

YOUR BEAUTY*

Lavender Graduation Keynote Address

Dr. Lisa Moore

Associate Professor for the Department of English, College of Liberal Arts

Delivered May 15, 2008

I'd like to thank the Lavender Graduation Committee, Ixchel Rosal, and Ryan Miller for inviting me to speak. I can't tell you how honored I am to be with you.

Looking out at your faces today, I'm moved and impressed. This is a very special group of graduates. In addition to studying, writing, computing, designing, staying up late and getting up early, sticking with it through the boring parts, and all the other skills it takes for anyone to graduate from college, you found yourselves against all odds and in the face of some significant challenges.

Just as you were contemplating college in 2003, the historic decision in Lawrence v. Texas made our state a civil rights landmark by striking down all remaining state sodomy laws, laws that had been used for decades to justify anti-gay discrimination. That same year, Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage. In the last five years, while you worked hard for the degree you are being awarded this week, court decisions upheld the rights of queer students to form student groups and finance them with student fees; to be free from homophobic harassment and bullying; and eighteen other court decisions and legal battles went our way, according to our friends at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. You might want to send them some of your graduation money.

Yet also during your college years, 13 states, including Texas, passed constitutional amendments that bar same-sex couples from marrying. And in the last five

years, almost 20% of hate crimes were motivated by sexual orientation bias, according to the FBI, and those are only the ones we know about, since six states still don't collect data on hate crimes against queers.

In spite of the violence and fear these statistics represent, you chose not just to acknowledge who you are, but to insist that who you are is worth celebrating. You got yourselves to the first-ever University of Texas Lavendar Graduation. Congratulations.

What does it mean for us—all of us—to celebrate graduation as LGBT people? After all, for us many major milestones that are conventionally supposed to be times of unalloyed celebration are kind of a mixed bag. Weddings are the classic example—the happiest days of others people's lives are often pretty hard for us. If they are legal, heterosexual weddings, we might feel resentful that our right to marry is increasingly being challenged around the country. If we go to celebrations of our friends' same-sex unions, we may be angry that even the most beautiful, heartfelt vows in the world can't bestow the couple with the more than 1100 legal rights that accrue to marriage in this country. Only one state—go Massachusetts!—recognizes same-sex marriages as legal, and just nine others and the District of Columbia recognize same-sex unions through some other means such as civil unions or domestic partnerships. And a hair-raising 46 states—including Texas—have laws on the books that restrict marriage to the union of one man and one woman.

Even births can be tricky. We have to ask ourselves—will our decisions about whether or not to have children be embraced and supported? In 2008, only ten states and the District of Columbia recognize the rights of same-sex couples to adopt—and Texas is not one of them, although it is one of the only 15 states in which second-parent same-sex

adoptions are sometimes granted. My partner Madge, who adopted our children Max and Milo, was a beneficiary of this loophole in state law, but across the border in Oklahoma Madge's parenthood is not recognized as legal, so we take the long way around when we drive north.

Even promotions—are we out at work? What kinds of barriers have we had to overcome just to show up every day as ourselves? Only ten states prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity—and again, Texas is not one of them.

So what about graduation? One of the features of LGBT life in a culture where many of us hear homophobic messages growing up is that we may come to a sure sense of our sexual identities later than our heterosexual friends. It may take some unlearning of the messages we heard from families, churches and the media—that everyone is straight, to start with; then that all LGBT people are adults living in San Francisco, not junior high school kids in Frisco, Texas; perhaps, that we will disappoint, anger, frighten or even disgust our parents, teachers and friends if we tell them about our same-sex attractions; that in any case, same-sex feelings are a phase we will outgrow; but that if we don't, we certainly cannot take our boyfriends or girlfriends to the high school prom. Would I have known enough to show up at Lavendar Graduation if such a thing had existed 21 years ago?

For me, graduation followed hard on the heels of coming out. I graduated from Queen's University in Ontario Canada, in April 1986. Just two weeks earlier I had convinced the girl I was in love with to spend exam week with me at my grandfather's empty house in nearby Prince Edward County. We became lovers, and we also studied like crazy because we both wanted to get into graduate school. We got no sleep at all. I

kept reading and re-reading the same two poems I'd studied at the beginning of my year-long eighteenth-century literature course nine months before because, enveloped in a sleepless erotic haze, I couldn't seem to quite grasp them. To this day, I remember Dryden's "Heroic Stanzas" and "Astraea Redux" as unutterably sexy poems. I think I may be alone in this, since the first memorializes the death of Oliver Cromwell and the second celebrates the coronation of Charles II. What can I say—sexy to me.

My parents flew 2500 miles from Calgary to attend my graduation. I trotted out my still-stunned ex-boyfriend, who would take a full year to believe I was seriously leaving him for a woman, to hide my newfound lesbianism from my parents. They did not meet my splinter-new girlfriend, although they had known her name as my best friend, co-editor of the university literary magazine, and companion on many adventures throughout my undergraduate years.

Because I came out pretty much as I was graduating, a lot of my friends did not have much time to get used to the idea. Several, like my boyfriend, simply did not believe me, or told me I was "experimenting" and that was nice, but I would get back to reality soon. Never happened. So it was a relief when I moved to Ithaca, New York that fall to start graduate school and found that when I told people I was a lesbian, they actually believed me. Ithaca had a friendly pansexual multi-gender gay bar, a famous women's bookstore that carried lots of exciting queer and feminist publications I had never known anything about, and a long history of grassroots activism. My education in being the professional queer I am today really began on the Ithaca Commons. But it continued on the Cornell campus, located on top of a hill with a view of Lake Cayuga, a stiff climb up Buffalo Street from downtown. There I discovered not just feminist

theory, but gay and lesbian literature and history and mentor, Bidy Martin (now provost of the university) who was making a career out of studying lesbian literature and theory. My head exploded, and so did my heart and mind.

Of course, all of you are growing up in a different world than I did. Your parents may watch Will and Grace and may have seen the Oprah episode with the pregnant transgender man. They may have loved Brokeback Mountain. Maybe they even voted against the 2004 Texas constitutional amendment declaring that legal same-sex marriages performed in other states and countries would not be recognized here. You may have received all the love and support you needed and deserved to come out early, and you may have taken your high school boyfriend or girlfriend to the Gayla Prom in Dallas or the Out Youth Alternative Prom here in Austin. But even you live in a state where, according to our friends at Equality Texas, who could also use a share of your graduation money, state law does not protect LGBT students from harassment and violence; you can be fired for being gay; while you were in college, two new anti-gay marriage laws were passed; a new hate crimes law failed to protect transgender people; and it's not illegal for a landlord to kick you out of your apartment or a business owner to refuse to serve you because you're queer. And my sense is that part of your work in college, no matter how much support you've gotten up till now, has been figuring out how to live with the reality of the homophobia you still face, the ways your culture ignores or misrecognizes you, the extra burden of being not just different but sometimes discriminated against or even hated.

And much of my work at UT has to do with giving you some tools for that fight, of reminding you that while we are sometimes hated we are even more frequently loved,

especially and importantly by one another. I've been teaching E370W, Gay and Lesbian Literature and Culture, since 1997. It's been a privilege. I've learned so much from all the students, queer and straight alike, in that class over the years. One reason I love it so much may be that I never got to take a class like it when I was in college. They say we best teach what we most need to learn. So what can I tell you that's both useful and true?

First, I want to tell you how very beautiful you are. Each one of you. You butches, you nellies, you transgenders and he/shes, you boys wearing eyeliner, you girls with chin hair and flat chests. You lovely femmes of both sexes, you androgynous bisexuals, you straight-acting, straight-appearing, self-respecting queers. Every one of you has a responsibility to believe in and celebrate your own beauty. That's especially important for LGBT people because we have may have felt that our bodies and our desires are out of synch with what popular culture tells is attractive or sexy. One of the great accomplishments of queer culture has always been to create alternative contexts—cabarets, bars, activist groups, movie nights with friends, gay and lesbian literature classes, the GSC—where the fat butch in the combat boots is the sexiest woman in the room, the skinny effeminate musical theater queen is the man everyone wants, and the willowy gender-neutral transperson is the prettiest one at the party. There are people in this world—in your world, in the world we are making together in this room and in other places—for whom the queerest things about you, the things you may have felt most ashamed of, are the very things that are going to make you special and desired and loved. Believe it—I see it.

Second, you are brave. You're here, aren't you? You survived the homophobic roommate, the bad breakup, the nervous glances at the gym or in the restroom, the phone

calls home that didn't reveal too much, the ones that did reveal too much, the professor who didn't quite get it, the courses where you never heard a word about people like you. Your courage is immense. You keep showing up, keep seeking these spaces where you can celebrate the LGBT part of who you are, and slowly you are turning down the volume on the parts of you that might be scared about what it means to go out into the post-college world as an LGBT person. Can you leave Austin? If so, can you go anywhere besides San Francisco or New York and be safe? Yes you can: you can go anywhere. The muscles of your courage are in good shape.

And finally, you're smart. I mean, really smart. Smarter than the average college graduate, because you have had to overcome significant challenges to succeed in college, sometimes just to get to class every day. Some of you battled depression during your college years; two or three times as many LGBT as straight people do. Some of you have even survived suicide attempts; up to 30% of all completed youth suicide attempts are by LGBT people. Even if things weren't that bad, you had to think your way into history classes that ignored your history, psychology classes that talked about "the family" but not yours, engineering classes where fag jokes were not only tolerated by the professor, but might even have been made by him. The brainpower it takes to learn the material in these contexts is considerable. You got an extra intellectual workout out every day in those classes. And now—you're really smart.

I'm so proud of you for making it to this day and this room. For many of you it is a risk to be here, and sadly, I know of more than a few students who were not able to make it because their families are in town. So seeing you here is incredibly meaningful to me personally. What LGBT students may not realize is that you are a crucial piece of

community for your LGBT professors. We too are isolated, sometimes scared, even harassed and discriminated against. These are experiences we know you get when our straight colleagues don't. So thank you for keeping me company for the past four years (or five—this is UT, after all). The world is lucky to have your beauty, courage and brains. You will make the world you need to live in—and indeed, you already have. Keep the faith. Peace, love, Texas.

* Do not cite without permission of the author.