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How to Be Gay

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The first hint of trouble came in an e-mail message. It reached me on Friday, March 17, 2000, at 4:09 p.m. The message was from a guy named Jeff in Erie, Pa., who was otherwise unknown to me.

At first, I couldn't figure out why Jeff was writing me. He kept referring to some college course, and he seemed to be very exercised over it. He wanted to know what it was really about. He went on sarcastically to suggest that I tell the executive committee of the English department to include in the curriculum, for balance, another course, entitled "How to Be a Heartless Conservative."

It turned out that Jeff was not alone in his indignation. A dozen e-mail messages, most of them abusive and some of them obscene, followed in quick succession. The subsequent days and weeks brought many more.

Eventually, I realized that earlier on that Friday, the registrar's office at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where I teach English, had activated its course-information Web site, listing the classes to be offered during the fall term. At virtually the same moment, the Web site of the *National Review* had run a story called "How to Be Gay 101." Except for the heading, the story consisted entirely of one page from Michigan's newly published course listings.

So what was this story that was too good for the *National Review*, which had evidently been tipped off, to keep under wraps for a single day? It had to do with an undergraduate English course I had just invented called "How to Be Gay: Male Homosexuality and Initiation."

The course examined how gay men acquire a conscious identity, a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, a distinctive sensibility. It was designed to explore a basic paradox: How do you become who you are? Or, as the course description put it: "Just because you happen to be a gay man doesn't mean that you don't have to learn how to become one."

The course looked specifically at gay men's appropriation and reuse

of works from mainstream culture and their transformation of those works into vehicles of gay sensibility and gay meaning. The ultimate goal of such an inquiry was to shed light on the nature and formation of gay male subjectivity, and to provide a nonpsychological account of it, by approaching homosexuality as a social, not an individual, condition and as a cultural practice rather than a sexual one.

Those who study gay male culture encounter an initial, daunting obstacle: Some people don't believe there is such a thing. Although the existence of gay male culture is routinely acknowledged as a fact, it is just as routinely denied as a truth.

That gay men have a specific attachment to certain cultural objects and forms is the widespread, unquestioned assumption behind a lot of American popular humor. No one will look at you aghast, or cry out in protest, or stop you in midsentence, if you dare to imply that a guy who worships divas, who loves torch songs or show tunes, who knows all Bette Davis's best lines by heart, or who attaches supreme importance to fine points of style or interior design might, just possibly, not turn out to be completely straight.

When a satirical student newspaper at the University of Michigan wanted to mock the panic of one alumnus over the election of an openly gay student-body president, it wrote that the new president "has finally succeeded in his quest to turn Michigan's entire student body homosexual." Within minutes, the paper wrote, "European techno music began blaring throughout Central and North Campus." A course in postmodern interior design became mandatory for freshmen, and "94 percent of the school's curriculum now involves show tunes."

This is the stuff of popular stereotype.

Perhaps for that very reason, if you assert with a straight face that there is such a thing as gay male culture, people will immediately object, citing a thousand different reasons why such a thing is impossible, or ridiculous, or offensive, and why anyone who says otherwise is deluded, completely out of date, morally suspect, and politically irresponsible. Which probably won't stop the very people who make those objections from telling you a joke about gay men and show tunes—even with their next breath.

Happily, some large cracks have lately appeared in that fine line between casual acknowledgment and determined denial. At least since the success of such cable-television series as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, it has become commonplace to regard male homosexuality as comprising not only

a set of specific sexual practices but also an assortment of characteristic social and cultural practices.

This flattering image of gay culture—of gayness as culture—is not entirely new, even if its entry into the stock of received ideas that make up the common sense of straight society is relatively recent. That gay men are particularly responsive to music and the arts was already a theme in the writings of psychiatrists and sexologists at the turn of the 20th century. In 1954 the psychoanalyst Carl Jung noted that gay men "may have good taste and an aesthetic sense." By the late 1960s, the anthropologist Esther Newton could speak quite casually of "the widespread belief that homosexuals are especially sensitive to matters of aesthetics and refinement."

Richard Florida, an economist and social theorist (as well as a self-confessed heterosexual), may have given that ancient suspicion a new, empirical foundation. In a series of sociological and statistical studies of what he has called the "creative class," Florida argues that the presence of gay people in a locality is an excellent predictor of a viable high-tech industry and its potential for growth. The reason is that high-tech jobs nowadays follow the work force, and the new class of "creative" workers is composed of "nerds" and oddballs who gravitate to places with "low entry barriers to human capital." Gay people, in this context, are the "canaries of the Creative Age." They can flourish only in a pure atmosphere characterized by a high quotient of "lifestyle amenities," coolness, "culture and fashion," "vibrant street life," and "a cutting-edge music scene." And so the presence of gay people "in large numbers is an indicator of an underlying culture that's open-minded and diverse—and thus conducive to creativity."

All of which provides empirical confirmation, however flimsy, of the notion that homosexuality is not just a sexual orientation but a cultural orientation, a dedicated commitment to certain social or aesthetic values, an entire way of being.

That distinctively gay way of *being*, moreover, appears to be rooted in a particular queer way of *feeling*. And that queer way of feeling—that queer subjectivity—expresses itself through a peculiar, dissident way of relating to cultural objects (movies, songs, clothes, books, works of art) and cultural forms in general (art and architecture, opera and musical theater, pop and disco, style and fashion, emotion and language). As a cultural practice, male homosexuality involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture. As a result, certain figures who are already prominent in the mass media become gay icons: They get taken up by gay men with a peculiar intensity that

differs from their wider reception in the straight world. (That practice is so marked, and so widely acknowledged, that the National Portrait Gallery in London could organize an entire exhibition around the theme of Gay Icons in 2009.)

What this implies is that it is not enough for a man to be homosexual in order to be gay. Same-sex desire alone does not equal gayness. "Gay" refers not just to something you *are*, but also to something you *do*. Which means that you don't have to be homosexual in order to do it. Gayness is not a state or condition. It's a mode of perception, an attitude, an ethos: In short, it is a practice.

And if gayness is a practice, it is something you can do well or badly. In order to do it well, you may need to be shown how to do it by someone (gay or straight) who is already good at it and who can initiate you into it—by demonstrating to you, through example, how to practice it and by training you to do it right.

Rather than dismiss out of hand the outrageous idea that there is a right way to be gay, I want to try to understand what it means. For what it registers is a set of intuitions about the relation between sexuality and form. If we could discover in what that relation consists, we would be in a better position to grasp a fundamental element of our existence, which even feminists have been slow to analyze—namely, the sexual politics of cultural form.

Will gay men still have to learn how to be gay when gay liberation has done its work and they no longer feel excluded from heterosexual culture?

When homophobia is finally overcome, when it is a thing of the past, when gay people achieve equal rights, social recognition, and acceptance, when we are fully integrated into straight society—when all that comes to pass, will it spell the end of gay culture, or gay subculture, as we know it?

That is indeed what people like Daniel Harris, the author of *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, and the journalist Andrew Sullivan, who wrote the much-discussed essay "The End of Gay Culture," have argued. I dispute their assertions, but perhaps their prognostications are not wrong, only premature. Perhaps the day is coming when more favorable social conditions will vindicate their claims.

People have wondered, after all, whether Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin's *Another Country*, or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* would become incomprehensible or meaningless if there ever came a time when race ceased to be socially marked in American society. Similarly, would the humor of Lenny Bruce or

Woody Allen lose its ability to make us laugh when or if Jews become thoroughly assimilated? Isn't that humor already starting to look a bit archaic?

Gay culture's apparent decline actually stems from structural causes that have little to do with the growing social acceptance of homosexuality. There has been a huge transformation in the material base of gay life in the United States, and in metropolitan centers elsewhere, during the past three decades. That transformation has had a profound impact on the shape of gay life and culture. It is the result of three large-scale developments: the recapitalization of the inner city and the resulting gentrification of urban neighborhoods; the epidemic of AIDS; and the invention of the Internet.

To appreciate the nature of the change and its decisive, far-reaching effects, recall the conditions under which gay culture emerged. To begin with, gay liberation in the 1960s produced a wave of gay migration that by the 1970s had brought hundreds of thousands of gay men from all regions of the country to New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Houston, Miami, and half a dozen other big cities. In particular, gay men moved from the comparative isolation of small towns or rural areas to specific urban districts, the so-called gay ghettos that were taking shape in major metropolitan centers.

The concentration of large numbers of gay people in urban neighborhoods had decisive political, economic, and cultural consequences. It provided a power base for a gay political movement. It supported a large commercial infrastructure, including not only bars, bathhouses, and other unique sexual institutions, but also a local, community-based press and other forms of communication, along with bookstores and coffeehouses. It created the kind of mass public that is essential to underwrite a flourishing cultural scene and to inspire constant political ferment. Finally, it produced queer communities freed from the surveillance of straight folks.

If you wanted to get laid, in those days, you had to leave the house. The Internet was a decade or two in the future, and cellphones were not even on the horizon. In order to find sexual partners, you had to attach yourself to one of the institutions of gay male social life: bars, bathhouses, the Metropolitan Community Church, the local gay business association, the gay biker club, the gay chorus, one of the gay political organizations or pressure groups. In many of those social contexts, you were bound to meet all sorts of people you would never have encountered in your own social circle, along with

numbers of people you would never have chosen to meet on your own, including a whole bunch you wouldn't have wanted to be caught dead with, if it had been up to you.

But it wasn't up to you. You had to take the crowds that congregated in gay venues as you found them. Which meant that you were exposed to many different ideas about what it meant to be gay. As if that were not enough, the new gay public culture virtually guaranteed that people who moved to a gay enclave would encounter a lot of old-timers who were more experienced at being gay and more sophisticated about it than they were.

Moreover, those veterans of urban gay life often held shockingly militant, uncompromising, anti-homophobic, anti-heterosexist, anti-mainstream political views. People who had already been living in gay ghettos for years had had time and opportunity to be "liberated": to be deprogrammed, to get rid of their stupid, heterosexual prejudices, to achieve a politicized consciousness as well as a pride in their gay identity. By encountering those people, with their greater daring and sophistication and confidence, the new arrivals from the provinces often found their assumptions, values, and pictures of the right way to live, of how to be gay, seriously challenged.

That social experiment proved to be short-lived. For during the same period, the recapitalization of American cities, along with its necessary basis in urban planning and renewal, was already starting to change the urban landscape of the United States. A huge inflow of capital drove vast urban redevelopment schemes, gradually removing the cheap, fringe urban zones on the border of former industrial or mixed-use areas where gay businesses, residences, and sex clubs had flourished, and replacing them with highways, high-rises, sports complexes, convention centers, and warehouse stores.

The AIDS epidemic facilitated the ultimate triumph of urban redevelopment by removing or weakening individuals and communities opposed to the developers' plans to rezone, reconfigure, raze, and rebuild entire neighborhoods. In the end, the malign coincidence of the AIDS epidemic with a surge of urbanism, property development, gentrification, and a corresponding rise in real-estate prices in the 1980s destroyed the gay ghettos that had been centers of gay life and gay culture for a couple of decades, starting in the late 1960s.

That has had a devastating effect on gay culture.

Without significant gay populations concentrated in local

neighborhoods, the power base of the gay movement was significantly weakened, as was the economic base of the gay media. Local gay newspapers were replaced by national glossy magazines that, in an effort to appeal to a national public of prosperous gay individuals who could afford the products advertised in their pages, became increasingly uncontroversial, commercial, and lightweight, eventually turning into the gay equivalent of in-flight magazines.

The loss of a queer public sphere was redeemed by the rise of the Internet and the production of virtual communities. Face-to-face contact in gay neighborhoods became increasingly dispensable. You could find gay people online. You didn't have to live in a gay neighborhood, which was no longer very gay and which you couldn't afford anyway. In fact, you didn't even have to move to a big city. You didn't have to live among gay people at all. You never had to leave your bedroom. Gay life became a paradise for agoraphobes.

You could now select the gay people you wanted to associate with before you met them. You didn't have to expose yourself to folks who might have more experience of gay life than you did. You could hang on to your unliberated, heterosexist, macho prejudices, your denial, your fear. You could continue to subscribe to your ideal model of a good homosexual: someone virtuous, virile, self-respecting, dignified, "non-scene," nonpromiscuous, with a conventional outlook and a solid attachment to traditional values—a proper citizen and an upstanding member of (straight) society.

In short, the emergence of a dispersed, virtual community and the disappearance of a queer public sphere, along with the loss of a couple of generations of gay men to AIDS, has removed many of the conditions necessary for the maintenance and advancement of gay liberation—for consciousness-raising, cultural and political ferment, and the cross-generational transmission of queer values. The lack of a critical mass of gay people physically present in a single location makes it difficult for the pace of gay cultural sophistication to accelerate. It stymies the diffusion of gay culture.

The agenda of gay politics and gay life has now been captured by the concerns of people who live dispersed and relatively isolated, stranded among heterosexuals in small towns and rural areas, instead of bunched together in metropolitan centers. And what are the concerns of gay people who find themselves in such locations? Access to mainstream social forms: military service, church membership, and marriage.

In such a context, gay culture seems increasingly bizarre,

insubstantial, intangible, nebulous, irrelevant. It is the sign of a failure (or refusal) to assimilate. What would gay people want nowadays with a separate culture anyway? Such a thing might have made sense in the Bad Old Days of social oppression and exclusion. Now it is simply a barrier to progress. Gay culture has no future.

Those predictions overlook a crucial consideration. Social acceptance should not be confused with the collapse of heterosexual dominance. Gay liberation and, more recently, the gay-rights movement have not undone the social and ideological dominance of heterosexuality, even if they have made its hegemony a bit less secure and less total.

Instead, what seems to be happening is the reverse. Gay people, in their determination to integrate themselves into the larger society, and to demonstrate their essential normality, are rushing to embrace heterosexual forms of life, including heterosexual norms. In so doing, they are accepting the terms in which heterosexual dominance is articulated, and they are positively promoting them.

Gay people seem to be rediscovering and championing the superiority of heterosexual social forms, including astonishingly archaic forms (like wedding announcements in the society pages of local newspapers) that heterosexuals themselves are abandoning. We are trying to beat heterosexuals at their own game.

We are witnessing the rise of a new and vehement cult of gay ordinariness. In an apparent effort to surpass straight people in the normality sweepstakes and to escape the lingering taint of stigma, gay people lately have begun preening themselves on their dullness, commonness, averageness. A noticeable aggressiveness has started to inform their insistence on how boring they are, how conventional, how completely indistinguishable from everyone else.

In a recent op-ed piece in *The New York Times* about the possibility of Americans electing an openly gay president, Maureen Dowd quoted Fred Sainz of the Human Rights Campaign, a Washington-based political lobbying organization for gay people, who "fretted to his husband that a gay president would be anticlimactic. 'People expect this bizarre and outlandish behavior,' he told me. 'We're always the funny neighbor wearing colorful, avant-garde clothing. We would let down people with our boringness and banality when they learn that we go to grocery stores Saturday afternoon, take our kids to school plays and go see movies.'" Electing a gay president would change nothing, apparently. (In which case, why bother?)

When on June 24, 2011, the State of New York enacted a law

permitting people of the same sex to marry, the Associated Press requested a response to that historic development from Christine Quinn, the openly gay New York City Council Speaker. Quinn declared that the decision would change everything for her and her partner.

What did Quinn mean by "everything"? The changes she went on to emphasize had nothing to do with increased material benefits, equality before the law, the progress of human rights, the rewards of distributive justice, the defeat of homophobia, the breaking up of the heterosexual monopoly on conjugality and private life, or the removal of legal barriers to the formation and preservation of intimate relationships. Quinn described the impact that the legalization of gay marriage would have on herself and her partner in these words: "Tomorrow, my family will gather for my niece's college graduation party, and that'll be a totally different day because we'll get to talk about when our wedding will be and what it'll look like, and what dress Jordan, our grand-niece, will wear as the flower girl. And that's a moment I really thought would never come."

Sometimes I think homosexuality is wasted on gay people.

What Quinn's testimony plainly indicates is that the end of discrimination, the rectification of social injustice, and the leveling of all differential treatment of sexual minorities—even should it occur—would not be the same thing as the end of the cultural dominance of heterosexuality, the disappearance of heterosexuality as a set of cultural norms.

We will be queer forever.

What makes gay people different from others is not just that we are discriminated against, mistreated, regarded as sick or perverted. That alone is not what shapes gay culture. (That indeed could end.) It's that we live in a world in which heterosexuality is the norm. Heterosexual culture remains our first culture, and in order to survive and to flourish in its midst, gay people must engage in an appropriation of it that is also a resistance to it.

So long as queer kids continue to be born into heterosexual families and into a society that is normatively, notionally heterosexual, they will have to devise their own nonstandard relation to heterosexual culture. Gay subjectivity will always be shaped by the primeval need on the part of gay subjects to queer heteronormative culture.

That is not going to change. Not for a very long time. And we'd better hope it doesn't.