**The Journey of Identity**

It may be hard to label oneself when one’s gender identity or sexual orientation does not fit the norm, and it may be even harder when facing pressure from others. So, **what does it feel like to be LGBTQ+?** iO Tillett Wright, the speaker of the TED talk *50 Shades of Gay*, grew up in the liberal New York City. Wright challenged gender norms as a child, pretending to be a boy for eight years until he turned 14 and decided he wanted to be a girl again. Wright is also a photographer who based his TED talk on a project he had been doing for a few years; his mission was to photograph people across America who identify as anything other than 100 percent straight. Ivan Coyote is the author of “No Bikini”, a short story from their book “Close to Spider Man: Stories”. “No Bikini” was written about an experience Coyote had as a child who challenged gender norms. Coyote grew up in the Yukon in the 1970s. **Similarly, both *50 Shades* and “No Bikini” describe the pressure one can feel to identify a certain way. However, the focus on sexual orientation in *50 Shades* differs from “No Bikini”. *50 Shades* sends a message that society has too few boxes which force one to identify in a way that may not feel right. Meanwhile, the story told in “No Bikini” explores changes in gender identity and conflicts one can face from those who don’t understand. Ultimately, both Wright and Coyote advocate that one should freely express themselves and identify in a way that makes them comfortable and confident regardless of what others say.**

Wright sends the message in *50 Shades* that society has created too few boxes for people to squeeze themselves into; the narrow categories force one’s identity into a mold. Wright’s project to photograph LGBTQ+ people across America made him realize that society had too few boxes, not too many. But, his mission was flawed in its goal to photograph gay people. This is because he was creating another box—which he has spent his life trying to avoid. Wright found out through this project that most people are not 100 percent gay or straight, but rather in a ‘grey area’ in between: “If you have gay people over here and you have straight people over here, and while we recognize that most people identify as somewhere closer to one binary or another, there is this vast spectrum of people that exist in between,” (Wright, 14:21). Although many people identify with a binary, it is not black and white. Labelling oneself when one does not identify with a binary can be difficult. Wright gave out release forms to people before photographing them; one question he later added asked them to quantify themselves on a scale of one to 100 percent gay. Wright says he “watched so many existential crises unfold” (Wright, 13:19) in front of him. People often are not given the option of quantifying themselves in such a way; a label may be forced on their identity, even if it does not fit right. Labels may help some find peace with their identity, but for others, a label may feel stifling. Wright sends the message that people should not be forced into boxes that do not fit right because they often constrict one’s identity.

When those who do not understand your gender expression or identity force their ideas of how one should act and dress according to gender norms on others, those people may feel restricted. In “No Bikini” the protagonist’s mother attempts to force a gender expression on her child by dressing the protagonist in a way they are not comfortable with and deciding on her own how the protagonist should dress. The mother and her child occasionally make compromises, such as agreeing that pink is not an option as well as other colours the child does not like. But, one’s gender expression should not be a compromise; it should be a way for one to express their own gender identity. It should be a personal choice. The protagonist says it is normal for them to hate their clothes: “I was an accomplished tomboy by this time, so I was used to hating my clothes,” (Coyote, page 47). It can be insinuated that their mother chose clothes for them that were ‘girly’ and suited the mother’s taste instead of the child’s. When the protagonist changes their gender identity, it causes a conflict with the mother. The protagonist’s bikini top did not fit them, so when they had swimming lessons they did not wear the top. No one suspected the protagonist to be anything but a boy until their mother found out at the final report card. This causes conflict between the two characters; the protagonist wants to express their gender in such a way that the mother does not agree with. The mother expects her child to dress and act like the sex they were assigned at birth; she does not provide her child with room for change: “I can’t believe you. You can’t be trusted with a two-piece.’ I said nothing all the way home. There was nothing to say,” (Coyote, page 48). The protagonist’s mother does not allow her child to express themself how they want; she has expectations of her child to act and dress in a way that fits gender roles. Those who do not understand gender expressions and identities that stray from the norm may force their expectations of how one should act and dress according to one’s gender on others. This can restrict those people; it may feel like one does not have a choice in their identity nor how they express it.

Although the difference in message, both authors advocate that one should freely express themselves and identify in a way that makes them comfortable and confident regardless of what others say. In *50 Shades*, Wright says that the boxes society has created constrict people. More boxes are needed in order for people to feel recognized and confident in their identities. Wright advocates that boxes can help one feel comfortable with their identity; although, the problem is when these boxes force people to identify a way that may not feel right. The boxes society has created to encase people’s identities are far too few: “It wasn't that we had too many boxes, it was that we had too few,” (Wright, 12:37). There are not enough boxes for the various identities people may have; these few boxes limit people’s identity to a label that may not fit right. When one is forced into one of these boxes, it may feel restricting; but when one ignores these all-encompassing boxes and finds a box that is comfortable and fits right, one may feel confident of their identity. In “No Bikini”, Coyote similarly advocates that when one freely expresses themselves regardless of what others say, they may feel confident. When the protagonist in “No Bikini” does not wear their bikini top to their swimming lessons and is mistaken for a boy, it makes them feel confident and free. The protagonist feels more confident taking risks, such as using the diving board or doing cannonballs. The water running over their back feels comfortable and natural, they don’t feel abnormal not wearing the top of their bikini: “And that I had never, not once, felt naked,” (Coyote, page 48). The protagonist feels comfortable and confident with their changed gender identity, it feels normal and right. Regardless of what the mother says, the protagonist feels comfortable and confident with their changed gender identity and how they express it. When one expresses their identity in a way that is true to who they are, one may feel more comfortable and confident than if they chose to identify in a way that makes others happy.

Similarly, both *50 Shades* and “No Bikini” advocate freedom of expression. However, *50 Shades* sends a message that the boxes society has created are too limiting. Meanwhile, the story told in “No Bikini” explores conflicts one can face from those who do not understand one’s change in gender identity. Ultimately, both Wright and Coyote advocate that one should identify in a way that is true to who they are and makes them feel comfortable and confident. In *50 Shades*, Wright discusses how his project to photograph LGBTQ+ people across America made him realize that although most people identify closer to one binary or another, there are many people who identify somewhere in the grey area between. This can make it hard for those people to label themselves as there are too few boxes to choose from; it may be hard to find one that fits right. In “No Bikini”, Coyote tells the story of a young child whose gender expression is restricted because of their mother who does not understand the child’s gender identity. “No Bikini” shows that when one changes their gender identity, conflict may arise with those who do not understand. Ultimately, both authors advocate that one should freely express themselves and their identity in a way that is true to who they are and makes them feel comfortable and confident. Similarly, both Wright and Coyote urge people to identify in a way that is true to who they are because it may allow one to feel comfortable and confident. Being LGBTQ+ may make one feel misunderstood by others as well as ill-defined and generalized by society; but, it may also make one feel confident, comfortable, and free when able to express oneself.

**References**

“No Bikini.” *Close to Spider Man: Stories*, by Ivan E. Coyote, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2005.

Wright, iO Tillett. “50 Shades of Gay,” *TED*, Dec. 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/io\_tillett\_wright\_fifty\_shades\_of\_gay.