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New Homonormativity's Dividing Practices**

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'Good Gays' Versus 'Bad Queers'
New Homonormativity's Dividing Practices

TJ Rivera and Gregory Bracken

The Netherlands is one of the best places to live if you're a member of the LGBTQIA+ community: same-sex activity has been legal since in 1811; it was the first country in the world to allow same-sex marriage in 2001; and couples can adopt children. There is, in effect, no difference between being 'gay' or 'straight' except in how people choose to constitute their families and living arrangements.

This article traces the journeys taken by two gay foreigners living in the Netherlands: Gregory Bracken, an Assistant Professor in Urbanism originally from Ireland, and TJ Rivera, a graduation-year masters' student in Architecture originally from the Philippines. These are our personal stories, both different yet with oddly similar trajectories. This is perhaps because we're both from devoutly Catholic countries where we were seen as 'bad queers' – using Carl Stychin's memorable terminology (1998). In the Netherlands, however, we're 'good gays' and these are our personal reflections on how this came to be. Our stories will hopefully help you understand the journeys we've taken to becoming accepted as citizens here, despite our difference from the majority in a heteronormative society. And while our stories are positive and our own personal and professional outlooks optimistic, we end this piece with a warning about the **internal struggles in the LGBTQIA+ community because of** new homonormativity's dividing practice which are in danger of fragmenting it along dangerous new lines of race, class, and gender.

Gregory's story

I grew up in rural Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when the country was poor and socially conservative. The Catholic Church also had a huge amount of power – priests and nuns basically ran the school system, both state and private, and bishops (following instruction from Rome) were listened to by politicians. This was a time when same-sex activity (between men) was a crime, you could actually go to prison for making love to someone. You could also be abused, made fun of, beaten up (something called 'queer-bashing'). Ordinary people would just shrug and think it was your own fault, that it wouldn't happen if you just acted 'normal'. Queer-bashers even saw themselves as providing a service to society (see van der Meer 2010). Apart from that, there was no divorce and no abortion (women 'took the boat' to England to have the procedure). This all changed in the 1990s, in large part thanks to the European Union because in order to get much-needed development funds Ireland had to sign up to European institutions and their values. Homosexual acts were decriminalised in 1993, divorce legalised in 1996, same-sex marriage allowed in 2015, and abortion (with caveats) in 2018. The 1990s also saw the implosion of the Catholic Church's influence. The population had become less religious (and a good deal richer) but there was also a series of scandals involving child abuse which, almost worse, were covered up by the Church authorities.

I came out to my parents in 1987. I was 19. After years of anguished soul-searching I finally realised that I was – horrified gasp – gay. This was a new word back then but it

seemed to describe my feelings, even if I hadn't acted on them. My parents were not happy, to say the least. My father wanted to kick me out of the house; my mother's compromise was to send me to conversion therapy – it didn't work. I also met someone around this time and, once I'd actually acted on my feelings, I knew I was right about them. And while this was liberating, the implications of such a realisation were scary. However, I came out to my classmates a year or so later (I was studying architecture in Dublin). They thought I was very brave and were incredibly supportive. I started going out on the gay scene, such as it was in Dublin in the late 1980s. I dated, I fell in love, I had my heart broken (twice). Then I met the love of my life. He was in Ireland on business and had missed his plane so decided to go for a drink one rainy night in October 1991 – we're still together.

I got my B.Sc.Arch. and moved in with my boyfriend after two years of a long-distance relationship (he's Dutch). We moved to Bangkok for his job; I got a job as an architect. We then moved to Singapore and after about fifteen years in Asia I came to TU Delft to do a masters (and never left). My parents, in the meantime, had reconciled themselves to who I was, and to my relationship (they could not, however, reconcile themselves to each other and were some of the first people to avail themselves of Ireland's new divorce laws). To be fair, they were always nice to my boyfriend.

I'm now an academic, a home-owner, an EU citizen living in the Netherlands, protected by all the laws that the LBGTQIA+ community has fought so bravely for since the 1960s. I'm indistinguishable from any other citizen. I pay my taxes, I vote (although I'm not allowed to vote for everything as I'm not actually Dutch). No one cares who I am, or what my sexual orientation is, or who I live with. It's certainly not the life a gay man was expecting to lead when I came out all those years ago but it's what I always wanted – to be simply accepted for who I am; to be respected for what I do; to live with the man I love, and to have that slight difference in my character – my being gay – treated as the irrelevance it is. In other words, I fit in – I've gone from being a bad queer to one of the good gays.

TJ's story

Growing up in the Philippines, being gay was more than just a stigma – it felt like a joke. I was constantly surrounded by the notion that queer people were destined to be comedians, as if society had already decided that we were here to entertain. I saw how queer people around me were treated: laughed at, discriminated against, and sometimes even physically and mentally abused. It seemed like we were automatically labelled as 'bad queers', misfits who didn't belong. Living in a country steeped in traditional Asian and Catholic values only made things harder. I went to church every Sunday, and every school day began with a mass. In this environment, homosexuality wasn't just taboo – it was sinful. I knew I was gay from a young age, but I felt I had to suppress it to meet everyone's expectations. I remember praying, over and over, asking God to take away what I saw as a sickness inside me. I just wanted to be 'normal', to fit perfectly into the society I was born into. I was desperate to be accepted.

From early on, I was taught what it meant to be queer in the Philippines. Being gay meant you were destined to work in a beauty salon, one of the few places society allowed us to exist without much scrutiny. I was told that being queer meant being at the bottom of the social ladder, labelled *salot sa lipunan* (a menace to society). It felt like I was doomed before I even had a chance to prove myself. The message was clear: being gay meant being less than, no matter who I was or what I could achieve.

But despite all the negativity, I couldn't ignore the strength of the queer people around me – the 'bad queers', as society might call them. They were the drag queens, the activists, the people who refused to shrink themselves to fit the world's narrow expectations. I watched as they pushed back against the discrimination we faced, questioning the very systems that oppressed us. While they were often ridiculed, they were also the ones forcing society to pay attention to issues that were otherwise ignored. It became clear to me that these bad queers were actually pioneers of change. Without them, there would be no progress.

When I moved to the Netherlands at the age of 14, things shifted. I found myself becoming what I now recognize as a 'good gay'. It wasn't something I consciously chose, but more of a natural adaptation. It was as though there were unwritten rules – hidden etiquettes – about how to be a good gay in this new environment. Being queer here was more accepted, even celebrated, but only within certain boundaries. As long as I didn't challenge too many norms or make people uncomfortable, I could fit in. I felt safer, more accepted – but I also felt like I had to conform. I had to be polite, non-disruptive, and respectable. I became the kind of gay person who could blend into society without drawing too much attention.

This contrast between my life as a bad queer in the Philippines and a good gay in the Netherlands made me question a lot about what it means to be queer in different societies. In the Philippines, the bad queers were the ones challenging the status quo, risking everything to make our lives better. They were loud, unapologetic, and sometimes seen as troublemakers, but they were also the ones pushing for real change. In the Netherlands, I felt like I was fitting into a box – one that allowed me to be gay, but only if I played by the rules. I was accepted, but it came at the cost of not challenging too much.

Looking back, I can see that both the bad queers and the good gays play a role in our community. But I can't help but feel that without the bad queers, nothing would ever really change. They're the ones who make people uncomfortable enough to reconsider their beliefs. And while it might feel safer to be a good gay, I've come to realize that comfort can come at the price of authenticity.

Now, I find myself somewhere in between. I appreciate the safety and acceptance that comes with being a good gay, but I can't forget the power of the bad queers who paved the way. I owe a lot to those who refused to fit in, and I'm learning that sometimes the only way to create real change is to challenge the norms, even if it means being seen as a bad queer.

We need 'bad queers': A warning about new homonormativity's dividing practices

Our research into queer space has revealed a worrying new trend in the LGBTQIA+ community **where privilege and discrimination are intersecting to shape new identities**. It's called 'homonormativity' (Anderson 2018; Bell & Binnie 2022; Brown 2009; Brown 2012). According to Gavin Brown, this has become an all-encompassing and politically unassailable structure (2009). Modelled on the old 'heteronormativity', it means that while society has allowed some gays and lesbians to come in from the cold – the 'good gays' – others in the LGBTQIA+ community (bisexuals, transexuals, intersex, those of ethnic minority or mixed-raced heritage – especially if they're from migrant backgrounds – and even the poor) are the 'bad queers' who are increasingly isolated.

From the point of architects and urbanists, this is most visible in city branding (Bell & Binnie 2022), where gay space is marketed as a cosmopolitan spectacle (Binnie & Skeggs 2004), a place where, for example, straight women can go for a safe brush with (mostly male) gay Otherness. Yet, this recent idealisation of public space as a site for the forging of a new type of sexual citizenship is far from straightforward (Hubbard 2001). What you get is the kind of auto-surveillance that we saw in TJ's story – the codes of etiquette that act silently to restrict conduct within a community. This ensures that the new modes of homonormativity are adhered to (Anderson 2018). This has, in turn, led to a fracturing of sexual culture, with those who do not fit in (because of gender identity, race, or even simply because they're too poor to afford to go to the commercial gay scene) being ostracised. These are the bad queers and they are being rejected not only by wider society but increasingly be the new 'good gay' citizens as well.

Good gays blend in. They tend to be middle-class, monogamous, and are (often) white. They can move into a suburb and not disrupt its equilibrium. They can afford to drink in chic gay bars and travel the world experiencing all it has to offer, with a cushion of money and privilege keeping them safe from harm. Bad queers, however, look and act differently, they're harder to place, they confuse and frighten or even disgust people – including the good gays. As a result, what we discovered was that something we thought of as uniting us – our shared experience as gay men – actually had the potential to divide us from others in the **LGBTQIA+ community, and this division actually calls into question its 'togetherness in diversity'**.

What can we do about this? Well, an intersectional perspective could be useful for understanding the ways in which homonormativity is influencing these groups' and individuals' identities and leading to new patterns of discrimination and privilege. While we will have to wait for future research to address this properly, what we wanted to do in this article was highlight how the new homonormativity's interlocking systems of power are affecting the most marginalised. This is also why we think it's important to be brave, to stand up for the rights of others – to be a bad queer from time to time. By working together we will be able to challenge this new homonormativity and create a more equitable society so that everybody gets the chance to be a full citizen, no matter how they express themselves.

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TJ Rivera is a graduation-year masters' student in Architecture. He got his bachelors in Architecture in 2023 (graduating *cum laude*). His work focusses on community building, queer theory, and diversity in architecture and the built environment. He seeks to create spaces that reflect diverse experiences, foster inclusion, and inspire social change, especially for the for LGBTQIA+ community.

Gregory Bracken is Assistant Professor of Spatial Planning and Strategy. He worked as an architect in Europe and Asia before doing his masters in Urbanism (graduating *cum laude*) and a PhD in Architecture Theory at the faculty. His work is widely published. He teaches masters' and bachelors' courses and is currently researching queer citizenship issues.

Illustrations

1. St Patrick's University Hospital, Dublin; the location of Gregory's gay conversion therapy in the late 1980s (source: <https://www.google.com>).
2. TJ and his aunt in their city church during TJ's elementary school days; here he's seen preparing for his first confession, a ritual marking the strong Catholic influence of his upbringing (source: TJ Rivera).
3. A drag queen performing a Taylor Swift impersonation at the O'Bar, the Philippines; a celebration of the vibrant queer culture that thrives despite societal challenges (source: TJ Rivera).
4. Regulierdwaarsstraat, Amsterdam; scene of the cosmopolitan gay lifestyle that underpins the new homonormativity (source: <https://www.google.com>).