



Reclaiming our Right to Darkness: Lesbians in dark spaces

On this Lesbian Day of Visibility, we wanted to share a conversation, questions and reflections from attendees at *the European Lesbian* Conference (EL*C)* in Kiev, Ukraine. Activists, equality practitioners, policy workers and allies came to the conference from Europe, Central Asia and South America to celebrate and champion lesbian visibility. My colleague and I, from Equality Network, Scotland, facilitated a workshop. What we discussed was not only important but touched on the core of being a lesbian in public space: our bodies, our emotions and our dynamic relationships with others and the non-human environment as queer people.

In this workshop we wanted to approach a very primal space: darkness. And, we would like to encourage other lesbians to think about what this space means to them too.

It is worth noting here that the EL*C uses “lesbian*” with an asterisk, you might have noticed, this is “to include anyone who identifies as lesbian, feminist, bi or queer, and all those who feel connected to lesbian activism” within the conference. Definitions of lesbian vary, but the one that Equality Network uses is that lesbian is a word describing a woman who is emotionally, romantically and/ or sexually attracted to other women.

Beginning a conversation



The room was illuminated only by projections and a faux moon, passed around in conversation, lighting people's faces

We hope that this conversation might begin to contribute to understandings of our nature connectedness as well as visceral and intangible encounters in darkness.

We hope to share in discussion about how individuals, groups and environments relate to one another and to begin to look at how the cognitive, social and cultural interrelate to create these experiences for queer people.

How is the darkness known?
How does this knowledge manifest in our experience? What do we project on to darkness and how does this affect our

own wellbeing? Is this a culturally affected phenomenon? How do we, as lesbians, interact with darkness?

We want to consider how we might reclaim our dark public spaces; How we might disarm the social and cultural construction of all dark space as 'unsafe' for us - To reflect on our experiences of darkness and on how these experiences might be affected, whilst acknowledging the necessity for self-care, reflection and awareness of one's interaction with surroundings and how this interaction is constructed. We want to discuss why it is vital to acknowledge how culture shapes the way that we can and do interact with our public spaces as lesbians.

Whether literal, physical dark spaces or emotional metaphorical spaces in the mind, 'the dark' is a space not so frequently mentioned within LGBTI discourse, and certainly not with regards to lesbians. For some this is down to the apparent decline of lesbian visibility in popular culture, something that this conference and Lesbian Day of Visibility seeks to address.

The aim of our workshop was, on paper, rather simple - to explore the relationship between lesbians and dark spaces. It is on this basis that we began our workshop. The conversation, ironically, was illuminating.

This is a short piece outlining the beginning of an important conversation between a group of lesbians in a dark room in Kiev, to start to shed light on our experiences of darkness as lesbians in contemporary European culture.

Kiev, Ukraine

When we arrived at the hotel in which the conference was to take place we were met by Kiev's National Guard, drafted in with riot gear and armed with batons to 'protect' the LGBTI people descending on the venue. A far right anti-LGBT protest had just taken place; this would be the first of several outside our venue this weekend. It was at this point as we entered that I thanked the organisers for changing the location of my workshop at the last minute under my breath (including an expletive or two!). Initially the workshop was planned to take place in a park, by the river, far more fitting, I had thought, for a workshop exploring our relationship to darkness and public outdoor space. Perhaps now more aptly, we would be indoors, and questioning, as queer people, *our lack of access to our nature, our darkness and our spaces*; A fitting example of our being unable to go wherever we want to go, specifically because we are queer, and we are women.

I would simulate the darkness outdoors, indoors. The conference had created a safe space in which, within the wider unsafe context we could ask questions and explore our relationship with the darkness. So, I invited women in to this dark room, situated next to the 'gentleman's club' on the third floor of around forty floors available within the Tourist Hotel in Kiev.

I coaxed participants in to the darkness. I watched as people peered in to the room and turned away. Some would step in and leave again. Some would come as far as sitting down and then they would leave again. People entered the room tentatively. It was not an inviting one, given the circumstances. The dark space clearly made some uneasy, one person asked apprehensively; 'will it be dark for the entire workshop, does it have to be?' The guard by the door was insistent on switching the light on. I switched it off, he switched it on again, I switched it off, and stared him down. Finally, thirty lesbians joined us, intrigued by what was happening in this dark room, with the faux moon.

There are contractions between queer people and engaging with darkness. Whilst queer behaviours were once 'rooted in the darkness, relying on the opacity of its codes – and the literal absence of light' (Stahl and Botta, 2019), "useful" tips found online (and in common conversation), encourage careful behaviours for women and queer people in dark spaces. How can one be queer (supposedly reliant on the darkness to be fully ourselves) and female (discouraged from entering the darkness at all)?

We must not dress to impress, we must be inconspicuous, cautious, we must 'understand European men' in order to be safe in dark spaces. We must stay in busy areas, at least then we know that 'if [we] scream, people will help.' We must not hesitate in these dark spaces and we must definitely not wander.

I am terrified of this dark thing that sleeps inside me...

-Sylvia Plath

We are robbed of the ability to dwell, reflect and simply be in the dark. If we then juxtapose this with the concept of dark headspace or rather, ideas of darkness in relation to mental ill health we have an intriguing dichotomy - The 'dark' is a *place* that we fear and a *place* where we do not wish to dwell, yet philosophers, shamans and

psychologists encourage us to reach in to this dark side of ourselves. Where does this leave us?

I played a video, projected and casting blue shadows across the room, the sounds and the scene of a dark woodland. I asked people to imagine being within this woodland. To sit and acknowledge themselves in this space. To think about being here, if they ever could be, and what they might feel if they were.



We sat, silent, listening to the sounds of the woodland, confronted by the darkness

Was this a space that you would, or indeed, could come to simply be? What do you feel? I asked that we sat here, still, in quiet reflection. It was telling that participants cried. I asked the question, why can't we dwell in the dark?

On reflection; More questions

It seems that the shadows induce more fear than being immersed in complete darkness, is our fear simply of the unknown?

We need to allow ourselves 'to take baby steps,' to ask ourselves, what are we uncomfortable with and why?

We need a way in which to investigate our fears, safely. We are afraid for our safety; what does this say about how far we have to come within our societies? What can we do to make this better?

Our vulnerability and anxiety reign in these scenarios, but, is this anxiety truly warranted? Or, is darkness merely constructed as a fearful place where we must not go? Is the sense of danger and our fear coming from without (a threat of violence) or from within (our own personal narratives and sense of who we are)?

For some our emotions in the dark are about attitude and acceptance; must we accept these spaces as unsafe for our interaction? Or should we consider being alert and being fearful as distinct? Can our minds protect us? Can we use fear as a tool?

Are we losing the night? What are our rights to the night? What are our rights to dark spaces? Our rights to access to nature? What do we lose when we cannot access these spaces?

Though we manifested a sense of belonging in this collective space, we are fearful of the isolated darkness. We are afraid of the unknown, the unseen.

Can we be still in dark spaces? How can we reclaim our right to be in dark spaces? How can we perform actions to reclaim this right to access safe dark spaces? How can we make dark space accessible to all? How can we build our confidence to walk and dwell in dark spaces? How can we change our mentality towards being in these spaces? How can we celebrate the darkness within and without?

Can we be safe in the darkness?

And,

What is at risk if we cannot?

- Rebecca Crowther, April 26th, 2019



Closing group photo at the EL*C, Kiev, 2019 - standing in solidarity with Mônica Benício for justice for Marielle Franco, killed in Brazil due to her activism on March the 14th 2018 – photo courtesy of the EL*C, 2019 SEE: <https://www.mariellefranco.com.br/> for more.