saying no still meant consent.

I never spoke about being sexually harassed by the girls in my school, because I figured it wouldn't matter and that the incidents wouldn't be taken seriously.

My experiences taught me that not only men were capable of assault, but also women too.

Over time through learning, I grew to let go of stereotyping the intentions of gay and bisexual girls. I learned to distinguish when someone was attracted to me and when they were just simply queer. Becoming close friends with a group of queer girls taught me a lot, for one they respected and accepted my sexual orientation. They never made me feel inferior, and they never tried to change me or coerce me to engage sexually with them or other women.

It taught me that manipulative people are ones to watch out for, and they are present in every race, sexual orientation and gender identity. And that stereotyping an entire community for the actions of the few, is who I never wanted to be.

I am proud of unlearning my biases, and ridding myself of the beliefs I was raised to have. I am proud of being an ally of the LGBTQIA community, and having several close friends who are part of it. Unlike my parents and grandmother, I feel fortunate to have learned different beliefs, even despite my experiences.

Therapy helped a lot with helping me accept my experiences, and it taught me to not let it restrict me from growing out of my, and I conditioned comfort zone. Fear didn't stop me from getting to know more queer people, and I didn't let my past beliefs and experiences dictate my future.

I made sure that I educated myself and became not just neutral--but accepting--towards those who were different from me.

Different didn't mean inadequate, it just meant being colorful when everyone was black and white.

Words by Ericka Francois.
(Edited by TGLM)

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