

# Bright Intersex Futures

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Volume 8

Issue 1

Spring 2025

**Keywords:**

*intersex,*  
*sex characteristics,*  
*celebration,*  
*pride,*  
*lived experience*

**Citation Link**

When I came out as intersex, my friend baked me a cake in the colours of the intersex flag, and my godson painted the flag on paper plates that they hung in the window to welcome me. For me, these kind actions stand for a world where there is space for me and others who might or might not use the word intersex (Davis, 2015) but share an experience of unnecessary and too often non-consensual medicalisation of their bodies and personhood (Garland and Travis, 2023) to be seen and celebrated for who we are.

The intersex flag has only existed since 2013. I got my yellow and purple cake in 2020, 24 years after I was due this second welcome. Variations of sex characteristics are discovered at different times; for some at birth, for others during puberty or when they first try out intimacy, or try for children, or later in life (spoiler alert, see the movie *Conclave*), or never (Karkazis, 2008). There are over 30 known variations of genitals (external & internal), chromosomes, hormones, gonads and secondary sex characteristics (Karkazis, 2008). I found out during puberty, and instead of grieving the decades I lost to being made to feel less than who and what I should have been, I want to imagine what could have been in a world beyond binaries – because that is the trajectory I want!

If I was to use the cake as a metaphor and consider what ingredients would have needed to be available for its existence in 1996, the first thing that comes to mind is visibility. Visibility is one of the opposites of secrets, like the yellow and purple t-shirt I have been gifted that has written “Born Perfect” on it. It’s a copy of the placard my friend made for the Pride March 2021 in London where we walked, visible to tens of thousands of people who were cheering (mostly), witnessing (White and Epston, 1990) and celebrating our existence. When I imagine my future, it has this feeling of belonging in the world without needing to be different to how I am that I took with me from that day.

With around 1.7% of the population having bodies that don’t neatly fall along the male-female divide (Fausto-Sterling, 2000), by age 16 I had for sure met a good number of intersex people, as had my parents, grandparents, teachers, peers. Perhaps someone in my extended family

has a variation. Perhaps the primary school teacher I adored is an intersex woman, or the girl I had my first crush on.

Or maybe a famous actor or politician I saw on TV growing up. It is inevitable, given the maths, that I (and everyone else) know(s) many more intersex people than I/they actually know. The ones I now know are artists, teachers, photographers, architects, social workers, academics, hairdressers, lawyers, bankers, activists – and I imagine that when finding out that I'm intersex I would have been told that I can be anything I want to be, because intersex people are valued members of society. I imagine that the doctor, who told me that I could come back for surgery when I had a steady partner, would have much preferred to have delivered this other message, given how quickly he disappeared. Instead of being worried about me and feeling guilty for something that they didn't do and that does not require guilt in the first place, my parents would have delighted in knowing that my future would hold two successful careers, lifelong friendships, singing on all the big London stages, loving partners and yes, heartbreak too, and all those ups and downs that are part of life, but overall things have worked out pretty well. Sometimes I imagine the, according to the maths, around 150.000 intersex people living in London all being out, known and loved for who they are, and the ease I imagine that might bring for talking about our life experiences in a context where intersex people are common knowledge.

Imber-Black writes “One useful way to examine narrow meanings attached to secrets is to imagine the effects of a yet-to-be-formed social movement on a particular kind of secret” (1993, p. 12). The psychologist John Money, who in the 1960s developed the surgical protocols that continue to shape the lived experiences of many intersex people in the Western world, insisted that children were not told of their surgeries, or if too old not to know should not tell others, to ensure successful identification with the assigned sex and gender: “Medical manuals and original research articles almost unanimously recommended that parents and children not receive of an infant's intersex status.” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 64). I have met people whose partners and friends didn't know they were intersex, a secret kept out of fear of rejection, and people who had siblings with the same variation without knowing this of one another – secrecy does not serve relationships well.

If my life was a train, the junctures that significantly changed my trajectory both going forward and looking back were knowledge and connection. Something about being told to keep secret who I am never felt right, despite the undoubted care and protection which inspired it; and I take my hat off to my younger self who didn't have the words or the knowledge but the guts to share her difference with others: *“I believed in talking to people about it, saying that this is how I am and that's how you need to accept me. I am not wrong, I am different, and if society would not be so ignorant and anxious about diversity, I might not have to explain this.”*, I wrote in 2006.

In trying to understand my difference I would sometimes think about not being bothered by getting glasses aged 8. Why did being intersex feel so different when both is about bodies, and why couldn't it just be like wearing glasses?

Because another key cake ingredient is whatever the opposites are of homophobia, transphobia and interphobia. It's perhaps not a coincidence that the person who made me my cake is a woman married to a woman. Accounts of my intersex ancestors, like Herculine Barbin (Barbin and Foucault, 1980) and Karl M Baer (N.O. Body and Simon, 2021) powerfully show that heteronormative, religious, patriarchal

and misogynistic dominant discourses determined how intersex people were understood: as a threat to the principles that organised life (Preves, 2003). Or in the words of a French doctor in 1899:

“The question (of mistaken sex) which occupies us has only a relative gravity if it concerns only contested heritages, electoral rights, or military service; but it is entirely otherwise when marriage intervenes. One can then be found in the presence of monstrous alliances, and see, for example, two men or two women united together, by a mistake which engenders social disorders, causes scandalous divorce, or creates some wretchedly equivocal situations.”

(Dreger, 1998, p. 120).

It has taken until April 2024 for the UN to pass its first ever resolution to combat discrimination, violence and harmful practices against intersex persons and affirm our rights (Human Rights Watch, 4.4.2024); which whilst hopeful speaks volumes about all that has not yet changed enough. It explains why there wasn't a cake in 1996.

A peer I met in 2001, who was way ahead of us all, said that she loved her variation because it made sex more creative. This is literally the opposite of a societal response to diverse bodies that continues to change children, adolescents and adults surgically to fit a binary because of a belief that this will make them and those around them happier people (Muschialli et al., 2024). I imagine this peer being in charge of sex education, and how much better everyone would be off if the key message was that all bodies are different, what people like is different so communication is what you need, not a body that fits one of two options. I imagine that the question whether I “avoid men” because of my variation would have been exposed for its homophobic roots with this approach when it first came up, or perhaps even better, it would not have come up at all. With the time and energy not spent on disentangling myself from that question I might have opened that bakery or learnt to play the cello, and maybe that is now in my future.

Recently I spotted someone on the tube with a bag in the colours of the intersex flag, and the feeling of belonging and existing I took from Pride lit up brightly. I send it back in time to the 16-year-old who deserved to know that this is possible, and I hope that the badges on my backpack and all the other ways in which I make intersex people visible will do the same for others.

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## Citation

Strzedulla, Annette (2025). Bright Intersex Futures. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 8(1), 50-53. <https://doi.org/10.28963/8.1.8>