

HOW *to be* GAY

DAVID M. HALPERIN

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for

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and for

John

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*L*et the pagans beget
and the Christians baptize.

PART ONE



B+ Could Try Harder



DIARY OF A SCANDAL

The first hint of trouble came in the form of an e-mail message. It reached me on Friday, March 17, 2000, at 4:09 pm. The message was from a guy named Jeff in Erie, Pennsylvania, who was otherwise unknown to me. (He readily provided his full name and e-mail address, but I have suppressed them here, as a courtesy to him.)

At first, I couldn't figure out why Jeff was writing to 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 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." There was surely at least *one* Republican in the department, he supposed, who was qualified to teach such a course. But then Jeff made a show of coming to his senses. A conservative allowed in the English Department? The very idea was ridiculous. And on that note of hilarity, his message ended.

This was all very witty, to be sure. So far, though, it was not especially enlightening.

But soon it turned out that Jeff was not alone. 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.

You may wonder, as I did myself, what I had done to deserve all

this attention. Eventually, I realized that earlier on the same day, Friday, March 17, 2000, the Registrar's Office at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where in fact I do teach English, had activated its course information website, listing the classes to be offered during the fall term of the 2000–2001 academic year. At virtually the same moment, unbeknownst to me, the website of the *National Review*, a conservative magazine of political commentary founded by William F. Buckley, Jr., had run a story in its series *NR Wire* called “How To Be Gay 101.” Except for the heading, the story consisted entirely of one page from the University of Michigan's newly published course listings.

Staffers at the *National Review* may well be on a constant lookout for new material, but they are surely not so desperate as to make a habit of scanning the University of Michigan's website in eager anticipation of the exact moment each term when the registrar announces the courses to be taught the following semester.

Someone must have tipped them off.

It later emerged that there had indeed been a mole at work in the University of Michigan Registrar's Office. At least, someone with access to the relevant information had e-mailed it in early March to the *Michigan Review*, the conservative campus newspaper associated with the *National Review* and its nationwide network of right-wing campus publications. The *Michigan Review* had apparently passed the information on to its parent organization. Matthew S. Schwartz, a student at the University of Michigan who for two years had been editor-in-chief of the *Michigan Review*, coyly revealed in an article in the *MR* the next month that “a U-M conservative newspaper tipped off a *National Review* reporter” about the breaking story. After that, as Schwartz put it, “the wheels of dissemination were in motion. Word . . . trickled down through conservative circles, and the story was well on its way to mainstream media.”¹

So what was this story that was just too good for the *National Review* 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 description had been made public that morning, along with the rest of the information about the class. The *National Review* website withheld all commentary, introducing the story thus: “What follows is the verbatim description from the University of Michigan’s Fall 2000 course catalog. U. Michigan was ranked as the 25th best University in the United States in the most recent ratings by *US News and World Report*.”

The next year, our national ranking went up.

Here is the course description, as it appeared (correctly, except for the omission of paragraph breaks) on the *National Review*’s website.

Just because you happen to be a gay man doesn’t mean that you don’t have to learn how to become one. Gay men do some of that learning on their own, but often we learn how to be gay from others, either because we look to them for instruction or because they simply tell us what they think we need to know, whether we ask for their advice or not. This course will examine the general topic of the role that initiation plays in the formation of gay identity. We will approach it from three angles: (1) as a sub-cultural practice—subtle, complex, and difficult to theorize—which a small but significant body of work in queer studies has begun to explore; (2) as a theme in gay male writing; (3) as a class project, since the course itself will constitute an experiment in the very process of initiation that it hopes to understand. In particular, we’ll examine a number of cultural artifacts and activities that seem to play a prominent role in learning how to be gay: Hollywood movies, grand opera, Broadway musicals, and other works of classical and popular music, as well as camp, diva-worship, drag, muscle culture, style, fashion, and interior design. Are there a number of classically “gay” works such that, despite changing tastes and generations, ALL gay men, of whatever class, race, or ethnicity, need to know them, in order to be gay? What roles do such works play in learning how to be gay? What is there about these works that makes them essential parts of a gay male curriculum? Conversely, what is there about gay identity that explains the gay appropriation of these works? One aim of exploring these questions is to approach gay identity from the perspective of social practices and cultural identifications rather than from

the perspective of gay sexuality itself. What can such an approach tell us about the sentimental, affective, or aesthetic dimensions of gay identity, including gay sexuality, that an exclusive focus on gay sexuality cannot? At the core of gay experience, there is not only identification but disidentification. Almost as soon as I learn how to be gay, or perhaps even before, I also learn how not to be gay. I say to myself, "Well, I may be gay, but at least I'm not like THAT!" Rather than attempting to promote one version of gay identity at the expense of others, this course will investigate the stakes in gay identifications and disidentifications, seeking ultimately to create the basis for a wider acceptance of the plurality of ways in which people determine how to be gay. Work for the class will include short essays, projects, and a mandatory weekly three-hour screening (or other cultural workshop) on Thursday evenings.

The *National Review* was right to think that no commentary would be needed. From the messages and letters I received, it was clear that a number of readers understood my class to be an overt attempt to recruit straight students to the gay lifestyle. Some conservatives, like Jeff from Erie, already believe that universities, and especially English Departments, are bastions of left-wing radicalism; others have long suspected that institutions of higher education indoctrinate students into extremist ideologies, argue them out of their religious faith, corrupt them with alcohol and drugs, and turn them into homosexuals. Now conservatives had proof positive of the last of those intuitions—the blueprint for homosexual world domination, the actual game plan—right there in plain English.

Well, at least the title was in plain English.



The course description for my class actually said nothing at all about converting heterosexual students to homosexuality.² It emphasized, from its very first line, that the topic to be studied had to do with how men *who already are gay* acquire a conscious identity, a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, a shared sense of self, an awareness of belonging to a specific social group, and a distinctive

sensibility or subjectivity. It was designed to explore a basic paradox: How do you become who you are?

In particular, the class set out to explore *gay men's characteristic relation to mainstream culture* for what it might reveal about certain structures of feeling distinctive to gay men.³ The goal of such an inquiry was to shed light on the nature and formation of gay male subjectivity. Accordingly, the class approached homosexuality as a social rather than an individual condition and as a cultural practice rather than a sexual one. It took up the initiatory process internal to gay male communities whereby gay men teach other gay men how to be gay—not by introducing them to gay sex, let alone by seducing them into it (gay men are likely to have had plentiful exposure to sex by the time they take up residence in a gay male social world), but rather by showing them how to transform a number of heterosexual cultural objects and discourses into vehicles of gay meaning.

The course's aim, in other words, was to examine how cultural transmission operates in the case of sexual minorities. Unlike the members of minority groups defined by race or ethnicity or religion, gay men cannot rely on their birth families to teach them about their history or their culture. They must discover their roots through contact with the larger society and the larger world.⁴

As the course evolved over the years, it grew less concerned with adult initiation and became more focused on the kind of gay acculturation that begins in early childhood, without the conscious participation of the immediate family and against the grain of social expectations. The course's goal was to understand how this *counter-acculturation* operates, the exact logic by which gay male subjects resist the summons to experience the world in heterosexual and heteronormative ways.

That is also the goal of this book.



The course description indicated plainly that the particular topic to be studied would be gay *male* cultural practices and gay *male* subjectivity. The stated purpose of the course was to describe a gay male

perspective on the world and to explore, to analyze, and to understand gay male culture in its specificity. Male homosexuality often gives rise to distinctive ways of relating to the larger society—to forms of cultural resistance all its own—so there is good reason to treat gay male culture as a topic in its own right. That is what I will do here.

Women have written brilliantly about gay male culture. (So have a few straight men.) Their insights played a central role in my class; they also figure prominently in this book. Studying a gay male perspective on the world does not entail studying it, then, *from* a gay male perspective. Nor does it entail excluding the perspectives of women and others. Nonetheless, describing how gay men relate to sex and gender roles, how they see women, and the place of femininity in gay male cultural practices does mean focusing on gay male attitudes toward women, not on women themselves, their outlook or their interests. It is the gendered subjectivity of gay men—both gay male masculinity and gay male femininity—that is the topic of this book. The fact that most of the women whose work I have depended on in order to understand gay male culture turn out to be gay themselves does not diminish the usefulness of considering male homosexuality apart from female homosexuality. (Since my topic is gay men, male homosexuality, and gay male culture, the word “gay,” as I use it here, generally refers to males, as it did in the title of my course. When I intend my statements to apply to gay people as a whole, to lesbians and gay men, or to queers more generally, I adjust my wording.)



The project of studying gay male culture encounters an initial, daunting obstacle. Some people don't believe there is such a thing as gay culture. Although the existence of gay male culture is routinely acknowledged as a fact, it is just as routinely denied as a truth.

To say that gay men have a particular, distinctive, characteristic relation to the culture of the larger society in which they live is to do nothing more than to state the obvious. But despite how obvious

such a statement may be—and despite how often, how commonly it is made—it is liable to become controversial as soon as it is asserted as a claim. That is especially the case if the statement, instead of being casually tossed off with a knowing wink, is put forward in all seriousness as a sweeping generalization about gay men.

That gay men have a specific, non-standard attachment to certain cultural objects and cultural forms is the widespread, unquestioned assumption behind a lot of American popular humor.⁵ No one will look at you aghast, or cry out in protest, or stop you in mid-sentence, if you dare to imply that a guy who worships divas, who loves torch songs or show tunes, who knows all of Bette Davis's best lines by heart, or who attaches supreme importance to fine points of style or interior design—no one will be horrified if you imply that such a man 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 . . . , European techno music began blaring throughout Central and North Campus. . . . The many changes . . . already implemented include requiring all incoming freshmen to take a mandatory three-credit course in post-modern interior design. . . . 94 percent of the school's curriculum now involves showtunes.”⁶

Similarly, when a British tabloid wanted to dramatize the shocking case of a “typical, laddish, beer-swilling, sport-mad 20-something smitten with his fiancée” who became gay overnight as a result of an athletic injury, it recounted that the first warning signs took the form not of homosexual desire on the boy's part but of a sudden lack of interest in rugby scores, an inability to converse with his loutish mates, and a new tendency to be sarcastic. Only later did he start sleeping with men, quit his banking job, and become a hairdresser.⁷ This is the stuff of popular stereotype.

Perhaps for that very reason, if you assert with a straight face that male homosexuality involves a set of non-standard cultural practices,

not just some non-standard sexual practices; if you suggest that there is such a thing as gay male culture; or if you imply that there must be a connection of some kind between a specific sexual orientation and a fondness for certain cultural forms, it is likely that 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.

My ambition in this book, then, is to try and occupy whatever gap I can manage to prise open between the acknowledged fact of gay male cultural difference and its disavowed truth.



Happily for me, some large cracks have lately appeared in that fine line between casual acknowledgment and determined denial. (Complete obviousness combined with total unacceptability is typically what distinguishes every worthwhile idea.) 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. According to this increasingly trendy way of thinking, male homosexuality somehow affords an unusual perspective on the world, along with a cluster of superior insights into life, love, and matters of taste in general. Being gay would seem to involve an entire attitude and set of values, an entire *cultural* orientation. It implies a refined sensibility, a heightened aesthetic sense, a particular sensitivity to style and fashion, a non-standard relation to mainstream cultural objects, a rejection of common tastes as well as a critical perspective on the straight world and a collectively shared but nonetheless singular vision of what really matters in life.⁸

That 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 twentieth century. In 1954 the psychoanalyst Carl Jung noted that gay men “may have good taste and an aesthetic sense.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ Many gay men, and a number of their straight friends and enemies, have long suspected that what makes gay men different from the rest of the world is something that goes well beyond sexual preference or practice.

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 widely discussed and often disputed 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.¹¹ The reason for this, Florida contends, is that high-tech jobs nowadays follow the workforce; the workforce does not migrate to where the jobs are—not, at least, for very long. (Florida used to teach in Pittsburgh.)

If cities and towns with lots of gay people in them are sure to prosper in the “Creative Age,” that is not only because the new class of “creative” workers is composed of “nerds,” oddballs, and people with “extreme habits and dress” who gravitate to places with “low entry barriers to human capital,” where the locals are generally open and tolerant of unconventional folks. It is also because gay people, according to Florida and his collaborators, are the “canaries of the Creative Age.” Gay people, in other words, 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.” The presence of gay people “in large numbers is an indicator of an underlying culture that’s open-minded and di-

verse—and thus conducive to creativity”; it also “signals an exciting place, where people can fit in and be themselves,” where the “people climate” is good and “quality of place” represents an important community value.¹² 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, of decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning. It consists, as the critic John Clum says, in “a shared alternative reading of mainstream culture.”¹³

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.)¹⁴ And certain cultural forms, such as Broadway musicals or Hollywood melodramas, are similarly invested with a particular power and significance, attracting a disproportionate number of gay male fans.

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. In order to be gay, a man has to learn to relate to the world around

him in a distinctive way. Or, rather, *homosexuality itself, even as an erotic orientation, even as a specifically sexual subjectivity, consists in a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world.* That dissident way of feeling and relating to the world is reflected in gay male cultural practices.

On this account, “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. Unlike the more arcane kinds of gay sex, gay culture does not appeal exclusively to those with a same-sex erotic preference. In principle, if not in actuality, anyone can participate in *homosexuality as culture*—that is, in the *cultural practice* of homosexuality. Gayness, then, 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 yourself.

Finally, your performance may be evaluated and criticized by other people, gay or straight, and it may invite suggestions for improvement from those who consider themselves to be experts.

Whence the common notion that there’s *a right way* to be gay.



Rather than dismiss that outrageous idea out of hand, I want to understand what it means. I want to figure out what on earth people have in mind when they subscribe to it. What exactly is at stake in different definitions or conceptions or ideals of *how to be gay*? What is the basis for determining the right way, or ways, to be gay? What are the larger implications of such judgments?

And what do people actually mean when they talk as if being sexually attracted to persons of the same sex were not enough to make you *really* gay? Or when they imply that there are certain things you need to know, or do, in order to make the grade and be *truly* gay? Or

when they claim that some straight individuals are actually a lot gayer than many gay men? What picture, what understanding of male homosexual feeling and perception do such views reflect?

Take the example of some joker (straight or gay) who says to a gay man, “You’re not really very gay, you know. If you don’t watch out, they’re going to revoke your license.” Or consider the case of one gay man who says to another, “You really need to know about this movie, if you’re going to be gay” or “I can’t believe you’ve never heard of this designer: let me show you her work, I just know you’ll absolutely love it!” What kinds of reasoning lie behind such remarks?

How about the friend who says to you, when he or she discovers that you are a great dancer or cook; that you love Cher or Madonna, Beyoncé or Björk, Whitney Houston or Kylie Minogue, Christina Aguilera or Mariah Carey, Tori Amos or Gwen Stefani (not to mention Lady Gaga); that you have a weakness for mid-century modern; that you would never dream of dressing for comfort; or that you drive a VW Golf or a Mini Cooper convertible or a Pontiac G6, “Gee, I guess you really *are* gay!”¹⁵ What does male homosexuality have to do with dancing, or cooking, or the music you like, or the car you drive, or the clothes you wear, or your attachment to period design? Are these just stereotypes about gay men? Are they expressions of a kind of sexual racism? Is there anything at all to these stereotypes, or anything behind them?



It was because I believed all those questions were worth taking seriously that I decided to teach a class about “how to be gay.” For I suspected that such questions registered—albeit in some socially encrypted way—a set of intuitions about the relation between sexuality, on the one hand, and cultural forms, styles of feeling, and genres of discourse, on the other. If that social code could be broken, and if those questions could be successfully addressed, the resulting insights would elucidate many aspects of gay male subjectivity. They would

reveal, specifically, what makes it so *queer*—in the sense of both *homosexual* and *non-standard*—without producing an explanation couched in the language of ego psychology. We would thus recover a social mode of sexual analysis that escaped the individualizing, normalizing, essentially medical approach to sexuality that typifies our therapeutic society. Such a method could also evade the opposition between the normal and the pathological on which that medical, psychological approach relies—and on which modern homophobia depends.¹⁶ We could then speak about gay male subjectivity, inquire into its specificity, and maybe even define the particular ways of feeling that constitute it, without worrying about whether our conclusions would make gay subjectivity look normal or abnormal, healthy or diseased.

Subjectivity without psychology. There must be ways of getting at the inner life of human subjects, and of gay men in particular, without delving into the peculiar psychic constitution of the individual. The study of social practices, aesthetic practices, styles, tastes, feelings—analyzed so as to disclose their internal structures, formal logic, cultural operation, meaning, and distribution—could provide an alternate and fresh approach to human subjectivity. In the case of gay male subjectivity, one way to depersonalize, deindividualize, and depsychologize it would be to ask how male homosexual desire connects with specific cultural forms, styles, modes of feeling, and kinds of discourse.

If we could figure that out, we would also be in a better position to understand the larger relations between sexuality and culture, between kinds of desire and conventions of feeling. We could measure the extent to which social practices and cultural forms themselves are both gendered and sexualized, and we could discover how they come to be imbued with specific sexual and gendered meanings. Finally, we might be able to apprehend an even more basic and defining feature of our world, an elementary structure of social meaning that until now has escaped sustained interrogation: *the sexual politics of cultural*

form. So this entire project, trashy as it might seem at first, could actually help us get at something both elusive and profound.



That was the point of departure for my class, as it is for this book. Precisely because the class focused on the *cultural practice* of male homosexuality, not on its *sexual practice*, its audience was not limited to gay men. (If the class had addressed itself solely to gay men, that would have meant it wasn't open on an equal basis to all qualified undergraduate students at the University of Michigan, and so it would have been unprofessional of me to teach it.) Gay culture, after all, is not something that you have to be gay in order to enjoy—or to comprehend. In fact, it turns out that being gay gives you no automatic intellectual advantage when it comes to appreciating, understanding, or analyzing gay culture. In my long experience of teaching the class, I found that women and non-gay male students routinely performed in it at least as well as gay men did, and sometimes a lot better.

Gay male culture coincides, admittedly, with lesbian culture at certain moments. Some mainstream cultural artifacts that have played significant roles in gay male culture also turn out to be lesbian classics—such as Hollywood movies featuring Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo, or the 1959 Doris Day–Rock Hudson comedy *Pillow Talk*, or Richard Strauss's opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. But even when the cultural objects are the same, the respective relations of gay men and lesbians to them are different, because lesbian and gay male audiences do not engage or identify with them in the same way. So the meaning that lesbians and gay men find in them is quite distinct.¹⁷ It would also be mistaken to conceptualize lesbian culture's alternative reading of mainstream culture according to the gay male model I have described here, one that would consist in queering particular objects (such as power tools), icons (James Dean), and practices (softball). Lesbian culture often involves the appropriation of entire ethical categories from mainstream culture: honor, for example, or revenge, or ethics as

a whole.¹⁸ Which is another reason to study gay male culture independently.

That does not mean there is a *single* gay male culture. I do not claim there is one and only one gay culture, shared by all gay men—or that the cultural practice of male homosexuality is unitary, whole, autonomous, and complete in itself. There are many variations in the ways gay male culture is constituted, within individual gay communities no less than among gay communities belonging to different national and ethnic cultures in different parts of the globe. But there are also common themes that cross social and geographic divisions. Some international transpositions are easy to make. If there is a French equivalent, say, of Madonna or Kylie Minogue, it is probably Mylène Farmer, the very mention of whose name conjures up gay clichés—though it does that only in France, not in the rest of the world—just as Dalida does not signify much to American gay men, despite being a doomed and tragic personage reminiscent of Judy Garland, and an equally classic figure in the eyes of many French gay men of an earlier generation. Kylie herself is a more obvious gay icon in Great Britain and Australia than she is in the United States (which says a lot about how central she is to gay male culture in those other places). And Bollywood musicals may exercise the same queer appeal on the Indian subcontinent, or among the peoples of the Indian diaspora, or in other parts of the globe, that the Broadway musical does in North America.¹⁹

But many cultural practices that are characteristic of gay male communities in the United States do not exactly correspond to anything practiced elsewhere. There is no word for “camp” in French, German, or Chinese. Popular gay culture in Turkey, India, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, China, and Japan, to mention only some of the most notable examples, may have many links with European and American gay culture—Lady Gaga is now a global gay male icon (no gay man comes anywhere close to rivaling her)—but gay male culture in those places also displays plenty of local, distinctive features.

The connections between transnational lesbian and gay male culture, on the one hand, and homegrown cultural practices in various corners of the world, on the other, are only starting to be described and understood.²⁰ And saying that does not even begin to confront the question of how far gayness itself is the same across national or linguistic boundaries, nor does it address the dynamic, complex nature of the relation between homosexuality and globalization. Although in choosing my material I glance occasionally at cultural contexts outside the United States, particularly at English culture, most of my observations refer consistently to American gay male life. (So the word “gay” in my text often implies “American” as well as “male.”)



If “gay” can refer to a way of being, and to a distinctive cultural practice, that means gayness can be shared with others and transmitted to them. And to the extent that gay initiation involves learning how to queer heteronormative culture—how to decode heterosexual cultural artifacts and recode them with gay meanings—any undertaking, such as mine, that studies this procedure also necessarily exemplifies and performs it. If gay men circulate specific bits of mainstream culture among themselves, endowing them in the process with non-standard meanings and consolidating a shared culture and sensibility on that basis, then a college course, for example, that involves circulating those specific items will also do the work of gay initiation, insofar as it introduces those students who have not yet encountered them to a wealth of possible gay significations latent in the surrounding culture.

In other words, a course that *surveys and examines* some of the materials on which gay men (both individually and in groups) have built a common culture, or cultures, will also be a course that *initiates* students, both straight and gay, into the *cultural practice* of male homosexuality, insofar as that practice consists precisely in the sharing and examining of such materials. My course was likely to expose students to non-gay works that had functioned in the past for some gay men as

a means of acquiring and transmitting a common culture, a shared sensibility. Students, whether gay or straight, who hadn't encountered those particular materials before would in this way be "initiated" into gay male culture—in the specific sense that they would be *introduced* to it for the first time and given an opportunity to get to know, understand, experience, and identify with it. They would have the chance, *regardless of their sexual orientation*, to determine whether gay culture held out anything of value to them, whether it enhanced or enriched their perspective on the world, whether they wanted to participate in it and to make its distinctive outlook and attitudes their own. They would have the possibility of becoming *culturally* gay . . . or, at least, gayer.

Accordingly, the original course description emphasized that "How To Be Gay," the class itself, would function as "an experiment in the very process of initiation that it hopes to understand."

That got me into even deeper trouble.



"We don't know what [Mr. Halperin] does in the classroom," darkly observed Gary Glenn, the president of the Michigan chapter of the American Family Association (AFA), but "it is outrageous that Michigan taxpayers are forced to pay for a class whose stated purpose is to 'experiment' with the 'initiation' of young men into a self-destructive homosexual lifestyle."²¹

In all the controversy that ensued, no one ever showed much concern about the female students enrolled in my class, who typically made up about half of it, or what effects my class might have on them.²²

In any case, once the news about the class had leaked out, "the wheels of dissemination," to borrow Matthew Schwartz's grandiose formula, did not take long to start rolling. The story that the *National Review* posted to its website on Friday, March 17, 2000, was picked up by the *Washington Times*, which alerted a number of right-wing organizations. Within days, and certainly by Tuesday, March 21, 2000, the

American Family Association had added to its own website a link to the *National Review's* online course description. On Wednesday, March 22, 2000, AFA-Michigan issued a long press release mentioning that Gary Glenn had e-mailed a written statement, calling for the cancellation of the class, to the governor of Michigan, to members of the Michigan House and Senate appropriations committees, and to the president of the University of Michigan, as well as to its elected Board of Regents.²³



The next day, on Thursday, March 23, 2000, the *Sydney Star Observer* (SSO), the most popular gay newspaper in Sydney, published a scathing editorial about the class. The University of Michigan's campus newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*, had yet to pick up the story, but—thanks to the Internet—it was already news in Australia. Under the punning title, “B+ Could Try Harder,” the SSO's editorial treated the class as a laughable academic appropriation of a common gay male practice, implying that gay men hardly required any expert instruction in it, least of all from college professors—they could do perfectly well on their own, thank you very much.²⁴ The editorial was accompanied by a cartoon, which eloquently expressed the paper's attitude, and which merits further attention in its own right (Figure 1).

For in order to get the point of the cartoon, you need to understand the meaning of the line uttered by the teacher caricatured in it. And in order to do that, you need to have undergone a gay initiation yourself.

Here is the background you require. The line “What a dump!” was first pronounced by Bette Davis in a sublimely awful 1949 Hollywood movie, directed by King Vidor, called *Beyond the Forest*. Indolently filing her nails in one of the early scenes, Rosa Moline (played by Davis) descends a staircase in her large and comfortable house, greeting with that disgruntled exclamation her loving and long-suffering husband: an earnest, devoted, hardworking doctor (played by Joseph Cotten), who is coming home from a sleepless and emotionally draining night,

Thought you might like a copy Cheers, Jason

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gems

Class, repeat after me: "What a dump!"

B+ COULD TRY HARDER

Have you ever considered perhaps your homosexual tendencies aren't sufficiently pronounced? Have you ever looked at framed art, hunted for boutiques that despite an advertisement of disposable income and that featured that soft from before's review, you're just not quite gay enough? Well, perhaps you should attend at the University of Michigan, where they have recently announced a new Literature and Culture course to they fall 2000 catalogue: **B+** - How to be Gay (Male Homosexuality and Institutions).

How think we're teaching it, taking the past, don't you? Well, no, although we kind of wish we were. Following are a couple of excerpts from the catalogue, as written by course instructor, David Halperin.

"There because you happen to be a gay man doesn't mean that you don't have to learn how to be gay. Gay men do some of that learning on their own, but often we learn how to be gay from others, either because we look to them for instruction or because they simply tell us what they think we need to know, whether we ask for their advice or not."

"In particular, we'll examine a number of cultural artifacts and a variety that seem to play a prominent role in learning how to be gay: Hollywood movies, grand opera, Broadway musicals, and other works of classic and popular music, as well as camp, disco worship, drag, muscle culture, stile fashion, and queer or design. Are there a number of classically 'gay' works such that, despite changing taste and generations, all gay men, of whatever class, race, or ethnicity need to know them, in order to be gay?"

"In case you're interested, course work includes short poems, poems, a reading weekly three times screening or other cultural workshop plus a 11.11.11 seminar for the purpose that letter is to meet the ends of knowing, all about it."

FAUX SAPPHO SHOW

you've been commemorated about the death of the actor in the Golden Mile, take home, have wonderful night at the M, you can't come but we'll see you at the

ODDS ON OSCAR

Hillary Swank might, Oscar nominee for Best Actress

DON'T ASK...

If the Colonel Fits... Chris Cooper in American





1 Editorial in the Sydney Star Observer, March 23, 2000 (with thanks to Jason Prior).

which he has spent in a desperate, heroic fight to save a patient's life. Looking disdainfully around her, Rosa remarks, "What a dump!"

More than a decade later, in 1962, Edward Albee's crypto-gay play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* premiered on Broadway. In 1966 it was made into a brilliant black-and-white movie by Mike Nichols, with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in the leading roles. The film, like the play, opens with Martha, the character played by Elizabeth Taylor, doing her own drunken Bette Davis impersonation, citing Davis's now-classic line, vainly badgering her husband to remember the name of the obscure movie in which Davis originally uttered it, and

trying—not very successfully—to recall the movie’s plot. Here is how the scene unfolds in Albee’s play.²⁵

MARTHA (*Looks about the room. Imitates Bette Davis*): What a dump.

Hey, what’s that from? “What a dump!”

GEORGE: How would I know what . . .

MARTHA: Aw, come on! What’s it from? *You* know . . .

GEORGE: . . . Martha . . .

MARTHA: What’s it from, for christ’s sake?

GEORGE (*Wearily*): What’s what from?

MARTHA: I just told you; I just did it. “What a dump!” Hunh? What’s that from?

GEORGE: I haven’t the faintest idea what . . .

MARTHA: Dumbbell! It’s from some goddamn Bette Davis picture . . . some goddamn Warner Brothers epic . . .

GEORGE: *I* can’t remember all the pictures that . . .

MARTHA: Nobody’s asking you to remember every single goddamn Warner Brothers epic . . . just one! One single little epic! Bette Davis gets peritonitis in the end . . . she’s got this big black fright wig she wears all through the picture and she gets peritonitis, and she’s married to Joseph Cotten or something . . .

GEORGE: . . . *Somebody* . . .

MARTHA: . . . *somebody* . . . and she wants to go to Chicago all the time, ’cause she’s in love with that actor with the scar . . . But she gets sick, and she sits down in front of her dressing table . . .

GEORGE: What actor? What scar?

MARTHA: *I* can’t remember his name, for God’s sake. What’s the name of the *picture*? I want to know what the name of the *picture* is. She sits down in front of her dressing table . . . and she’s got this peritonitis . . . and she tries to put her lipstick on, but she can’t . . . and she gets it all over her face . . . but she decides to go to Chicago anyway, and . . .

GEORGE: *Chicago!* It’s called *Chicago*.

MARTHA: Hunh? What . . . what is?

GEORGE: The picture . . . it’s called *Chicago* . . .

MARTHA: Good grief! Don’t you know *anything*? *Chicago* was a ’thir-

ties musical, starring little Miss Alice *Faye*. Don't you know *anything*?

GEORGE: Well, that was probably before my *time*, but . . .

MARTHA: Can it! Just cut that out! This picture . . . Bette Davis comes home from a hard day at the grocery store . . .

GEORGE: She works in a grocery store?

MARTHA: She's a housewife; she buys things . . . and she comes home with the groceries, and she walks into the modest living room of the modest cottage modest Joseph Cotten has set her up in . . .

GEORGE: Are they married?

MARTHA (*Impatiently*): Yes. They're married. To each other. Cluck! And she comes in, and she looks around, and she puts her groceries down, and she says, "What a dump!"

GEORGE: (Pause) Oh.

MARTHA: (Pause) She's discontent.

GEORGE: (Pause) Oh.

MARTHA: (Pause) Well, what's the name of the picture?

GEORGE: I really don't know, Martha . . .

MARTHA: Well, think!

The scene itself reads like a failed attempt at gay initiation. It's actually a bit difficult to imagine a straight couple having that conversation, though it comes off plausibly enough on stage.

In any case, Bette Davis's line "What a dump!" already lent itself to exaggerated performance, or reperformance, in the United States by the early 1960s, at least on the evidence of Albee's dialogue. It was its own little mini-drama: a playlet within the play. "I just did it," says Martha, citing her own citation and identifying it as a demonstration. "'What a dump!'" had apparently become something you could *do*.



The ability to perform such a line is treated by the cartoonist of the gay newspaper in Sydney as a standard part of the gay male repertoire, a typical piece of gay male theater, which is at home in gay male society but completely out of place in the classroom. It would

be idiotic or absurd, the cartoon implies, to teach it to students, as if one were trying to instruct them all how to imitate Bette Davis or how to behave like gay men. Nor did I try to teach my students how to deliver the line, of course—my class was not a gay version of *Pygmalion* or *My Fair Lady*, and I was not some gay Professor Henry Higgins instructing the Eliza Doolittles of Ann Arbor how to pass muster in gay society—though I did end up teaching the cartoon and trying to draw out its implications, as I am doing here.

So what are those implications? Well, Bette Davis's infamous line clearly came to represent and express a certain specific attitude, a characteristic posture that would otherwise have been hard to capture in just three little words: a combination of vulgarity and hauteur, disdainful superiority, withering aesthetic judgment, upper-class-wannabe pretentiousness, and prissy, feminine dismissal of the selfless, sincere, manly values of middle-class respectability. The line got taken up at some point by gay male culture and made into a symbol, an economical way of encapsulating a dramatic pose so as to make it available for subsequent reenactment through citation. In particular, the line became a parody of extravagant disappointment, disenchantment, and disrespect, a vehicle for the theatrical expression of "bad attitude," a means of gleefully dismissing middlebrow American moralism as a contemptible aesthetic failure.

Once the line had been wrenched out of its original context and reappropriated, it could provide gay men with some elements of an alternative, collective stance, a style of resistance to the moral and gendered values of the dominant culture. And so it could contribute to the elaboration of a dissident, oppositional way of being and feeling.

"What a dump!" is thus a cardinal example of the practice I set out to study, an example that dramatizes how gay men have selectively appropriated, recoded, and recirculated certain bits, often quite obscure bits, of mainstream culture. That is why the *Sydney Star Observer's* editorialist presented it (accurately enough) as typifying the curriculum of my class. But he assumed—in his superior, Bette Davis

way—that my class was merely a simpleminded exercise, a literal attempt to teach my students how to be gay, instead of what it actually was: namely, an effort to inquire into the social and emotional logic behind the specific practices that constitute gay male culture.

But that's not what makes the cartoon interesting to me.

At the time the cartoon was published, the SSO had a circulation of about 25,000, consisting mostly of younger gay men in Sydney. If the editorialist intended the paper's readers to grasp the humorous point of the cartoon, he must have expected them to have no trouble picking up its various allusions to the gay male cultural curriculum that I have just reviewed.

Which in and of itself testifies to the phenomenon I have been calling *gay initiation*. Is there any other way to explain how young gay men in Australia in the year 2000 could be expected to get a joke that depends on a shared knowledge of obscure bits of American culture dating back to the late 1940s and early 1960s—references that virtually none of my own students has ever managed to recognize or identify? (Among my acquaintances, only the late Randy Nakayama could immediately pick up the allusion to *Beyond the Forest*; he is the one who first taught it to me.) Gay initiation clearly requires a critical mass of knowledgeable folk in a single location.

In other words, your degree of gay acculturation depends a lot on your social network. There is a big difference between living in a gay ghetto in a metropolitan center, such as Sydney, and growing up in a small town in the north of Michigan before going to school in Ann Arbor. The cartoonist for the *Sydney Star Observer* was operating within the horizons of a complex gay social world whose elaborately developed cultural infrastructure—including networks of friends and lovers, as well as popular and extensively stocked video stores in gay neighborhoods—appears to have been functioning actively and even to have been working overtime.

By now, many of those video stores in Sydney and other gay urban centers have gone out of business: the kind of social learning they once fostered has been taken over by the Internet and its social-

networking sites. Whether these new electronic media perform their initiatory function as effectively as the older, more traditional social networks used to do, whether they expand or contract the available range of queer information, opening up new possibilities of literacy or reducing gay cultural references to a limited set of stereotypes—all that remains to be seen. In either case, the basic point is the same: gay culture doesn't just happen. It has to be made to happen. It requires material support, organization, and a queer public sphere.²⁶



The following week, back in the United States, another hostile account of my class appeared in a gay paper, this time in San Francisco.²⁷ The gay press did not seem to like the class any better than the American Family Association did. The reactions of some gay or gay-friendly individuals were supportive and enthusiastic, to be sure, but many others complained that I was being reckless and provocative, giving gay men a bad name, trading in stereotypes, implying that gay men are different from straight men, propounding the crazy idea that there is such a thing as gay culture and that it is distinct from straight culture, confirming the homophobic notion that gay men “recruit” straight men into the “gay lifestyle,” or giving the religious Right a weapon to bash us with and thereby endangering the struggle for lesbian and gay civil rights. So the gay response was often antagonistic for one or more of those reasons. Still, I did receive strong expressions of support—which I want to acknowledge here, with heartfelt gratitude—from the Triangle Foundation, Michigan's statewide GLBT civil rights and advocacy organization, and its director, Jeffrey Montgomery; from students, colleagues, and administrators; and from numbers of previously unknown well-wishers, both gay and straight, at the University of Michigan, in the town of Ann Arbor, in the state of Michigan, and around the world.

Meanwhile, there was a storm of chatter on talk radio and in the national and international press. On Tuesday, May 23, 2000, eight Republican representatives in the Michigan state legislature sponsored

an amendment to the yearly higher-education appropriations bill, requiring the state to set aside 10 percent of the annual sum allocated to the University of Michigan, and to distribute it to the fourteen other public universities in Michigan, if the university held a class “promoting or facilitating the participation in a sexual lifestyle or practices other than heterosexual monogamy.” (Abstinence, for once, did not feature among the approved sexual lifestyles that the Republicans sought to promote.)

After a heated debate that “lasted well into the night,” according to the *Michigan Daily*, a majority of the legislators voted for the measure, with 52 in favor and 44 against. But its passage required more than a simple majority, and its supporters came four votes short of the requisite number of 56. As state representative Valde Garcia (R-Clinton), a sponsor of the amendment, conceded, the proposal itself was a largely symbolic gesture: “I don’t believe we should be spending taxpayer dollars to teach a class to teach someone to violate the law,” he insisted, noting that homosexuality “is still against the law and it offends many people’s deep-seated religious beliefs.” At the same time, Garcia admitted that “he was not familiar with the actual content of the class.” “We had some information about the class and that it exists,” he told the *Daily*. “Beyond that, we don’t know much about it.”²⁸

Since 2000 was an election year, the ripples from the vote in the state legislature continued to be felt throughout Michigan during the ensuing months. In some electoral districts, such as the 87th (comprising Barry and Ionia counties in west-central Michigan), the question of what line to take on the class became a central political issue in the Republican primary for state representative.²⁹ As November approached, election guides in the state of Michigan featured information about how individual lawmakers had voted on the budget amendment back in May. Outrage over the class led Auburn Hills mayor Tom McMillin, who had previously waged a successful campaign to defeat a gay rights ordinance in Ferndale, Michigan, to seek the Republican nomination for a vacant seat on the University’s Board

of Regents. He didn't get it, though the two Republicans who did also opposed the teaching of the class. They were both ultimately defeated in the general election in November, when Michigan tilted very slightly in favor of Al Gore.³⁰

The Michigan branch of the American Family Association allegedly gathered 15,000 signatures on a petition urging "Gov. Engler, the Legislature, and the U-M Board of Regents to do everything possible to stop U-M officials from using my tax dollars to recruit teenage students into a class whose stated intention is to 'experiment' in the 'initiation' of students into a high-risk lifestyle of homosexual behavior that is immoral, illegal and a serious threat to personal and public health." Gary Glenn presented the petition to the Board of Regents of the University of Michigan on October 19, 2000.³¹ Although it is remotely possible that the "homosexual behavior" in question—say, frequent viewing of films such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *All about Eve*, and *A Star Is Born*—might ruin your health, there is in fact no law against it, not even in Michigan, and I continued to teach the class without interference.

Three years later, with my course once again in the news, a bill was introduced into both houses of the Michigan legislature to amend the state constitution in order to give the state legislature veto power over course offerings at public universities in Michigan.³² It caused a great deal of excitement in the media, on campus, and in the state capital, but it did not get very far.



In order to make sense of all this, it helps to know that there had been a change of leadership in the Michigan branch of the American Family Association. Gary Glenn, who had formerly worked for an anti-union organization, the Idaho Freedom to Work Committee, as well as the Idaho Cattle Association, and who had made an unsuccessful run for U.S. Congress after serving as a Republican commissioner in Boise, moved to Michigan in 1998 to lobby for a school choice tuition tax credit, which later failed to be approved by the voters. He then

took a job with the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a conservative think tank in Midland, Michigan. In the fall of 1999, half a year before I came up with the bright idea of teaching a course on male homosexuality as a cultural practice, he had become head of the Michigan chapter of the AFA.³³

That local chapter had proved to be a comparatively sleepy outfit, concerned mostly with pornography and obscenity issues, until Glenn took it over. Glenn made opposition to gay rights the focus of the AFA's mission. As Kim Kozlowski, a journalist with the *Detroit News*, put it in 2001, Glenn "gelled the group into Michigan's premier antigay organization." "'I've taken a leadership position in pro-family values when under assault by the homosexual agenda,' Glenn says. 'We have become the most high-profile, pro-family organization in the state and, quite frankly, one of the most high-profile in the country.'"³⁴ It was really Glenn, not I, who intended to proselytize. As a result, he and I found ourselves inadvertently collaborating on a kind of reciprocal membership drive, in which we made a successful if reluctant team. His organization increased its numbers, and my course got enrollments.

In fact, no one at the University of Michigan had paid any attention to my class before Glenn issued his press release on March 22, 2000. One University of Michigan undergraduate, who eventually enrolled in the class, first heard of it when a reporter from a local TV news team stuck a microphone in his face and asked him what he thought about it. After imperturbably expressing support for it, he raced off and signed up. So in the end, Glenn and I helped each other "recruit" new adherents to our respective "lifestyles." Never again would my class attract so many students.

Beyond that local skirmish, gay issues were starting to become a political obsession in the United States, occupying the forefront of the national news with some regularity. Civil unions in Vermont, boy scout organizations at the Supreme Court, the ordination of gay bishops by the Episcopal Church, the resignation of gay governors in New Jersey, the constitutionality of sodomy laws, gays in the military,

the rise of “wedge politics,” gay marriage and a batch of state and federal constitutional amendments redefining marriage, to say nothing of affirmative action, hate crimes, and the status of minorities: it was all more than enough to make my class, which I continued to teach every other year until 2007, a perennial and irresistible subject of commentary, despite my best efforts to keep it out of the news. (I wanted to shield the University of Michigan from hostile publicity.) As late as January 7, 2008—when Mario Lavandeira, a gay blogger better known by his pseudonym, Perez Hilton, belatedly caught up with the class and posted a long out-of-date course description on his celebrity gossip website—I was still studiously ignoring requests to appear on *Hannity & Colmes*, *The O’Reilly Factor*, *Fox News*, CNN’s *American Morning* and *Headline News*, MSNBC’s *Scarborough Country*, ABC’s *Good Morning America*, CBS’s *The Early Show*, and NBC’s *The Today Show*.

Throughout all this time, the University of Michigan behaved impeccably. The course itself had been approved through the usual channels and according to the usual bureaucratic process. Some people at the university may have disapproved of it when it got into the news, and some may have been unhappy with me for proposing such a course, but no one thought that politicians or pressure groups outside the University of Michigan should determine what its faculty teach. So there was no opposition of any kind to my course from within the University of Michigan.

The student newspaper editorialized eloquently in its favor, and the student government unanimously passed a powerful resolution supporting it. Even the *Michigan Review*, which made relentless fun of it, argued in favor of my “right to free speech regardless of how repulsive and amoral it really is.”³⁵ My colleagues, who had approved the course, were generally enthusiastic about it. The university administration at all levels supported both the course and my right to teach it. The English Department, the office of the Dean of the College, the president’s office, and the office of the Alumni Association

uncomplainingly fielded hundreds of not especially friendly inquiries about it. The provost of the university issued a public statement on behalf of the president and the administration, saying, "We are completely in support of Professor Halperin's course and of his freedom to teach this course as he constructed it."

More remarkable, no one in the administration asked me to explain the rationale behind the course or justify what I was up to. The director of undergraduate studies in the English Department, the associate dean for undergraduate education (a professor of marine geochemistry), and the president of the university all issued public statements explaining and defending the course. But none felt the need to consult with me beforehand in order to seek advice about what to say or how to represent the thinking behind my admittedly novel approach to the analysis of gay male culture and gay male subjectivity. I would have been happy to offer them information that they might have used to defend the course in their public statements. They seemed, however, to feel a professional responsibility to inform themselves on their own, as if even to ask me to explain or justify myself would have been to subject me to possible indignity.

I found that quite extraordinary, especially as the university faced considerable criticism in the national media and in the state of Michigan on account of the course. Lesser schools, even fancy private institutions, might well have buckled under the pressure. I would therefore like to take this occasion to thank publicly, for their courage and intrepidity, John Whittier-Ferguson, who was director of undergraduate studies in the Department of English Language and Literature; Lincoln Faller, who was chair of the Department of English, and his successor in that position, Sidonie Smith; Robert Owen, who was the associate dean for undergraduate education in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA); Terrence McDonald, who was associate dean for academic affairs in the College of LSA and later dean of the College; Nancy Cantor, who was provost and executive vice-president for academic affairs at the University of Michigan; Lee Bol-

linger, who was president of the University of Michigan; and the members of their offices and staffs.



This book represents the explanation they never asked for.

It is an explanation that I feel I still owe them. I offer it, as well, to all those who defended and believed in my work. Most of all, I hope this book will serve to justify the value and seriousness of my course “How To Be Gay” to everyone who was skeptical, perplexed, offended, or outraged by it, who opposed it, or who criticized the University of Michigan because of it.

I don’t expect to convince everybody who reads this book that my project is worthwhile, but I hope at least to make clear the genuineness of the intellectual stakes in my inquiry into gay male culture.

HISTORY OF AN ERROR

I found the unwanted publicity surrounding my class to be acutely embarrassing, for a number of reasons. Despite what some envious souls suggested at the time, I was not seeking celebrity and I had no wish to draw public attention to myself. Rather the opposite. I had joined the faculty of the University of Michigan only a few months before. I was grateful to the university for giving me a comfortable job, a constantly thrilling intellectual and cultural environment, and a new home. The last thing I wanted was to bring discredit on the university or on those who had just hired me.

Of course, I knew there was a chance that a class called “How To Be Gay” could raise eyebrows and attract unfavorable attention. Whatever the actual course content, the title itself was provocative: it might create misunderstanding or even invite deliberate misrepresentation. If I had called the class “Processes of Cultural Cross-Identification as Mechanisms of Sexual Sub-Cultural In-Group Community Formation in the United States,” I doubt there would have been any trouble. But I believe in plain speaking and I am a big fan of truth in advertising. Although I despise provocation for its own sake, I like to avoid academic jargon if at all possible. I did not want to closet the class or to be deliberately, defensively obscure. I considered a tactic of concealment to be beneath my dignity. If, however, I had known then

what I know now—namely, that the mere title of the course would end up costing the University of Michigan almost as much time and effort to defend as the university's continued support for affirmative action in its admissions policies—I certainly would have called it something else.

Once the controversy started, however, it was too late to change the course's name. To do so would have been to yield to the campaign of intimidation. It would have meant sacrificing academic freedom to public opinion and giving politicians or pressure groups the authority to determine what I could teach and how I could describe it. And that would have meant losing the precious right guaranteed to researchers in a free society: the right to follow their thinking wherever it may lead. After all, there's no point in having freedom if you can't use it. Freedom that you are not free to exercise isn't freedom.

So although I would have been no less happy to see the title "How To Be Gay" disappear from the course catalogue than from the media spotlight, and although I was eager to spare my colleagues the labor and annoyance of having to justify the class, I wasn't about to retitle the class or stop teaching it for those reasons alone. The class reflected my current research interests. It contributed meaningfully to the general project of higher education: it was interesting, well designed, thought-provoking, and rigorous. I got a lot of insight out of teaching it, and the students seemed to benefit from taking it. My thinking about male homosexuality as a cultural practice underwent a constant evolution during the years I taught it. I certainly found it gripping, as well as unsettling.

There was only one problem. I was the wrong person to teach it.



All my life, I've been told that I have no idea how to be gay. I am, apparently, utterly hopeless at it, a miserable failure as a gay man. That is a large part of the reason I found the publicity surrounding the class to be so embarrassing. It exposed me to the mockery of a number of

my friends, both straight and gay. “Since when,” they objected, “are *you* qualified to teach people how to be gay? What do you know about it? Why, just look at how you dress! *I* could do better than that. Come to think of it, I should be teaching this class.” A number of students over the years have made similar observations, more gently at some times than at others.

But the point of my class was not to offer practical instruction in how to be a successful gay man, much less to provide a living exemplar. Nor is that the point of this book. Such instruction is abundantly available elsewhere. This book is not intended to compete, for instance, with Joel Derfner’s *Swish: My Quest to Become the Gayest Person Ever and What Ended Up Happening Instead*; Donald Reuter’s *Gaydar: The Ultimate Insider Guide to the Gay Sixth Sense*; Cathy Crimmins’s *How the Homosexuals Saved Civilization: The True and Heroic Story of How Gay Men Shaped the Modern World*; Kevin DiLallo’s *The Unofficial Gay Manual*; Judy Carter’s *The Homo Handbook: Getting in Touch with Your Inner Homo: A Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men*; Frank Browning’s *The Culture of Desire: Paradox and Perversity in Gay Lives Today*; Daniel Harris’s *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*; Bert Archer’s *The End of Gay: And the Death of Heterosexuality*; or even Michael Bronski’s classic survey, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*. This book, like my class, is called *How To Be Gay* because that phrase names the topic, the phenomenon, the problem I want to explore and understand—namely, the very notion that there’s a right way to be gay, that male homosexuality is not only a sexual practice but also a cultural practice, that there is a relation between sexuality and social or aesthetic form.

It’s precisely because I’ve been told so often how bad I am at being gay, and how much I need to learn “how to be gay,” that I find the thrust of those four little words so intriguing. I have long wanted to understand *exactly* what that mysterious imperative signified—what sense it might make to claim that there is a right way to be gay, a way that needs to be learned even (or especially) by gay men themselves.

Let me make it clear, then: I do not claim to possess some special, native insight that qualifies me to tell other people how to be gay. My relation to gay culture is that of a student, not an expert. I still feel like an outsider to it. Its workings aren't obvious to me; I don't find anything very intuitive about them. Gay male culture remains an enigma, whose obscure logic I continue to puzzle through. Some of my lesbian friends, and a number of my talented straight friends as well, have a much better grasp of it. And there are plenty of gay men, of various ages, who are deeply versed in gay male culture—who seem to have been born into it and who speak the language of gay sensibility as if it were their mother tongue. They are the ones who really ought to have invented my class. And they should be writing this book. I'm sure they'd do a much better job.

Or perhaps not. If in fact they're *not* doing this work themselves, it may be for a very good reason. After all, it's not as if they have nothing to say about gay male culture. In addition to the authors and books listed above, countless gay men have written learned, engaging, lovingly detailed studies of Hollywood cinema, the Broadway musical, grand opera, classical and popular music, style and fashion, interior decoration, and architectural design. But, with a few important exceptions (which I'll discuss in later chapters), they have said almost nothing about the *relation* between gay men and those aesthetic forms, about the gayness of those non-gay forms, or about the reasons for gay men's personal investment in them.¹ Because for them, no doubt, *gay male culture is not a problem*. It's not alien to them, and so they don't need to make an effort to understand it. They *already* understand it. Which is why they feel no particular impulse to explain it, either to themselves or to others.

Or, on those rare occasions when they do try to explain it, they tend to speak in a native language internal to the gay culture they are trying to explain, using indigenous concepts. They seldom advert to a critical language external to gay culture—that is, a meta-language. But if you don't use a critical meta-language, you just end up rede-

scribing the culture in its own terms. Instead of accounting for its central features, you merely restate and reproduce them.

So I'm going to have to do the explaining.



My explanation will be limited to a small number of examples. Like “What a dump!” each example requires extensive commentary to describe how it works. Under these conditions, a general survey of gay male culture is simply not an option, much as I would like to cover everything. So I won't be able to account for the gay male fascination with all the cultural forms I enumerated—Hollywood cinema, the Broadway musical, grand opera, classical and popular music, style and fashion, interior decoration, and architectural design—though I will touch on them. Instead, a great deal will be made of a very few cultural objects. For even ordinary cultural artifacts contain vast figural possibilities, and gay male cultural practices often consist in mobilizing the figural potential of seemingly unassuming, taken-for-granted objects.

My plan is to examine the figural and formal dimensions of some of the mainstream cultural objects that gay male culture appropriates and endows with queer value. I will seek *meaning* in *style* and I will look for queer *content* in *form* itself.² For that purpose, what I need is not a large quantity of empirical data, but a thorough, detailed understanding of how some typical and particularly expressive gay male cultural practices actually work. The goal is to make style speak, to make sense of gay aesthetics—of the peculiar, anti-social brand of aesthetics in which gay male culture specializes—and *to seize hold of social forms in all their specificity*.

Given the current state of queer cultural analysis, it is much too early to generalize about the meaning of divas, or melodramas, or musicals, or fashion and design. Instead, each individual object that gay male culture borrows from mainstream culture, each gay male cultural practice, demands to be considered with full attention to its

particularity. That will involve an effort to arrive at a systematic grasp of the elusive, almost ineffable meaning of certain gestures, of specific attitudes, of particular perspectives, angles of vision, and styles of expression. The project is necessarily inductive: it begins with phenomena, not with theory (since it is not clear in advance what the right theoretical framework for understanding the phenomena would be), and it aims to extract a coherent and, ultimately, a unified comprehension of gay culture from a close examination of a few representative examples. For it is in those select examples that we'll find, condensed and encrypted, the information we are seeking about the meaning of gay style and about the sexual and gendered content of cultural forms.

We'll also discover that the great value of traditional gay male culture resides in some of its most despised and repudiated features: gay male femininity, diva-worship, aestheticism, snobbery, drama, adoration of glamour, caricature of women, and obsession with the figure of the mother.



For a long time I found it ludicrous to suppose that a gay man, a man sexually attracted to men, a man who has sex with men, isn't "really" gay, simply because he lacks some specific bit of in-group knowledge or is ignorant of some particular item of gay cultural trivia. For me, personally, being gay has always been an erotic experience—not a matter of sensibility or cultural practice or even a preference for specific physical acts, but an experience of finding males sexually desirable. Period. I never thought that being gay, in and of itself, obligated me to be a certain way, to like certain things, or to enjoy certain activities. In the past, at least, I always insisted that being gay had absolutely nothing *necessarily* to do with anything at all besides gay sex.

In this, I think I was pretty typical of my generation—typical, that is, of gay men who came out in the mid-1970s, half a dozen years after the 1969 Stonewall riots, during the era of gay liberation which those riots ushered in and which saw the emergence in major cities of

new gay social worlds. Those events vastly expanded the available options for gay male sexual and social life, created a public, visible, open gay male culture, and forged a dignified, habitable gay male identity, thereby changing radically, and forever, the terms on which male homosexuality could be lived in the United States.

Gay men my age prided themselves on their generational difference. We were dimly aware that for a lot of gay men ten or twenty years older than us, being gay had something to do with liking Broadway musicals, or listening to show tunes or torch songs or Judy Garland, or playing the piano, wearing fluffy sweaters, drinking cocktails, smoking cigarettes, and calling each other “girlfriend.” That was all fine for them, no doubt, but it looked pretty pathetic to me—and distinctly unsexy. In fact, it seemed downright desperate: a feeble way of compensating for being old, frustrated, effeminate, and hopelessly unattractive. From my youthful perspective, which aspired fervently to qualify as “liberated,” those old queens were sad remnants from a bygone era of sexual repression—victims of self-hatred, internalized homophobia, social isolation, and state terror. (It did not occur to me at the time that some lingering self-hatred or internalized homophobia of my own might be responsible for the righteous aversion I felt to *their* self-hatred and homophobia, or what I took to be such.)³

In any case, if those sorts of queeniness and clannishness were what gay culture was all about, I wanted no part of it. It certainly wasn't *my* culture. I had already spent a certain amount of effort carefully cultivating my tastes, which I considered to be distinguished, and which in my view expressed my particular relation to my historical moment, my chosen affiliation with certain movements or styles in modern art and culture, and my political values. I liked to think—naively, of course—that my tastes testified to my individual discernment and did not necessarily make me resemble other boys, other Jews, other middle-class kids, other Americans, other intellectuals, or even other classicists (I have a Ph.D. in classical Greek and Latin from Stanford, which makes me part of yet another weird minority). I didn't see why being gay should be any different—why I should sud-

denly have to adopt other people's tastes simply because my sexual practices identified me as a member of their group. Especially when their choices—in movies, say—seemed to be specific to a social class to which I did not see myself as belonging.

From time to time, George Cukor's 1939 film *The Women*, famous for its bevy of gorgeously costumed female Hollywood stars and for being a movie in which no male character ever appears except off-screen, would play at the Castro movie theater, in the heart of one of the gay districts of San Francisco. The audience would be full of gay men who knew the movie by heart and who would recite the lines out loud in unison with each other and the actresses. I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area at the time, but I deliberately stayed away. I found such performances profoundly distasteful and alienating. (I went to the Castro, in the company of straight friends, to see François Truffaut's *Day for Night*.) The whole experience was like being at Mass—or some exotic religious ritual rather less familiar to me than the Christian liturgy—where everyone except me knew the proper responses by heart. It made me feel like I had nothing in common with gay men. At least, nothing in common with *those* gay men.

For me, and for many gay men of my generation, gay culture was simply not a high priority. We certainly weren't much interested in what passed for gay culture at the time. After all, it didn't even focus on gay men like ourselves (who had yet to be visibly represented by the media). It didn't reflect our lives and it didn't help us to deal with the challenges we faced, as out, proud, young, masculine, sexually active gay men, trying to find our place in a homophobic society and struggling to reconcile our sex lives with our needs for love and loyalty and friendship. Instead, it featured female stars or divas whom older gay men identified with, apparently because those doomed, tragic figures reflected the abject conditions of their miserable lives and resonated with the archaic form of gay male existence that we ourselves had luckily escaped—that gay liberation had liberated us from.⁴ Gay culture, as we knew it, was a vestige from a previous ep-

och. It didn't seem to be about us, to be *our* culture. It had nothing to offer us.

But there was another reason gay culture did not particularly appeal to us.

Culture itself, we thought, was pretty much beside the point. Why would we need gay culture anyway? After all, we had gay sex.⁵ We had the real thing. *We were really doing it, not just dreaming about it.* What we wanted wasn't Somewhere over the Rainbow. It was Down on the Corner. (And it was starting to get impatient, so there was not a moment to lose.) For the first time in two thousand years, we could finally come out into the open, declare ourselves, and find quantities of people who wanted to have sex with us as much as we wanted to have sex with them. Also, thanks to gay liberation, we discovered it was possible to be gay without being effeminate. (Or so we imagined.) We therefore didn't see any resemblance between ourselves and those earlier generations of show queens, opera queens, and movie queens. We defined our generational difference by *rejecting* the gay culture of previous generations—by rejecting *gay culture* itself—as hopelessly anachronistic and out of touch, as a substitute for the real thing. And every gay generation, or half-generation, since ours has done exactly the same, all the while thinking it was the first gay generation to do so, the first gay generation in history to see nothing of interest or value in inherited, traditional gay culture.

Ever since the late 1970s, if not before, gay men have been in the habit of drawing invidious generational comparisons between gay boys in their teens and twenties—modern, liberated, enlightened, advanced, “utterly indistinguishable from straight boys . . . [and] completely calm about being gay” (as Andrew Holleran wrote in 1978), who fit into mainstream society just fine, have never experienced homophobia among their peers, don't see themselves as belonging to any gay community, and have no need of gay culture—and gay men in their thirties or forties (or even older), stuck in some fanatical allegiance to an outmoded, outdated brand of gay culture and convinced

that it is the only gay culture there is, the obligatory culture of everyone who happens to be gay.⁶

That habit of thinking about gay life in terms of generational contrasts is understandable to a certain degree. Social attitudes toward homosexuality have been changing rapidly over the past fifty years, and the social conditions in which gay kids grow up have changed as well. That gay culture, its appeal, and its audience should have evolved radically during the same period is only to be expected. At the same time, precisely because this process of historical change has been going on for decades now, the persistent assertion that younger gay men, unlike the half-generation of gay men before them, have no need of gay culture is starting to wear thin and to look downright suspicious—the result of systematic amnesia and collective denial.

In fact, it can't be perennially true. For those sorry gay men in their thirties, who supposedly cling to an old-fashioned and now passé version of gay male culture—a version of gay male culture that means nothing, and is of no use, to anyone in their teens and twenties—are obviously the very same people who, only a few years earlier, actually *were* those pioneering teenagers, taking their first innocent steps in a brave new world without homophobia, ignorant of gay culture and indifferent to it. From gay men who had no need of gay culture, they seem to become, in the twinkling of an eye, gay culture's stooges, its dreariest representatives. Which makes you wonder what happens to gay men in their mid- to late twenties that causes them suddenly to appear so tired, so superannuated, so culturally retrograde. Could it be gay initiation? Could gay male culture turn out to be not so irrelevant to gay men after all, once they're gradually exposed to it? And once they accumulate a bit of experience, a bit of self-knowledge, and even perhaps a bit of humility?

Well, that might be one explanation. But there are also specific historical reasons why gay male culture constantly embarrasses its own subjects, why the previous gay generation's disavowal of gay culture is endlessly repeated by each new gay generation, why gay culture itself always turns out to be—sometimes in the view of younger gay

men and always in the view of those who speak for them—the exclusive property of the older guys, the queens, folks who in one way or another are simply past it: in short, *other people*, particularly other people whose real or imagined embrace of gay culture always ends up making them look both *effeminate* and *archaic*.



Let us recall that homosexuality, as a distinctive classification of sexual behavior, sexual desire, and sexual subjectivity, was originally precipitated out of the experience and concept of gender inversion. The first psychiatric definitions of deviant sexual orientation, elaborated in the latter part of the nineteenth century, were definitions not of homosexuality but of sex-role reversal or transgenderism: Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal's "contrary sexual feeling" of 1869 and Arrigo Tamassia's "inversion of the sexual instinct" of 1878.⁷ The pathological mental condition those terms referred to involved same-sex sexual desire but did not reduce to it. Instead, same-sex desire qualified as merely one symptom of a more profound reversal, or "inversion," of an individual's gender identity. Insofar as desire for a person of the same sex was opposite, or "contrary," to the individual's own sex, it pointed to a deeper and more pervasive gender disorder: an estrangement from one's actual sex and an identification with the opposite sex, which is to say a transgendered psychological orientation. It was this deviant orientation of the invert's subjectivity that the doctors considered medically problematic—"the feeling of being alienated, with one's entire inner being, from one's own sex," as Westphal memorably put it in a footnote to his 1869 article. Same-sex desire was not the essence but merely a further extension of that basic gender trouble, a more developed "stage of the pathological phenomenon."⁸

That clinical definition drew on the inverts' own testimony and experiences. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, the first political activist for homosexual emancipation, who began writing in the early 1860s, had described himself in a notorious Latin phrase as having a woman's soul

enclosed in a man's body ("anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa").⁹ Westphal was familiar with his writings. Nineteenth-century sexologists strongly disapproved of same-sex sexual behavior, to be sure, but such behavior, though obviously deviant, did not represent in and of itself an infallible sign of sexual difference,¹⁰ not even according to the great German authority on sexual perversion, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who was careful to distinguish "perversion of the sexual instinct" from mere "perversity in the sexual act."¹¹ Homosexual sex might in some cases turn out to be bad without being sick: it could be a mere vicious indulgence, an extreme form of debauchery; it was not in every instance an indication of "moral insanity." Deviant sex could be saved from pathology by normative gender identity and gender style: the conventionally feminine woman who allowed herself to be pleased by a butch, or the straight-identified hustler who played a masculine role when he prostituted himself to inverted, effeminate men, did not routinely come in for sustained medical attention until well into the twentieth century.¹²

As late as 1919, petty officers in the U.S. Navy could ask "normal" enlisted men to volunteer to have sex repeatedly with "fairies" in order to expose the immoral conditions in and around a naval base;¹³ and in the dockside bars of New York in the same period, sailors seeking easy women for sexual gratification could be redirected to fairies as plausible substitutes for them.¹⁴ In many parts of the male world today, even in the industrialized liberal democracies, what counts as sexually normal sometimes has more to do with gender style and sexual role than with sexual object-choice (that is, the sex of the desired sexual object).¹⁵

Nonetheless, it is clear and undeniable that something changed in the course of the twentieth century. Gender inversion had to make room for a novel category: "homosexuality." The distinctively modern, narrowly delimited yet ambitiously universalizing concept of homosexuality appeared when same-sex sexual object-choice came to be categorically distinguished from sex-role reversal and began to qualify, in and of itself, as a marker of sexual difference.

The pace of transformation picked up after the end of the Second World War. In the field of sexology, the decisive break occurred in 1948, with the publication of the first Kinsey Report. Alfred Kinsey maintained that “inversion and homosexuality are two distinct and not always correlated types of behavior.”¹⁶ Homosexuality, as Kinsey understood that concept, referred to the sameness of the sexes of the persons engaged in a sexual act. It did not admit any categorical difference between men who played insertive sexual roles and men who played receptive sexual roles in same-sex sexual contacts. It applied to all same-sex sexual actors alike. Kinsey rejected as mere “propaganda” the claim by some of the straight-identified men he interviewed that receiving oral sex from another man did not count as engaging in a homosexual act. According to Kinsey, the role you played didn’t matter. The sex of your partner did. All “physical contacts with other males” that result in orgasm are “by any strict definition . . . homosexual,” Kinsey insisted, no matter who does what to whom and no matter how tough or effete the men involved in sex with each other might happen to look.¹⁷



Kinsey and his categories of sexual behavior reflected the culmination of a long process of change in the systems of both sexual classification and sexual desire. That process had begun much earlier, and it had been under way for a considerable time, but it was not complete until the twentieth century. Heterosexuality had been slowly coming into existence among the middle classes in England, northwestern Europe, and their colonies ever since the late seventeenth century. As time went by, its definition gradually became more stringent, requiring stricter avoidance of any expression of same-sex affection.¹⁸ In the United States, sexual, emotional, and romantic bonds between men, which had once been conventional, started to dissolve well before the end of the nineteenth century, and middle-class men began to avoid physical contact with other men for fear of being considered deviant.¹⁹

At the same time, a relatively new social type emerged: what we would now call “the straight-acting and -appearing gay man.” This was a man differentiated from other men *only* by his same-sex sexual object-choice, by the direction of his erotic desire, by his attraction to males. His homosexual desire now defined him—it made him gay through and through—but it also left him completely indistinguishable *in every other respect* from normal men. His gayness was no longer a sign of gender inversion, of sex-role reversal. It was an expression of a single feature of his personality, what could henceforth be called his “sexuality.” Since it had to do only with sex, and not with gender, this new gay sexuality was entirely compatible, at least in theory, with perfect, faultless, unimpeachable masculinity. The mere fact of desiring men no longer prevented a gay man from being “straight-acting and -appearing.” You could look like a regular guy, even though you were totally gay. And you could be gay without being disfigured by any visible stigmata of gender deviance, or queerness—without appearing to be different in any way from normal folk.

To be gay, according to this emerging twentieth-century definition, was to have *a sexuality, not a culture*. For some men—at least, for some *modern* men—homosexuality was merely a kind of erotic automatism, an unreasoning reflex that was natural and involuntary: a *sexual instinct*. It was not rooted in consciousness; it was not the result of moral or aesthetic choice; it did not arise either from bad habits or from cultivated taste; and so it did not express itself in multiple aspects of the personality. It was, quite simply, an instinctual drive—in short, a sexuality—not an ethos or a way of being, let alone a distinctive, non-standard cultural practice. The best-known early portrait of the straight-acting and -appearing gay man, the most eloquent example of this new sexual type (though by no means the first instance of it), is the title character of E. M. Forster’s 1913–1914 novel *Maurice*.²⁰

As the twentieth century progressed, this emergent sexual type took more solid form and shape. He appeared in gay fiction with increasing frequency. Indeed, he became the preferred hero of gay romance, the normal gay man whose ideal sexual partner (which he seeks and inevitably finds) is another straight-acting and -appearing

gay man just like himself. This romantic ideal was built on systematic contrasts with other, earlier, queerer types; in fact, it thrived on explicit put-downs of effeminate or gender-deviant men, from whom the hero or the author recoiled in horror. That is what we find especially in the explicit gay male fiction that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the Second World War: Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile* (1953), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* (1953), not to mention all of her Greek romances. A similar phenomenon appeared in lesbian fiction in the postwar period with Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952) and, most aggressively, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), in which butch lesbians from earlier working-class lesbian bar culture are subjected to savage ridicule and intense sexual depreciation.



Fiction was not the only place where homosexuality triumphed over inversion. Although the Stonewall rebellion may have been sparked by drag queens, gay liberation in at least some of its later manifestations encouraged lesbians and gay men to act out new, positive, non-deviant sex and gender roles in everyday life. To be sure, new styles of hypermasculinity had appeared among gay men much earlier, in the aftermath of the Second World War; they seem to have been popularized in that period via the nascent gay social networks inadvertently created by the mass mobilizations of the war and the gay bars in coastal cities that catered to military personnel. Already by the late 1940s, as the historian George Chauncey has demonstrated and as much anecdotal information attests, a new, distinctively American butch style began to be adopted by some gay men: a look defined by the wearing of a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and a leather jacket.²¹ Whatever post-Stonewall mythology might claim, it was not only after 1969 that gay men learned how to be butch, or that butch styles began to compete with earlier "effete" modes of self-presentation among gay men.²²

But if gay liberation, which tended in any case to promote forms

of androgyny, was not directly responsible for the invention of gay masculinity, the 1970s did see the new gender-conformist styles become generalized and hegemonic in the gay male social worlds that were taking shape in the metropolitan centers of the United States. As a result, earlier, gender-deviant practices of homosexuality came to look increasingly archaic. The ideology of the post-Stonewall period positively encouraged the rejection of previous, abject, supposedly self-hating forms of lesbian and gay male behavior. It insistently championed new, enlightened, egalitarian, symmetrical practices of both sex and gender, elevating them to the status of trademarks of lesbian and gay liberation, and transforming them into privileged elements in new lesbian and gay male self-understandings.

The emerging gay-affirmative sciences of homosexuality contributed to this ideological makeover by helping to shatter the lingering stereotypes. In San Francisco, the new *Journal of Homosexuality* published article after article throughout the second half of the 1970s showing that, contrary to all the old myths, most gay men were actually *not* effeminate.²³ In Paris, Michel Foucault asserted in a 1978 interview that male homosexuality had no fundamental connection with femininity: drag was merely an outmoded strategy of resistance to earlier sexual regimes.²⁴ Soon, no doubt, it would wither away.

The irony of this updated brand of gay liberation is that it did not always liberate. In some cases, it also imposed new constraints. And it gave rise to its own brand of censorship. Archivist and memoirist Joan Nestle was told by her lesbian-feminist comrades that it might be okay for her to celebrate butch-femme roles in the lesbian bar culture of the 1950s. But if she dared to champion role-playing among lesbians in the present-day world of the 1970s, she would be herstory.



By the late 1970s, then, lesbian and gay male life in the gay urban ghettos of the United States and Western Europe came to be distinguished by the hegemony of lesbian feminism and the emphatically masculine culture of the so-called gay male “clone,” both of which

sought to banish gender polarities and asymmetrical role-playing from homosexuality. That move was not, to be sure, an effort to eliminate all gender identities or all roles. Certain privileged gender styles, such as gay male virility, and certain approved performances of sexuality, such as egalitarian sexual roles, were actively promoted and valorized. But they weren't promoted *as* styles or roles, *as* explicit performances of sex and gender. Instead, they were valorized as reflections of healthy, liberated gayness itself, as universal truths about homosexuality and signs of its natural, undistorted expression. And they contrasted proudly with older gay styles.

Those older styles went underground, but they did not disappear altogether. Rather, they coexisted with the new, emerging embodiments of lesbian and gay male identity and alternated with them, often within the same individual. But if the 1970s now stand out in retrospect as an unfortunate chapter in the long, grim history of transgender oppression, they were also, for many lesbians and gay men, a time of gender euphoria. A giddy sense of exhilaration accompanied the discovery, made and ceaselessly remade throughout lesbian and gay male urban communities in the period, that homosexuality was *not* irretrievably wedded to gender non-conformity, that lesbians and gay men were and could be "normal."

As if to demonstrate and to dramatize that stunning breakthrough, so incredible and yet so true, gay men threw themselves headlong into a collective project of normative gender performance. By 1975 or so, it suddenly started to seem that everyone in the gay male world (or maybe just in the gay cruise bars I went to in San Francisco) had completed a crash course in how to be butch. It was as if we'd all finally figured out how to impersonate straight men, or at least how to imitate our favorite straight-acting and -appearing heroes from the world of postwar gay romantic fiction.

An article in a 1975 issue of London's *Gay News* provided helpful hints about how to pull off that difficult trick and make a successful transition from archaic gay male forms of life to modern gay male identity. It afforded a satirical (if revealing) glimpse of the techniques

gay men were employing behind the scenes to embody the newer, stricter standards of masculine self-presentation that the gay world now imposed: "I have found that practicing in front of a mirror is a good way of ridding oneself of these added afflictions [i.e., effeminacy]," explained the writer. "I was able to learn more normal movements and expressions that way. Of course it took years of practice, but now I can relax in public without the acute embarrassment of finding myself limp-wristed or adopting effeminate postures."²⁵ Further pointers about "being butch" and perfecting "butch movement," "butch noises," "the butch body," "butch dressing," and "butch drugs" were provided in 1982 by Clark Henley in a scathing and hilarious but genuinely instructive guide, *The Butch Manual*. According to Henley, the real motivation behind the transition from queen to butch was simply the desire to "get laid," which gay masculinity made possible to an extent previously undreamed of.²⁶

In the gay society of the period, in short, the shift from deviant to normative gender styles, the rise of sex as both symbol and practice, and the euthanasia of traditional gay male culture were all strictly correlated. As queen was to butch, so culture was to sex. Now that gay men were living their homosexuality not as a cultural practice but as a sexual identity, they required a new gender style; and the masculine gender style that they adopted, by expanding their sexual opportunities, enabled them to consolidate a definition of gay existence and a model of gay identity that focused on sex at the expense of culture—and that excluded the feminine identifications that had informed and defined much of traditional gay male culture.



And so in the rapidly expanding gay enclaves of the major cities in the United States and elsewhere during the 1970s, a new and supposedly modern style of gay masculinity acquired ever more solid form, achieving a spectacular visibility.²⁷ My straight friends in San Francisco would ask me why all the gay men in the city seemed to have among them only three or four different looks: construction worker, college athlete, lumberjack, motorcyclist. Frances Fitzgerald, visiting the

Castro district in San Francisco in the same period, described the sidewalks as overflowing with “young men dressed as it were for a hiking expedition,” all wearing denim jeans, flannel shirts, hiking boots, and down-filled nylon flight jackets.²⁸ “It would be easy enough to treat gay macho as nothing more than a matter of shifting fashions,” concedes Alice Echols in a book on the culture of 1970s disco music. “But embedded in this macho turn were changes in gay men’s identity and subjectivity. Gays not only presented themselves differently, they regarded themselves differently, searched out unfamiliar sorts of sexual partners, and expanded their sexual repertoire.”²⁹

Indeed, the new clone style was much more than a style of gender presentation. It was also a sexual style, which consisted in the down-playing of polarized roles.³⁰ Gone were the supposedly self-hating queens who lived only to service straight trade, who spent a lifetime on their knees. No longer were gay men alternately one another’s sisters and one another’s rivals for the favors of the young and the beautiful; now they were one another’s preferred objects of desire. “We’re the men we’ve been looking for” was the watchword of the 1970s, and as if to prove it, gay men held hands and kissed in public.³¹ Mutuality and reciprocity were the expected sexual protocols, in gay life as well as in gay porn. “One-sided” homosexual relations, though they might still exist, were a vestige from the premodern past. Or so maintained Dr. Charles Silverstein and Edmund White, the authors of the first edition of *The Joy of Gay Sex*, published in 1977. “This sort of [active/passive] role-playing, held to as a strict division, seems increasingly on the wane,” they added, assuring their readers that “most gay men would denounce” such role-playing nowadays “as ‘old-fashioned’ or ‘unliberated.’”³²

Just eight years earlier, in 1969, White had taken a very different line. He had admitted that “many gay men are constantly trying to reproduce with their lovers a facsimile of straight marriage. One gay man plays the ‘butch’ while the other plays the ‘femme.’”³³ But by 1977, all that was already ancient history. From the freshly minted official perspective of the post-Stonewall gay male world—and from the personal insight that many gay men had gained through intense sex-

ual experimentation in the wake of gay liberation—polarized sex-roles existed only in homophobic fantasy. Gay relationships were no longer “one-sided,” no longer divided into active partners who played the butch and passive partners who played the femme. “Which of you wears the pants in the family? Which of you is the husband, and which is the wife?” Those were the kinds of questions that only a clueless straight person would ask.

Modern gay sex was not polarized or hierarchical. It was mutual, and its mutuality positioned the two partners identically in relation to each other. There were no tops; there were no bottoms. There was but a single homosexual identity—namely, gay. Hence, successful sexual relationships involved equal partners of the same age, the same wealth, and the same social standing, each of them doing everything with and to the other with perfect reciprocity. The typical modern gay male couple pictured by Silverstein and White consisted of “a 35-year-old lawyer in love with a 35-year-old doctor”; the two of them would “share expenses and household duties” and “take turns fucking each other.”³⁴

Robert Ferro went even further. The ideal love affair described in his 1985 novel *The Blue Star* is one in which erotic reciprocity gives rise to such a simple, hearty, natural fellowship among equal partners that sex takes on the jovial mateyness of the all-American sport of baseball. Addressing the reader with a wry, ingratiating charm, but not the slightest intended irony, the narrator recalls, “We made love to each other several times, taking turns as if at bat, as if still playing a game in which first he and then I stepped up and loved.”³⁵

The analogy from baseball was not a complete accident. The erotic model of equal affections it implies turns out to be just as dear to a leading character in Mark Merlis’s 1998 novel *An Arrow’s Flight*. This man, significantly, came to sexual maturity during the “age of heroes” immediately after Stonewall. His most stubborn, cherished image of gay love is chastely embodied by “a pair of boys playing catch. . . . Lazy and silent on a spring morning, in perfect communion.”³⁶ The pornography produced by Falcon Studios in the 1970s provided the visual counterpart: it promoted a model of gay sex as a wholesome,

easygoing masculine exchange among friendly, mutually respectful teammates, and it offered its bedazzled viewers tantalizing glimpses of a gay comradeship at once sexual and fraternal, inclusive and tender, virile but non-judgmental, happily free of roles, hierarchy, and sexual difference.

That classic, utopian vision—as old as Walt Whitman, as new as the latest circuit party or other gathering of the gay male “tribe”—did not long survive unscathed. For in 1990 came the “queer” moment, with its militant vindication of deviant sex and gender styles, its men in dresses and leather and pearls, its delight in butch display and high-femme theatrics, its reclamation of tops and bottoms, and its multiplication (or rediscovery) of queer sub-identities: twink, bear, emo. Ever since then, it’s been a bit hard to take seriously the romance of gay male love as an undifferentiated brotherhood, an innocent manly pastime, the sexual equivalent of baseball. The closest gay sex comes to team sports nowadays is “Gag the Fag.” I am referring to those compilations of semi-amateur porn videos, sold over the Internet and now past their fifth installment, that feature acts of oral intercourse so rough as to provoke vomiting. What kind of sex could be less fraternal, less egalitarian, less reciprocal, less symmetrical?³⁷ It is certainly a far cry from that game of catch among upright, amiable youths lazily tossing a ball back and forth in perfect masculine communion on a spring morning.



Already by the early 1990s, the compulsory loyalty oaths to egalitarian sex and gender roles that gay men had been obliged to swear for more than a decade came in for gentle caricature from Pansy Division, the queer San Francisco rock band. Here is the opening verse of a song called “Versatile”:

There’s a few straight guys I know
They wanna know who plays the woman’s role
I shake my head and say it’s not like that
Some guys have the imagination of a doormat

Our roles are not cast in stone
We trade off getting boned
Cause we're *versatile*.³⁸

In these lyrics, the typical protest at straight people's perennial, exasperating inability to appreciate the true meaning of gay male sex and gender roles is succeeded by the predictable, out-and-proud claim to have transcended old-fashioned, gendered paradigms ("Our roles are not cast in stone")—but that claim quickly turns out to be hollow. At least, it is undercut by the very terms in which it is articulated. These boys aren't *really* versatile, after all: they just "trade off getting boned."

"Versatility," in other words, is not an unambiguously virile boast, not at least as it is used here. It functions as a transparent cover for the continuing practice and enjoyment of "one-sided," "unliberated," *passive* role-playing. Contrary to what Robert Ferro had implied with his language of batting and hitting, being versatile consists in politely waiting to take one's turn at being a bottom. Roles did not disappear in 1969, or in 1975, then, despite the many obituaries that were written for them. They just went underground for a time, and a little dose of queerness was all it took to resuscitate them. Or so Pansy Division slyly implied.

The corrosive skepticism that emerged in the 1990s about the gender-normativity and egalitarianism of post-Stonewall, pre-queer gay styles made it hard to believe that anyone had ever taken gay male clone culture seriously. Recent converts to the cult of performativity in queer theory have tried, accordingly, to interpret the 1970s clone style, as well as butch-femme role-playing among lesbians, as a knowing parody of gender roles, as a send-up of normative sexual conventions.³⁹ But back in the 1970s, at least so far as gay male clones were concerned, nothing could have been further from the truth. The desire to carry off a gender presentation that did not appear to lag behind the historical curve was intense and genuine. Also, as Henley and Echols rightly emphasize, gay hypermasculinity was an *erotic* style, and that meant it was played very straight, at least when a gay

man was looking for action, which was often. As Leo Bersani put it in 1987, “Parody is an erotic turn-off, and all gay men know this. Much campy talk is parodistic, and while that may be fun at a dinner party, if you’re out to make someone you turn off the camp.”⁴⁰

An acquaintance of mine, a gay man of my own generation, still records the message on his answering machine thirty times over, until he’s sure his voice reveals no traces of effeminacy. There’s nothing tongue-in-cheek about such a performance: it couldn’t be more earnest. And in fact it was quite wise, in that post-Stonewall era of butch one-upmanship, not to take too many chances. There was no higher compliment you could pay the trick of the moment than to say, “You know, when I saw you walk into the bar tonight, I thought to myself, ‘There’s gotta be some mistake. Does this guy know it’s a gay bar? He *can’t* be gay. Is he here for real? I can’t believe he’s not straight.’” To which this paragon of masculinity would invariably reply, if he was in a mood to be agreeable, “Well, you know, if I just happened to see you walking down the street, I would never think *you* were gay.” Such compliments—for that is indeed what those remarks purported to be—were not only exchanged in all seriousness; they were uttered in a swoon of erotic delirium. In such circumstances, nothing was more scandalous, or more unforgivable, than for the guy one was dating to show up for a romantic dinner wearing an earring—which is not to say that such catastrophes never happened.

In short, post-Stonewall gay male life was defined by the emergence of a new masculine, non-role-specific practice of gender and sex, which gave rise to a new style and a new form of life, embodied by the gay clone or butch gay man. Those developments betokened the proud triumph of an undifferentiated *gay sexuality* over an earlier, discredited, effeminate *gay culture*, from which the new sex-centered model of gay male identity offered a long-overdue and welcome refuge.



No wonder that in the heady atmosphere of those glory days in the late 1970s, before AIDS or the rise of the New Right, when sex was

everywhere (if you were under thirty, urban, butch, and not too bad-looking), and when utopia seemed to be just around the corner—no wonder that young gay men like me had little use for Judy Garland. Traditional gay male culture—with its female icons, its flaming camp style, its division between queens and trade, its polarized gender roles, its sexual hierarchies, its balked romantic longings, its sentimentality, its self-pity, and its profound despair about the possibility of lasting love—all that seemed not only archaic and outdated but repulsive. It was an insult to the newer, truer, and better definitions of gayness that gay men had recently invented, popularized, and labored to embody as well as to exploit. In such a context, gay male culture, as it had been traditionally constituted, appeared to be nothing more than a series of stereotypes—and homophobic stereotypes, at that—though all too often internalized, sadly, by gay men themselves.

So I had to move to Australia, settle down with a boyfriend half my age, and undergo my own gay initiation in order to see for the first time, in the 1990s, the movies from the 1930s and 1940s that I had studiously avoided seeing in the 1970s. (They turned out to be pretty good.) It was only then that I was introduced to the American gay cultural curriculum that gay American men who were twenty years older than me already knew by heart, but that I had resisted learning about from them. Since I underwent this gay initiation at the hands of a much younger lover, I am constitutionally immune to the claim that pre-Stonewall gay male culture is irrelevant to more recent generations of gay men, or out of date—even if it is, undeniably, and endearingly, dated . . . and even if it cannot help *looking* archaic from our current, post-Stonewall perspective.

To study gay male subjectivity by studying traditional gay male culture seems like such an intriguing thing to do nowadays precisely because it feels so counter-intuitive, so shockingly retrograde, especially in the light of the social, conceptual, generational developments I have just traced. It represents a reversal of previous, long-held convictions, a complete betrayal of the most cherished notions that many of us thought we believed about the nature of male homosexuality

and that we also tried to make other people believe. It violates, in particular, the official post-Stonewall creed that gay men are no different from anybody else, that sexual object-choice has nothing to do with gender style, that gay sexuality has no relation to femininity, and that homosexuality is a sexual orientation, not a culture or a subculture.

Which is no doubt why my class aroused so much hostility among so many gay men.



For example, in the spring of 2000, before I had even taught “How To Be Gay” for the first time, a man named John in Annapolis, Maryland, sent an e-mail to the University of Michigan’s English Department, protesting against the class. (John used his full name, but I am withholding it, to protect his privacy.) John’s message was addressed not to me but to the director of undergraduate studies, who had issued a public statement defending the class. John disagreed with that statement and, appealing to the authority of my administrative superiors to resolve the matter, he urged them, in the strongest terms, to cancel the class and remove it from the English Department’s curriculum.

So far, there was nothing unusual about John’s message. It resembled countless others that had been sent by members of the Christian Right to various offices at the University of Michigan. But John was not a religious conservative. He identified himself as a gay man in his mid-thirties, who was no supporter of any of the right-wing evangelical organizations that had been lobbying against the class. Instead, he said he was deeply disturbed by a number of its features, which promoted what he considered to be stereotypes of gay people. Merely by offering such a course, he argued, I was implying that gay men as a group were characterized by “universalities” that could be discovered, enumerated, and presented to undergraduates as if such things were facts. But far from being facts, these sorts of generalizations about gay men were common misconceptions—for instance, that gay men were fashion-savvy, or design-savvy, or had a penchant for dressing like women.

John had been fighting those stereotypes his entire life, he said, and he didn't like seeing them propped up by institutions of higher education. Surely, every enlightened person understood that human individuals are all unique. There were lots of effeminate straight men and lots of masculine gay men. Everyone was different, and people didn't "fall into neat little boxes." John himself happened to belong to the latter category: he made it clear that he considered himself a masculine gay man. And as someone who didn't fit the usual gay stereotypes, he resented the assumption that just because he was gay, he was bound to like certain things, such as particular works of music and art. What would be next, he asked sarcastically—a course for African Americans that would teach them how to enjoy fried chicken, ribs, and watermelon?

In short, John admired any and all efforts to teach young people to be tolerant of others, especially those unlike themselves. But he objected to clichés and assumptions and stereotypes that would "give students a skewed impression of gay men in America." Being gay, he insisted, was a sexual orientation, *not* a subculture.

It would be altogether too easy to demean or to dismiss this complaint by highlighting the writer's defensiveness about his masculinity or by making fun of his evident panic at the prospect of being lumped together with a bunch of screaming queens. To be sure, as a self-described masculine gay man, John had everything to lose by being identified with men who were deviant not only in their sexual practices but also in their gender style, and who therefore ranked lower on the scale of social acceptability than he did.⁴¹ If he objected to the promotion of stereotypes, that was not necessarily because he had problems with stereotypes in and of themselves—after all, the straight-acting and -appearing gay man that he claimed to be was nothing if not a stereotype. Rather, it was because the *particular* stereotypes he believed my class was promoting happened to be at odds with his own proud and "positive" image of himself as virile and dignified.

That's what John meant when he said that such stereotypes gave

“a skewed impression of gay men in America”: they failed to differentiate between sexuality and gender, to distinguish male homosexuality from effeminacy, to acknowledge the existence of straight-acting and -appearing gay men, to separate those men from their degraded, effeminate brethren, and to credit them with the social respectability to which their praiseworthy gender achievement entitled them.

Such recognition is in fact hard to come by. Claiming a normatively masculine gender identity is always a dicey act for a gay man to carry off in a society that routinely continues to associate male homosexuality with effeminacy. And since one of the demands that our society makes on homosexuality is that it be—if not visible—at least legible, that it always reveal itself to careful, expert scrutiny, any attempt to assert the entirely unmarked character of male homosexuality, to insist that it does not produce any decipherable signs of its difference, is bound to be met with skepticism and resistance.⁴² So John faced an uphill battle in trying to establish his masculine credentials, and he needed all the help he could get, which my scandalous class did not exactly give him. (It may be worth noting in this connection that I never received any protests about my class from gay men who prided themselves on being flagrantly effeminate and who were alarmed that my reference to “muscle culture” in the course description might lead to their being mistaken for a bunch of buff military types or boring gym bunnies who wear track suits, like to watch team sports, and have no sense of verbal wit.)



The main reason it would be unwise to dismiss John’s objections in some righteous or condescending way is that to do so would be to underrate their political force and to overlook their grounding in a particular set of social and historical developments, to which in fact they offer an important and useful clue. John was registering and expressing a pervasive, enduring belief among gay men of the post-Stonewall era, a belief I once held myself, a belief we were taught to consider politically necessary as well as politically progressive—

namely, that homosexuality is a sexual orientation, not a lifestyle or culture; that it is downright homophobic to represent gay men as marked by certain typical, or stereotypical, traits; that gay men are all individuals; that it is impossible to generalize about us as a group; that we are not any different from normal people. The official line of the post-Stonewall gay movement in the United States has gone something like this: “We are not freaks or monsters. We are the same as you: we are ordinary, decent people. In fact, we are just like heterosexuals except for what we do in bed (which is nobody’s business but our own—and, anyway, the less said about it, the better).”

For a short time, around the birth of the “queer” movement at the turn of the 1990s, it became fashionable to claim the opposite. Those who embraced a queer identity (or non-identity) used to take a line that exactly reversed the official post-Stonewall one: “We queers are totally unlike anyone else; we do not resemble you at all. We are completely different from heterosexuals—except for what we do in bed (which is more or less what everyone does in bed, with some minor, insignificant variations).”

But that queer fashion didn’t last long, and a lot of lesbians and gay men in the United States, like John from Annapolis, have now gone back to claiming that gay people are defined, if at all, only by a non-standard sexual preference which in and of itself does not strictly correlate with any other feature of the personality. In all other aspects of their lives, gay people are the same as everyone else. (That tendency may actually reflect a recent development of international scope, what Rogers Brubaker has called “the return of assimilation.”)⁴³ In American popular usage nowadays, to be sure, the word “gay” may mean “stereotypically gay” or “culturally gay,” while men who are defined by their sexuality, by the sex they have with men, are more likely to be termed “homosexual.” But in the official language of the gay movement, “gay” remains an identity marker attached to sexual preference. To be gay, according to this latter outlook, is to have a sexuality, a sexual orientation; it is *not* to have a distinctive culture or psychology or social practice or inner life, or anything else that is different

from the norm. Especially if—in the case of gay men—that difference implies any identification with women or femininity. Merely to question this doctrine is to risk conjuring up the dread specter of sexual inversion, opening the door to a return of Victorian psychiatry, with all its ancient prejudices about the congenital abnormality and psychopathology and gender deviance of gay men.

But so long as we cling to the notion that gayness is reducible to same-sex sexual object-choice, that it has nothing to do with how we live or what we like, that our homosexuality is completely formed prior to and independent of any exposure to gay culture—and so long as we hold to that belief as to a kind of dogma—then the persistence of gay culture will remain a perpetual embarrassment, as well as an insoluble analytic puzzle.



Will Fellows makes a similar point at the beginning of his own book about male homosexuality as a cultural practice. In *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*, Fellows inquires into the particular role gay men have played in historic preservation, architectural restoration, and various antiquarian pursuits. “At first, I was bothered by this strong, gender-atypical trend” in gay male behavior, he confesses. “I suppose I saw the apparently disproportionate presence of gay men in historic preservation as the stuff of stereotype. And so I failed to take it seriously.” Fellows blames his initial, instinctive refusal to see anything significant in this pattern of cultural practice among gay men on

the old saw about gay males being no different from straight males except for their sexual orientation. This notion developed as a central tenet of the gay rights movement since the 1970s. . . . If outside of our sex lives we gays are just like straights, then it must be only a stereotypical illusion that gay men are inordinately drawn to being house restorers and antiquarians—or interior designers, florists, hair stylists, fashion designers, and so forth. Now it’s clear to me that gay men really are extraordinarily attracted to these kinds of work. Rather than

dismissing these realities as the stuff of stereotype, I see them as the stuff of archetype, significant truths worthy of exploration.⁴⁴

In speaking of archetypes and essential gay differences, Fellows goes further than I would go; I try to distinguish my view from his in Chapter 15 of this book. But he is certainly right to note the perennial defensive reflex that is immediately triggered nowadays by any suggestion that “gender variance” or “gender-atypical” behavior might be a part of gay male identity—a transphobic reflex which our friend in Annapolis perfectly exemplifies. Fellows knows that routine by heart. He both anticipates it and reproduces it unerringly: “‘I’m homosexual,’ they will protest, ‘but I’m *not* effeminate.’” More controversially, and more intriguingly, Fellows counters those claims by contending that the mere failure to *appear* effeminate does not support such a defensive assertion on the part of a gay man, since gender variance “may be manifested more internally in his interests, aptitudes, values, emotional constitution, and communication style.”⁴⁵ We’ll see some eloquent testimony to that effect in the following pages.

Unlike Fellows, I do not regard gender variance as the key to understanding gay male subjectivity. But the project of my class and of this book agrees with his insofar as it bucks the historical trends that are responsible for making gay male culture a permanent embarrassment to gay men—and that do so by constituting gay culture as inherently backward, archaic, unmasculine, unsexual, and therefore inassimilable to modern, normative gay identity. These are the same historical trends that have made the denial of any and all non-sexual differences between gay and non-gay people, including differences in culture or gender style, an article of faith in the ideology of the post-Stonewall gay movement. Such a denial lies behind the insistence that younger gay men, healthy and untouched by homophobia, have no need of gay male culture—and certainly no need of a gay male culture that implies some sort of female identification or effeminacy.

A similar denial persists, more surprisingly, throughout much writing in the academic field of “queer theory.” There it assumes the pro-

tective coloration of an axiomatic opposition to “essentialism”—the stubborn but ultimately untenable belief that social identities are grounded in some inherent property or nature or quality common to all the members of an identity-based group. The rejection of essentialism did not prevent the original founders of queer theory from asking, “What do queers want?” or from exploring the particularities of gay culture.⁴⁶ But as queer theory has become institutionalized, the understandable reluctance to accept essentialist assumptions about lesbians and gay men has hardened into an automatic self-justifying dogmatism, a visceral impulse to preempt the merest acknowledgment or recognition of *any* cultural patterns or practices that might be distinctive to homosexuals.⁴⁷

Barry Adam, a sociologist and one of the inventors of lesbian/gay/queer studies, has put the point as follows.

We are now in a period when difference is the order of the day, and queer orthodoxy denies the search for, or assertion of, commonality now that the commonality posited by gay/lesbian identities has been exposed as never really having existed (which is why queer theory will never be able to account for why so many women and men defy the odds to affirm identity again and again). But a sense of mutual recognition, commonality, and—dare one say—identity endures despite the many fractures and assaults that try to undermine it.⁴⁸

The very attention that queer theory has lavished on difference, intersectionality, and comparison has ended up screening out the question of how, for a large segment of homosexual American men during the past century or so, being gay has been experienced through highly patterned forms of embodied sensibility—even as those patterns tend routinely to be disavowed by gay men in their efforts to escape “stereotypes” and “labels.” It is no accident that the studies of gay male culture that do focus most intensely on that question have tended to be undertaken by academics like Will Fellows and John Clum, who write at least in part for non-academic audiences, or by community-based intellectuals like Michael Bronski, Neil Bartlett,

and David Nimmons—all of whose work falls outside the canon of queer theory.⁴⁹

The general denial of any and all homosexual specificity, especially cultural specificity, is an eloquent symptom of our current predicament. It testifies to the emergence of a powerful taboo, what legal theorist Kenji Yoshino has called a “new form of discrimination” that “targets minority cultures rather than minority persons.”⁵⁰ We may value diversity and difference, but we flinch at the very notion that minorities might be *culturally* different.⁵¹ And anyway, gay culture in its manifold concrete manifestations often seems to be much too low-brow a topic for serious intellectual inquiry, which may also explain why many academic queer theorists—even or especially some of the most prominent ones—tend to shy away from it.



This book, nonetheless, champions queer politics over gay politics in a very particular way. While honoring the traditions of gay liberation and gay pride that emerged in the wake of the Stonewall riots, it explores and even celebrates certain non-standard practices of sex and gender. It also attempts to reclaim the culture of pre-Stonewall gay men by connecting it with such post-Stonewall developments as the queer and transgender movements. At the same time, it is deeply gay-positive. For it is unashamed of gay male culture, even gay culture’s most unsettling or objectionable elements. At least, it is unashamed of gay shame—and therefore willing to linger over some features of gay culture that continue to make gay men nowadays ashamed of both gay culture and themselves.

Unlike the kinds of hostile stereotypes that are intended to demean and denigrate the members of a minority group, the stereotypes about gay male culture and identity that I am interested in here are stereotypes that have been elaborated and propounded by at least some gay men themselves. That alone makes them worthy of being treated with seriousness, respect, curiosity, and analytical rigor—even

though certain proud gay men, like John from Annapolis, find them “skewed” or even self-hating.

If, for example, it actually were the case that African Americans largely defined themselves *to themselves* by their shared understanding that being Black implied a distinctive, unusual, or marked preference for fried chicken, ribs, and watermelon (to use John’s example), I would not in fact be afraid to inquire into the cultural meanings that might be involved in the selective appropriation of those foods.⁵² Being Black, after all, can also be understood as a set of peculiar and defining cultural practices, though it is a rare event when such a model of Black identity makes its way into respectable political discourse—even as a joke. On January 21, 2008, in the debate before the Democratic Party’s electoral primary in South Carolina, Barack Obama was asked what he thought of Toni Morrison’s remark that Bill Clinton was the first Black American president. He replied, “I would have to investigate more Bill’s dancing abilities.”⁵³ Black writers and critical race theorists have recently taken up the topic of “how to be Black” and have treated it as worthy of sustained investigation.⁵⁴

In the case of gay men, it is not only (or even chiefly) homophobes who think that gay men like Judy Garland. Gay men themselves—or, at least, some gay men in the United States and Great Britain during the past sixty years—have thought the same thing.⁵⁵ We are not dealing with a hostile stereotype, then. We are dealing—at least, within certain historical, geographic, racial, and generational limits—with a collective self-recognition, though a self-recognition that admittedly continues to occasion a good deal of shame and therefore to produce a considerable amount of unease, and even outright denial.

In order to face down that shame and resist that impulse to denial, it is tempting to be shameless, to throw caution to the winds, to go all the way to the other extreme and to entertain, if only for a moment or two, the assumption—as our man in Annapolis said—that just because one is gay, one must like certain things, such as particular works of art and music. That assumption is plainly indefensible when it is

put in those terms. But what if we tried to discover what was behind it? What if it were possible to connect the experience of gayness with particular cultural tastes, with the love of certain cultural objects? What if there actually were a certain logic to that connection? What if we could derive the characteristic themes and experiences of gay culture from the social conditions under which that culture arises and is reproduced? What if we went even further and considered the possibility that gay male tastes for certain cultural artifacts or social practices reflect, within their particular contexts, ways of being, ways of feeling, and ways of relating to the larger social world that are fundamental to male homosexuality and distinctive to gay men, despite gay men's many differences from one another? What if gay male subjecthood or subjectivity consisted precisely in those ways of being, feeling, and relating?

What if, in short, post-Stonewall gay male attitudes were *wrong*, and it turned out that male homosexuality was less about sex and more about culture, as well as the feelings, emotions, and complex combinations of affect (as epitomized by some gay men's love of Judy Garland) that cultural practices imply? What if those old queens at the Castro movie theater understood something about gayness—about *how to be gay*—that gay men of my generation, and the ones that came after it, completely missed, at least when we were young and new to the scene?

Which brings me back to my original, hazardous hypothesis. Perhaps there really is such a thing as gay male subjectivity. And perhaps gay men's cultural practices offer us a way of approaching it, getting hold of it, describing it, defining it, and understanding it.

That, at least, is the hypothesis on which this investigation will proceed.

PART TWO



American Falsettos

GAY IDENTITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

So what was it that those old queens at the Castro movie theater understood about how to be gay that many members of my own generation missed? If I had to convey in a few words what I think it was, I would say they knew that *gay male desire* cannot be reduced either to *sexual* desire or to *gay identity*.

Sexual desire is only one aspect of gay male desire. Sex is not the sum of queer pleasure. Gay desire seeks more than the achievement of gay identity. Gay identity does not answer to all the demands of gay desire. Gay identity is inadequate to the full expression of gay subjectivity. Gay identity may well register the fact of gay desire; it may even stand in for its wayward promptings, its unanticipated urges and satisfactions. But gay identity does not—it cannot—capture gay desire in all its subjective sweep and scope. *It cannot express it.*

Desire into identity will not go.

Gay identity cannot express gay desire or gay subjectivity because gay desire is not limited to desire for men. Gay desire does not consist only in desire for sex with men. Or desire for masculinity. Or desire for positive images of gay men. Or desire for a gay male world. All of those desires might, conceivably, be referred to gay identity, to some aspect of what defines a gay man. But gay male desire actually comprises a kaleidoscopic range of queer longings—of wishes and sensations and pleasures and emotions—that exceed the bounds of any

singular identity and extend beyond the specifics of gay male existence.

That is why a social movement grounded in a gay identity defined by exclusive reference to gay people—with its LGBTQ community centers and organizations, its lesbian magazines and novels and movies and popular music and TV shows and cable channels, its neighborhoods, bars, clubs, vacation resorts, and churches, its political representatives and leaders and spokespeople and human-rights lobby groups and street marches and demonstrations, its theoretical and scholarly breakthroughs, historical discoveries, university classes, and fields of research—that is why all this commercial and political and cultural infrastructure of gay identity remains a perennial let-down, leaving many members of its gay constituency perpetually unsatisfied. Gay identity—gayness reduced to identity or understood as identity—fails to realize male homosexual desire in its unpredictable, unsystematic ensemble. It answers to only a single dimension of gay male subjectivity.

And yet, *identity* has become the preferred category for thinking about homosexuality. Moreover, it has been promoted at the direct expense of pleasure or feeling or *subjectivity*.¹



The lesbian and gay movement has long fought to win for queer people the status of a political minority. It has tried hard to persuade others to see us as defined by a political category—namely, gay identity—because such a category is *morally neutral*. And so the lesbian and gay movement has presented us as members of a social group that has suffered and continues to suffer, through no fault of our own, from both formal and informal discrimination—ranging from a lack of equal rights to casual disrespect and denigration. To be gay, on this view, is to be a member of a socially disadvantaged minority. That is certainly a fair enough view of our situation. But there is also a quite specific ideological payoff that comes from defining homosexuality as a political and social condition, rather than a subjective one: such a purely political definition of gayness helps to ensure that homosexu-

ality will never again be understood as a kind of mental illness—as a sickness for which gay people as individuals are to blame, instead of the homophobic society in which we live.

The lesbian and gay movement has had good reason, then, to downplay the subjective experience of homosexuality, to pass over what homosexuality *feels like* to us. It has been perfectly right to worry that any attention to our supposed mental or emotional peculiarities would simply reconfirm ancient prejudices about our psychological abnormality, prejudices that have served so often to justify discrimination against lesbians and gay men. So it has minimized our subjective and cultural differences, even denied them. It has waged a sustained, consistent, decades-long ideological struggle to portray homosexuality as a political category, or at most a social category, not an emotional or psychological particularity. As a result of all those efforts by lesbian and gay activists, writers, artists, and scholars, the only credible differences (beyond sexual differences) that can be assigned to gay people nowadays, at least by anyone who wishes to appear enlightened and politically mainstream, are purely *social* differences.

So the lesbian and gay movement's gambit has been largely successful. If anything, it has been rather *too* successful. For it has effectively closed off the entire topic of gay subjectivity to respectable inquiry, making it impossible for us to inquire into ourselves or to explore in any systematic or meaningful way our unique sensibilities and cultures—beyond matters of sexuality.² We have ended up imposing a sanitizing blackout on many distinctive aspects of queer life that might otherwise qualify as its most original and, possibly, its most praiseworthy features.

For all its undeniable benefits, gay pride is now preventing us from knowing ourselves.



Indeed, the whole point of gay identity politics has been to stop people (ourselves included) from asking too many awkward or prying questions about what goes on in our inner lives. One of the overarch-

ing aims of identity politics in general has been to make the world safe for minority subjectivity by shifting the public's gaze away from the distinctive features of minority subcultures, especially from everything that might make people who don't belong to those subcultures feel uncomfortable with them, suspicious of them, or excluded from them. By focusing attention, instead, on specifically political (and therefore less viscerally upsetting) demands for equal treatment, social recognition, and procedural justice, progressive social movements have achieved significant gains for members of stigmatized groups. Accordingly, campaigns for minority rights have persistently championed identity (who we are) over subjectivity (how we feel) and emphasized such matters as social equality, the benefits of diversity, the pleasures of difference, the ethics of peaceful coexistence.

The ultimate effect has been to imply that the spectrum of minority identities is no more shocking or offensive than a banquet of ethnic cuisine at an international food festival: a smorgasbord of delectable but insignificant and meaningless variations, open to all; an invitation to broaden our cultural range, providing something for everyone to enjoy—without anyone feeling obligated to sample everything, especially anything that looks particularly gross or disgusting. Stepping back from the details of queer life, we take shelter in inoffensive generalities: promoting human rights, celebrating diversity, valuing difference, supporting multiculturalism, fighting for social justice.

The greatest beneficiaries of this vogue for representing cultural difference in terms of innocent and harmless diversity have been those marginalized groups that still bear a heavy burden of stigma and whose public behavior continues, for that reason, to arouse strong general aversion: African Americans using Black English in White society, gay men kissing on the street, butch women claiming leadership roles and asserting authority over men, or disabled people painfully and obtrusively negotiating a built environment not designed for them. Identity helps to “cover” the indiscreet and disruptive features of socially excluded groups, their most flagrantly visible mani-

festations—precisely those defining attributes of stigmatized minorities that caused them to be stigmatized in the first place.³ Identity provides a protective shield against the uneasiness that stigmatized populations often occasion in “normal” people—that is, people who don’t suffer from the stigma in question and come comfortably close to embodying the social norm.

Identity can perform this important practical and political function because it allows and indeed encourages normal people to categorize the members of a stigmatized population as a single group, not on the basis of their offending behavior but, more neutrally, on the basis of their “identity”—that is, their common membership in a “community.” The category of “identity” offers plausible grounds on which to support as a matter of principle the equal treatment of individuals belonging to such a community by representing them as *a general class of persons*—as a group like any other—and by downplaying their shared, flamboyant differences, all those weird and disturbing shenanigans that at least partly define, distinguish, and constitute the group in the first place. As Michael Warner puts it, with reference to sexual minorities, “Identity . . . allows us to distance ourselves from any actual manifestation of queerness.”⁴ The politics of identity performs in this way an important practical service. Despite springing from a model of social difference, identity politics, insofar as it insists on *identity* as a general—even universal—social category, contributes to the transcendence of *particular* differences and thus to the identity-blind project of assimilation.⁵

It is precisely because the goal of mainstream gay politics has been to promote a benign attitude of acceptance toward sexual minorities, represented not as subjects of a distinctive way of being and feeling but as members of a generic identity-based group, that gay people have been pressured to mask their queerness, rein in their sensibilities, and play down their differences from regular folks. “Progress in gay rights,” Daniel Harris argues, “is often won at the expense of our indigenous, unacculturated idiosyncrasies as a minority which must be toned down or erased altogether in order for us to achieve com-

plete social acceptance. Gay liberation and the gay sensibility are staunch antagonists.”⁶

That antagonism has not led to the total exclusion of gay sensibility from the public scene, of course, nor have political imperatives succeeded in suppressing all undignified expressions of lesbian and gay desire, subjectivity, and cultural specificity. Gay pride celebrations in major urban centers still do have their uniquely queer, transgressive, carnivalesque contingents—from dykes on bikes to boy-lovers, from drag queens to porn stars. But such figures represent a distinct embarrassment to the official, public image of American gay identity, with its politics of respectability, social responsibility, and affirmation.⁷ In the week following any gay pride parade, dozens of letters typically appear in the local newspapers (both mainstream and gay) complaining that gay pride has become a freak show and that the presence of all those flaming creatures at the march gives homosexuality a Bad Name and is Bad For The Cause.

Gay identity politics has certainly procured for us an undeniable and inestimable array of liberties and permissions. But now it is also starting to reveal the defects of its very virtues and to subject us to a surprising number of increasingly bothersome constraints. We may have become proud of our gay identity, and unabashed about our same-sex desires and relationships. Yet we remain hopelessly ashamed of how queerly we feel and act—ashamed of our instincts, our loves and hates, our attitudes, our non-standard values, our ways of being, our social and cultural practices.⁸ Instead of celebrating our distinctive subjectivity, our unique pleasures, and our characteristic culture, we have achieved gay pride at their expense.



When, for example, I say that I am gay—when I “identify” as gay or disclose my gay “identity”—I adopt an *identity-based strategy*, generated by gay identity politics itself, for dealing with the social difference that my sexual difference makes in a heteronormative world. In particular, I choose to represent my sexuality as a neutral feature of

my social being, more or less as if I were declaring my ethnicity or gender. In so doing, I avail myself of a positive, non-phobic, non-pathological term provided for me by a multi-generational political movement for lesbian and gay liberation, pride, and dignity. By making the term “gay” available to me, the movement has given me a way of naming my sexuality without describing it and without making specific reference to my sexual desires, feelings, or practices. I can acknowledge my sexuality openly and unambiguously, even while I bracket the obnoxious details of my sexual behavior and cultural dissidence. The gay identity-label also enables me to present myself socially without recurring to pejorative or otherwise tainted psychological, theological, criminological, sociological, sexological, medical, or moral language (“pervert,” “sodomite,” “deviant,” “sex fiend,” “psychopath,” “homosexual”).

I wasn’t always so keen on the term “gay” myself, I admit. For a while, back when I first encountered it in the early 1970s, it struck me as an ill-judged piece of political jargon—which, by its cheery insistence on how happy we were all supposed to be, merely invoked the specter it was all too obviously struggling to exorcise, the specter of a sad and pathetic homosexuality.

But that was then. This is now.

The advantage of “gay,” nowadays, is that it no longer means anything in itself. It certainly doesn’t imply that gay people are *gay* in the sense of upbeat or cheerful. The word has become a symbolic designation, not a descriptive or an expressive one. It functions entirely as a conventional term of reference. It simply refers to people who make a same-sex sexual object-choice, suggesting perhaps, as well, that they are not ashamed of their sexuality and do not seek to hide it.

As such, “gay” permits my sexuality to declare itself socially under the cover of a polite designation, almost a euphemism, and in terms of an *identity* rather than an erotic subjectivity or a sexual behavior. It allows me to present myself as a member of a people or nation or race, a human collectivity at any rate, instead of as a deviant individual—a monster, freak, criminal, sinner, or social outcast. (I may well

choose to style myself as a deviant, as a social or sexual pariah, which is what I do when I label myself “queer,” but at least that’s my choice; it’s no longer a life sentence.)

So the term “gay” *identifies* my sexuality without evoking its lived reality and without dwelling on my sexual feelings, fantasies, or practices. In that sense, it sounds relatively respectable, and it functions in the same way that “husband” or “wife” does for married people, referring to a sexual identity without foregrounding explicitly what is sexual about it.

That is a great convenience.

But that convenience comes at a certain cost. For one thing, the prospect of achieving social acceptance by promoting gay identity over gay sexuality makes it tempting to construct a kind of official, public gay identity totally divorced from sex. That is the temptation Michael Warner eloquently warns us against in *The Trouble with Normal*, urging us not to turn our backs on the sophisticated and adventurous queer culture we have created around sex, not to sell out those members of our communities who do not (or who cannot) bury their sexuality discreetly within the sphere of private life, and not to purchase respectability at the expense of sex.⁹

Similarly, John Howard, a prominent gay historian, complains that American lesbian and gay history “often glosses over the erotic interactions of queer historical subjects. Concerned with identity, culture, and politics, it sometimes politely overlooks the arguably defining feature of the enterprise, *homosex*.”¹⁰ As gay men have gained entry into popular culture and media representation precisely by bracketing or downplaying the specifically sexual dimensions of their lives—witness the success of such movies and TV shows as *Philadelphia*, *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Rent*, and *Brokeback Mountain*—a number of voices have been raised to support Warner’s protest against this desexualizing of gay men. I have contributed to that critique myself, and I am not going to belabor those earlier arguments here.¹¹ The case, I believe, has been well made, even if the consensus in its favor is not as broad as I would like it to be.

Instead, I now have a different, almost an opposite point to make. I'm going to argue that the transformation of homosexuality from a sexual perversion into a social identity, and the political requirements of gay pride, have tended to militate against any serious gay inquiry into the inner life of homosexuality—especially those *non-sexual* dimensions of it that gay people are still unsure or nervous about. Gay subjectivity, and the distinctive cultural practices that manifest it, may now have become just as disreputable, just as taboo, as queer sex. One name for this strategic avoidance of gay subjectivity, for this refusal to explore it, is, quite simply, “gay identity.” Or, at least, gay identity functions in that way when it is taken to be an elemental, primary term, a term with no component parts and no subjective dimensions, a term that has to be accepted at face value and admits of no further analysis. Gay people simply exist. Some people are gay. I have a gay identity. And that's that. (You got a problem with that?)

Well, yes, actually, I do have a problem with it. Not, obviously, with the fact that some people are gay. And not just with the way that gay identity often ends up closeting sexuality (though I do share Warner's concern and I fully endorse his critique). After all, gay identity does at least acknowledge gay sexuality to the extent that it insists on same-sex sexual attraction as the defining feature of gay identity, and it does provide a social basis on which we can assert pride in our sexual relationships and sexual subjectivities. My basic problem with the political functioning of gay identity nowadays is that in the course of claiming public recognition and acceptance of the fact of homosexual *desire* (sometimes at the expense of gay sex, to be sure), the official gay and lesbian movement has effectively foreclosed inquiry into queer sensibility, style, emotion, or any specific, non-sexual form of queer *subjectivity* or *affect* or *pleasure*.

That suppression once served a crucial political purpose: it was only by deemphasizing how queerly we felt, and by denying how culturally different we were from straight people, that we were able to expunge from homosexuality the taint of abnormality and to shrug off the heavy burden of psychopathology, of sickness. Now the im-

perative to deny our difference is less urgent than it once was. So why are we still so skittish? Our avoidance is all the more puzzling insofar as it perpetrates a grave slander against us: it implies that we are just like everybody else. And so it obscures the very things about gay life and gay culture that make them interesting and valuable. It denies the unique genius in being queer.



This habit of foregrounding identity and backgrounding subjectivity has not always felt like a constraint. The promotion of gay identities at the expense of gay subjectivities could be more easily tolerated during the 1980s and early 1990s, when that protective tendency seemed to reflect the urgent demands of a catastrophic political situation.

With the rise of the New Right, the increasing devastation of HIV/AIDS, the newly fashionable homophobia unleashed by the moral panic surrounding the epidemic, and the failure of most governments to respond effectively to the medical disaster overtaking their own citizens, the understandable impulse of the gay movement was to insist on our survival as a people, to defend ourselves as *members of a group* that was at great *collective risk*. And so we strove to highlight our common belonging to various social and ethnic identity-categories and we sought to play down those subjective dimensions of homosexuality, as well as those distinctive features of gay male culture—to say nothing of the emotional and erotic specificities of queer existence—which in the minds of many people were responsible for the spread of HIV in the first place.

If gay men did not feel terribly constrained by that bracketing of emotion, sensibility, affect, and the felt difference of their lived experiences, if the overwhelmingly *political* representations of gayness as a collective social identity during this period did not strike them as particularly oppressive, that was due to a second, more subtle factor. Gay subjectivity, far from having been silenced, seemed everywhere to be triumphant. The public gay response to HIV/AIDS, after all, was pos-

itively drenched in affect. Or, rather, it was drenched in two specific affects—grief and anger—accompanied and amplified by their corollary public expressions: mourning and militancy.¹²

Grief and anger, however, though they were undeniably passionate emotions, were also politically righteous emotions. They expressed not individual sensibility but the personal experience of collective devastation. The more personal they were, the more exemplary they could come to seem—exemplary of gay men's suffering, loss, and victimization *as a group*.

So grief and anger, far from being discreditable affects, were politically imperative ones, affects we were politically committed to having. In that sense, grief and anger were not individualizing or personalizing, however individual or personal they might also be; they didn't reduce to matters of private subjecthood, if that was defined by a unique, unshareable interiority. Far from being limited to the personal, grief and anger propelled gay identity further into the public sphere. They increased its human dignity and they accelerated its transformation into a publicly claimable identity, deserving of recognition, acceptance, and protection. There was no political tension between the emotions of anger and grief and the demands of political visibility.

There were, however, some queer emotions that gay people were not supposed to have, and that were not politically respectable.¹³ Leading gay writers and intellectuals, such as Larry Kramer and Paul Monette, made the distinction very clear.¹⁴ Bad gay emotions included narcissism, shame, self-loathing, passivity, sentimentality, cowardice, and supposedly destructive (by which was often meant "promiscuous") forms of sexuality. Unlike grief and anger, these emotions were *merely* personal, in the sense that they expressed not group identity but individual failings. They even implied pathology: they symptomatized the lingering effects of the injuries we had suffered during the previous centuries of societal oppression, effects from which we had insufficiently liberated ourselves. HIV/AIDS no longer permitted us the luxury of incomplete political identification, the luxury of not

struggling for psychic decolonization. The enemy was not only in the corridors of power, but also in our souls (“Hitler in my heart,” as Antony Hegarty, the lead singer of the group Antony and the Johnsons, put it many years later). It was more than ever necessary to rid ourselves of whatever affects prevented us from coming together collectively in a newly militant and even militarized movement. This was not the moment to celebrate the anti-social, self-indulgent queer pleasures of narcissism and passivity.¹⁵

Part of what distinguished good gay emotion from bad gay emotion, then, was that the good kind was not personally or psychologically revealing. Anger and grief could be publicly claimed and acted out precisely because they did not express some peculiar, individual, personal, and possibly pathological inward condition afflicting gay men. Rather, they expressed our collective situation of political oppression and resistance, our collective victimization by an epidemic and by a society that smugly watched it happen. They also expressed our refusal to go quietly, to keep our suffering out of the public eye, to hide our sexuality, to closet our relationships, to let our oppressors off the hook.

As such, feelings of anger and grief did not need to be denied. After all, they originated not in our damaged psyches, but in our objective, beleaguered situation. They were psychological responses to an external threat, an external devastation—a reaction to a calamity that had been visited upon us from outside ourselves. They were a *healthy* response to loss.

HIV/AIDS was precisely *not* the inner truth of male homosexuality, not the outward and visible sign of an inward or spiritual illness, not the punishment of gay sin or gay crime, not what we had asked for. Hence the characteristic political tactic of turning our grief into anger, our mourning into militancy. The point was to express our personal and collective insistence that HIV/AIDS was a public-health catastrophe, exacerbated by indifference and homophobia, not the working-out of the inner logic of male homosexuality itself. It was a terrible historical accident, and it had nothing to do with us or with

who we were—and so our emotional response to it also had nothing to do with us, or with who we were as gay men, except insofar as we were being collectively blamed for the very epidemic of which we were the victims.

In the long shadow of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, it has been possible for gay men to dodge the awareness of having imposed a blackout on the expression or investigation of queer affect. After all, gay life has long been saturated with affect, soaked in tears and suffused with rage. Now that HIV/AIDS activism, though not HIV/AIDS itself, has been receding from the forefront of gay male life, at least among White people in the developed world, now that the political requirements of HIV/AIDS activism are changing, now that grief and anger are starting to lose their monopoly on the range of queer affects that can be openly expressed, and now that queer culture is reinventing continuities between contemporary lesbian and gay existence and earlier, pre-Stonewall forms of sexual outlawry, it seems increasingly possible to inquire into aspects or dimensions of the inner life of homosexuality that not so long ago seemed politically dubious, not to say unpalatable—and, in any case, off limits to detailed exploration.¹⁶

HOMOSEXUALITY'S CLOSET

Contemporary gay culture has been slow to seize its newfound opportunity to explore the inner life of homosexuality. When questions about the distinctive features of gay male subjectivity are raised, even inadvertently, the typical response is to silence them. Nevertheless, this censorship, though automatic, is usually not so quick or so total as to prevent us from getting a glimpse of the various queer affects that are hurriedly being shoved back into the closet. It is therefore possible to form an idea of the purpose behind the clampdown—and to figure out what in particular is being so actively and so anxiously defended against by means of it.

Consider a typical example, chosen almost at random. In the “Arts and Leisure” section of the *New York Times* on Sunday, October 29, 2000, Anthony Tommasini, the paper’s main classical-music critic, who is an openly gay man, published a story about David Daniels, the celebrated countertenor, who at the time was still a young and up-and-coming performer.¹ Having just released a magnificent recording of Handel’s *Rinaldo* with Cecilia Bartoli, Daniels was about to perform the title role in a new and much-anticipated production at the New York City Opera. As Tommasini noted, though in much more guarded terms, Daniels had once been a struggling tenor who occasionally delivered impromptu operatic performances at gay parties, where he sang female parts in a high falsetto voice. After undergoing psychotherapy—which appears to have worked only too well, as we

shall see—Daniels decided in 1992 to come out . . . as a countertenor, and to pursue a serious musical career by means of the voice he had previously used only to provide his friends with camp entertainment.

Daniels quickly established himself by singing operatic roles originally written for the high, powerful voices of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *castrati* (male singers who had been castrated as boys so as to preserve their soprano vocal register and to qualify them for life-long careers as performers in single-sex church choirs). For the past hundred and fifty years, right up until very recently, such roles have always been sung by women. But Daniels did not stop there. Retaining his love for vocal music of the later, Romantic period, and even the twentieth century, he daringly recorded a number of songs and arias written expressly for the female voice and customarily performed only by sopranos.²

Of course, Daniels is not the first gay man to take pleasure in singing, if only to himself, great works from the female vocal repertory, as any opera queen will tell you (and in the gay world nowadays, perhaps no one but an opera queen would be willing to make such an embarrassing admission). But he is exceptional in establishing an artistic reputation among the general concert-going public by singing works that are normally off-limits to male performers.

There are of course some countertenors who are straight. But they are relatively few and far between. Something about the particular quality of the sound one is required to produce, and about the social meanings ascribed to the kind of voice required to produce it, seems to attract gay male singers—or to bring out a male singer's queer potential. In any case, David Daniels is no exception. Despite being "a young, virile male," according to Tommasini, who is "sturdily built," "exudes a square-shouldered masculine confidence," loves to play basketball, and "can often be found in the park, elbowing fellow players in a pickup game," he turns out, sure enough, to be a fag. Or rather, as our newspaper of record and its out-of-the-closet music critic put it, "he is an openly gay male, who readily admits to keeping his beard short and scruffy not out of macho display but because it gives him 'some semblance of a jaw line' and because his 'other half'

likes it.” That description keeps the accent firmly on gay identity, on gayness as same-sex desire. Gay identity is expressed here by a light-hearted adherence to masculine gender norms, as well as by a proper if modest pride in one’s appearance, while same-sex desire makes itself visible in the respectable form of a conjugal relationship (Daniels does in fact wear a wedding ring, at least when he is giving recitals).



So why does he sing so funny? He seems virtually normal. Is there actually something wrong with him? Might there be any connection, of any sort, between being gay and “the gender-blurring ambiguity of the voice”—or the fact that, “when he starts to sing, his alto voice has a tender beauty that seems classically feminine”? Is Daniels just a big queen, a fairy, a gay cliché after all?

For all the trouble Tommasini takes to shatter those very stereotypes, by emphasizing so pointedly and heavy-handedly Daniels’s virility, physical sturdiness, square shoulders, masculine confidence, and (did he really have to go that far?) passion for team sports, he still can’t seem to help trafficking in all the usual signifiers of gayness, all those tired equations of homosexuality with gender deviance, effeminacy, and masculine lack, invoking everything from “ambiguity” to “gender-blurring” to androgyny to castration to femininity. We are clearly not so far removed from the ancient association of homosexuality with gender inversion and psychological deviance after all, even if Tommasini is careful in the end to drain those gay signifiers of all significance. “To Mr. Daniels, the way he sings feels perfectly natural,” Tommasini insists, though by the time he makes that remark it is rather too late for a return to innocent naturalness—too late to put the queer cat back into the bag of gay normality.

Still, the purpose behind Tommasini’s belated insistence on Daniels’s sense of his own perfect naturalness (hard-won, admittedly, through years of therapy) is to conjure away all those ghoulish phantoms of gay psychopathology and gender deviance that Tommasini’s own uneasy obsession with Daniels’s queer musical persona had called up in the first place. Tommasini’s point is that Daniels may be

unusual, but please don't conclude that he is perverse. No, he was born that way, and—for him, at least—singing like a woman is normal. End of story. Although “Mr. Daniels knows that in his case [his gender-deviant singing] is given extra resonance” by the fact that he's gay, that resonance is quickly deprived by Tommasini of any possible, well, resonance. “While acknowledging that an androgynous quality is built into a countertenor voice, Mr. Daniels said he doesn't think about it.”

And indeed he doesn't, at least to judge by what he is quoted as saying in Tommasini's article. Daniels admits that his practice of performing the female vocal repertory without resexing the pronouns in the texts of the songs he sings is something that a heterosexual performer would be less likely to do—but that just seems to mean that the only thing about gayness that counts for him is sexual object-choice, the directionality of erotic desire, its homosexual focus, the maleness of the male love-object. It is, apparently, *not* a question of sensibility, or affect, or identification, or pleasure, or subjective positioning, or gender dissonance, let alone a relation to femininity. It is not even a matter of cultural practice. The fact that Daniels was a gay performer before he was a professional countertenor, or that he claimed a public gay identity by becoming a countertenor, yields no information at all about any possible relations among his voice, his performance, and his gayness, and it throws no light on the connections between musicality and sexuality.³

Singing the female vocal repertory is no more indicative of Daniels's subjectivity, finally, than playing basketball: they're both just *fun activities* that ultimately tell us nothing about the individual who takes part in them. And, anyway, “reality in the theater . . . is never literal,” Daniels says. No wonder, then, as Tommasini points out in the opening line of his article, that “David Daniels hates the term ‘falsetto.’”



I don't mean to sound like I have a personal gripe with David Daniels. I don't blame him one bit, in fact, for being cagey, if that's actually what he's up to. Tommasini's article alone provides all the justifica-

tion anyone could ever want for such wariness: it indicates exactly why gay men would be well advised to think twice before using the *New York Times* as a vehicle for exploring the emotional or erotic meaning of their feminine identifications. Indeed, there is something representative about the way the *Times* article insistently constructs a connection between Daniels's gender-blurring, on the one hand, and his homosexuality, on the other, while following Daniels's lead in refusing to acknowledge any substantive relation between the two. In part, this is simply a classic instance of journalistic innuendo: the article's presumption that "we all know what *that* means" exempts it from having to claim that *that* means anything at all. Tommasini's rhetoric simply reflects and reveals the current conditions under which gay people typically gain admittance to the public sphere—and to the official discourse of the news in particular: our difference from normal folk is at once hyped and disavowed.

But we can get a better idea of the entity being closeted here by noticing what it is that the article refuses to name except by implication.

The target of the article's elaborate mobilization of suggestion, connotation, association, and sexual coding is no longer homosexuality, as it would have been back in the Bad Old Days.⁴ At least it is no longer homosexuality *if by homosexuality we mean same-sex erotic desire and same-sex sexual object-choice*. After all, those are the very things that both the gay countertenor and his gay critic are happy to acknowledge openly and explicitly.

What remains unspoken, and what is therefore constantly, insistently *implied*, is the woman's soul supposedly enclosed in David Daniels's male body—the secret, inchoate transgendered condition evidenced by his high-pitched singing and by his paradoxical combination of masculine and feminine attributes, patterns of feeling, and personae. The closet operates here to conceal not *homosexuality as identity or desire* but *homosexuality as queer affect, sensibility, subjectivity, identification, pleasure, habitus, gender style*.

What remains literally unspeakable is no longer the love that dare

not speak its name. Daniels and Tommasini are quite happy to talk about *that*. Instead, it is a less classifiable but still quite specific dimension of faggotry: whatever it is in particular that accounts for why so many countertenors are gay.

After all, no one—no gay man, anyway—who has heard David Daniels sing, or who has listened to his recording of Romantic art songs written for the soprano voice, could fail to discern *some* connection between his appropriation of the female vocal repertory and the queer form of emotional life that often seems to accompany homosexuality. What is the nature of that connection? Is there any meaningful relation that links the cultural practice of singing countertenor roles to a pattern of affect, to a particular way of feeling, and that links either or both to homosexuality?

Don't ask Daniels. Don't ask Tommasini. Don't ask the *Times*. And don't ask gay men.

No one is talking.

WHAT'S GAYER THAN GAY?

To be fair to Daniels and Tommasini, no one in queer studies is talking, either. At least, no one seems to be in much of a hurry to tackle these questions.

There has in fact been a tacit understanding on the part of many of us who work in the field of queer studies that matters of gay subjectivity are best left unexamined. Perhaps we worry that we wouldn't like what we would find. Perhaps we fear that whatever we did find would be used against us. (As it surely would be, so those fears are hardly groundless.) Speaking about how queer studies has treated material dating back to the Bad Old Days of pre-liberation lesbian and gay male life, Heather Love makes a similar point about the field's instinctive reflex of refusal and avoidance. "Although critics have been attentive, especially in the last couple of decades, to the importance of shame, violence, and stigma in the historical record, certain forms of [queer] experience still remain off limits for most. These are representations that offer too stark an image of the losses of queer history. What has resulted is a disavowal of crucial aspects of this history and of the conditions of queer existence in the present."¹

In the case of queer subjectivity, this reflex of disavowal makes itself felt in a different form: the only kind of subjectivity that qualifies

for “serious” lesbian and gay analysis is that which can be safely theorized in the register of psychoanalytic abstraction. Which is a procedure so conventional, so speculative, so detached from the daily practices of queer life, and so personally uninvolved, that it no longer has the capacity to unsettle anyone. In fact, psychoanalysis continues to be the privileged method within queer studies, as within cultural studies in general, for thinking about the workings of human subjectivity. But psychoanalysis—as I have argued at length in *What Do Gay Men Want?*—is not useful for understanding the collective subjectivity of specific social groups.

It is a psychoanalytic truism, of course, that desire exceeds identity, that identity does not and cannot capture the boundless play of desire. So psychoanalysis is hardly incompatible with the argument being put forward here. If I avoid couching this argument in psychoanalytic terms, that is first of all because I don't need to do it, since I have plenty of concrete evidence on which to base my conclusions. I much prefer to make my case by looking closely at the social phenomena themselves—by performing a close reading of cultural objects or undertaking a thick description of queer cultural practices—rather than by appealing to the authority of any preexisting theory or doctrine. And I am wary in general of replacing descriptions with interpretations, concrete objects and practices with “a shadow world of ‘meanings,’” thereby refusing to see social phenomena for what they are in themselves, in all their particularity, and ignoring what is there to be observed.²

Second, when psychoanalytic thinkers advance their claim about desire exceeding identity, the main purpose, or outcome, is to destabilize heterosexual identity, to *free heterosexuality from identity*—a procedure whose effect is ultimately not to undermine but to promote and to universalize heterosexuality.³ (Some queer theorists similarly invoke psychoanalysis to cast doubt on the reality of gay sexual orientation: the result, however, is not to reverse that heterosexist effect but to deepen it.) I choose to take a different route, and to dramatize the

limits of gay male identity by attending to the cultural practices and life experiences of gay subjects themselves.



One of the few people in the world of queer studies who *is* talking is D. A. Miller. In an extraordinary 1998 book called *Place for Us*, Miller sets out to explore gay male subjectivity through an analysis of gay men's pleasures and cultural practices—specifically, their emotional investments in the Broadway musical. And he comes to the conclusion that I have taken as the starting point for this part of my argument—namely, that gay male desire cannot be reduced to gay identity, to gayness *as* identity. Gay identity is therefore not adequate to the expression of gay subjectivity. This insight, I now believe, not only constitutes a theoretical breakthrough; it also explains why so many cultural practices characteristic of male homosexuality extend beyond the realm of gay sex—be they singing in falsetto or flower-arranging, diva-worship or interior design.

Or, for that matter, the cult of Broadway musicals. That gay men love Broadway musicals is of course a cliché, a stereotype.⁴ As John Clum says in his own book about the gayness of the Broadway musical, “It is a stereotype that gay men have been particularly invested in musical theater, indeed that love of musical theater is a sign of gayness” (29). But the mere fact that such a notion is a stereotype doesn't mean it's untrue. “Like all stereotypes, it is problematic,” Clum allows, “at best partially accurate, and it may be generational, though if my [drama] students are any indicator, it continues to have some validity” (5).⁵ To call it a stereotype, then, is neither to refute it nor to grasp its significance. And merely to expose it as a stereotype is not to disable its efficacy or to diminish its power. Just as straight men who like Broadway musicals have to expend quantities of effort in order to overcome the skepticism that naturally greets their claims to heterosexuality, as Miller points out, so, in the case of gay men, “though not all” or “even most . . . are in love with Broadway, those who aren't are hardly quit of the stereotype that insists they are.”⁶

A stereotype doesn't have to be generally valid in order to contain some truth.⁷ The problem is that whatever truth it does contain is made available to us, Miller observes, "only in the short-circuited form of a joke" (66). Whose effect is to foreclose, almost instantaneously, any potential insight or recognition that the stereotype fleetingly affords, thereby rendering the truth behind it inaccessible to serious thought. In this way, whatever truths may be reflected in stereotypes become impossible to specify and to analyze. Or so Miller laments. But he remains undeterred in his effort to locate those truths, and in particular to uncover the social and emotional logic that identifies gay men with Broadway in the popular mind, as well as in gay culture and the lived experience of many gay men.

The result has much to tell us about the relation of gay desire to aesthetic form, of sexuality to culture. So Miller's analysis merits our sustained attention.



"In the psyche of post-Stonewall man," Miller begins, "the Broadway musical lies like a nervously watched pod that, having been preserved from a past geological epoch, may nonetheless—say, at any temperature above frigidity—split open to reveal a creature that, in comparison with the less primitive forms of life around it, even with those which must have evolved from it, will appear monstrous beyond recognition" (26). By "post-Stonewall man," Miller refers not only to those gay men who grew up after the Stonewall riots. He also refers to those men, like himself, who had come of age before Stonewall—when the Broadway musical was still a living cultural form,⁸ and a public gay male culture did not yet exist—and who were so thoroughly and improbably transformed by their experience of gay liberation that it gradually came to seem "perfectly ordinary that I, of all people," as Miller remarks, "should frequent the company of men wearing weight belts, or nipple rings, and utterly strange not only that I should still be hearing music I have known since I was a child, but also that there should be others, many of these men among them,

in the same strange situation as myself” (23–24). The changes in Miller’s society, and in the conditions of his sexual and emotional life, have been so momentous that what stand out as bizarre, and cry out for explanation, are not the flamboyant contrasts with the past but the dogged continuities—the persistent power and appeal of the world of feeling he had known before he could even imagine the transformative possibility of gay pride, before he could succeed in claiming and inhabiting a gay identity.

The music that Miller had known since he was a child is not just any old music. It is music that belongs to “the only [gay genre] that mass culture ever produced” (16). The golden-age, definitive version of the Broadway musical was “entirely the conception of four gay men” and therefore the only “general cultural phenomenon” with a gay male following *at whose creation gay men were indisputably present*—unlike, in other words, grand opera or *All about Eve* (39). Yet in Miller’s eyes, that gay presence is merely a sign of *the musical’s intrinsic gayness as a form*: it may be a contributing cause of the musical’s gayness, but it is not the complete explanation for it.

What is it, then, that explains the nature of the Broadway musical’s gay appeal? And why does the inner life of male homosexuality that finds expression in gay men’s notoriously passionate attachment to the Broadway musical now appear so strange, indeed so monstrous, in the eyes of contemporary gay men, whether they are survivors from the pre-Stonewall era, relatively recent products of the post-Stonewall era, or both? Miller suggests that it is the outmoded brands of sentimentality mobilized by the Broadway musical that have come to mark it as defining an immature and now-outgrown stage in the development of the gay male subject. In fact, it is precisely because the Broadway musical’s appeal is rooted in the emotional vicissitudes of pre-Stonewall gay *childhood* that the affects connected with it occasion nowadays so much adult embarrassment. Those affects date back to a time before an achieved gay life or a mature sexual existence was conceivable, and their intrinsically archaic character expresses a retrograde state of feeling, even as their persistence in the inner life of the adult gay man signals his humiliating failure to evolve beyond it.

If the Broadway musical had a formative impact on the character, outlook, taste, and overall sentimental makeup of the proto-gay child growing up in the 1950s, that is because it afforded him a figurative language in which to give systematic and limpid expression to “those early *pre-sexual* realities of *gay* experience” that shaped his subjective existence in that hostile environment (26; I have added italics to bring out Miller’s insistence that there can be gay experience before sex—that since “gay experience” includes many dimensions of subjective life beyond same-sex eroticism, it is possible to attribute a specifically gay experience to a child who has yet to form any clear idea of the eventual orientation of his sexual desire). The continuing appeal of the Broadway musical to gay men nowadays is therefore highly discreditable. Not only does it betoken gay men’s refusal to transcend their abject origins; it also registers the continuing satisfaction they take in childish queer pleasures that don’t come directly from gay sex—the sole source from which specifically *gay* pleasure, gay identity-based pleasure, ought to come, or so we now like to think.

Even worse, the particular queer pleasure that the Broadway musical still affords certain gay men is one that the sex they are now able to have does not provide. It is a pleasure that sexual fulfillment has not rendered obsolete. And, worst of all, this distressing state of affairs, archaic though it clearly is, continues to the present day. For it appears that the same “early pre-sexual realities of gay experience” persist in shaping the subjective existence of at least some proto-gay children now, even in the comparatively enlightened period following the world-historical event called Stonewall. That makes the gay male cult of the Broadway musical a perennial embarrassment to contemporary gay identity, which insists on being grounded entirely in a sexual orientation—not in a lifestyle, a subculture, a pattern of affect, or a subjectivity.⁹

What are those early presexual realities of gay experience that adult gay men today are supposed to have outgrown? Miller identifies three related queer affects that the gay cult of the Broadway musical once expressed, distilled, preserved, and now mercilessly exposes to view: (1) “the solitude, shame, secretiveness by which the impossibil-

ity of social integration was first internalized”; (2) “the excessive sentimentality that was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object”; and (3) “the intense, senseless joy that, while not identical to these destitutions, is neither extricable from them” (26). Those queer affects constitute elements or aspects of gay male subjectivity that, at least for gay men of a certain background and generation, took abiding shape early in their subjective lives. The persistence and prominence of such queer affects in the inner lives of adult gay men help to explain why gay subjectivity cannot be reduced to homosexual desire or to gay identity.

What makes those queer affects look so grotesque nowadays is not just how pathetic, pitiable, dreary, or politically outdated they may be in themselves, but also how systematically they have been excluded from gay expression by the once-unimaginable gay identity and gay pride that have supplanted the very exclusions and social impossibilities that produced them. “Precisely against such [pre-sexual] realities [of gay experience],” Miller argues, “is post-Stonewall gay identity defined: a declarable, dignified thing, rooted in a community, and taking manifestly sexual pleasures on this affirmative basis” (26). Now that we have gay identity, now that we have gay sex, what on earth would we still want with the Broadway musical? Official, public, out-and-proud gay identity has no tolerance for shame, solitude, secretiveness, and no patience for those who choose to wallow either in an abject state of emotional isolation or in the compensatory, manic joys of a solitary queer fantasy life.

Nowadays, proud gay men do not ground their identity in their loneliness, lovelessness, hopelessness, isolation, and sentimentality. Quite the opposite. We fashion a gay self (to the extent that we do) by proudly affirming a common, collective gay identity, claiming this gay identity openly, visibly, unashamedly, and communally, constructing on that basis a shared culture and society—full of opportunities for emotional and erotic expression—and thereby attaining to a *healthy* gay sexuality, defined by our eroticization of other gay men *as* gay, and ultimately crowned by the successful achievement of a *relation-*

ship. And, by the way, we don't want to be reminded that 'twas not ever thus.

Miller is not nostalgic, of course. "No gay man could possibly regret the trade" of pre-Stonewall gay abjection for post-Stonewall gay pride, he acknowledges. No gay man "could do anything but be grateful for it—if, that is, *it actually were a trade*" (26; italics added). The problem, it turns out, is that instead of winding up in triumphant possession of a gay pride and freedom that we can wholeheartedly call our own, we have constructed a gay identity that actively *represses* both the pathos and the pleasure of those residual queer affects that we prefer to think we have liberated ourselves from and that we claim have simply vanished from our consciousness. Instead of transcending the secret shame and solitary pleasures of our sentimentality, as we would like to think, we have assiduously closeted them.

For example, back in the Bad Old Days, Miller observes, a gay man had to be careful to hide his physique magazines in the closet. What was acceptable to display in one's living room, by contrast, was one's collection of playbills and original-cast Broadway musical albums. Nowadays it is fashionable—or, at least, it was fashionable in the comparatively defiant gay male culture of the 1980s and 1990s, when Miller was writing—for a gay man to manifest his gay pride, his sexual liberation, by keeping his stash of gay porn visibly exposed next to his bed, along with various other erotic accessories. But that does not mean that his closet lost its previous function. On the contrary. That closet now serves to hide his old collection of original-cast albums—if their owner has not taken the further precaution of jettisoning them altogether (26–27). After all, no gay man acquires social or erotic credit by coming off as a show queen.



Or so Miller discovered when he made the mistake of using an original-cast album of *South Pacific* as a courting-gift. It turns out that there's no quicker or surer way to put an end to a budding romance. The reasons for that are revealing. For they indicate the gulf that sep-

arates gay subjectivity from gay identity—and that correspondingly divides gay culture from gay sex, gay desire from the desire for an actual relationship with a man.

Miller recounts that he once gave a tape of *South Pacific* to a guy with whom he was secretly in love, a tape that reproduced the surface noise of the vinyl record he had possessed since he was a child—noise that became especially noticeable during “Some Enchanted Evening,” the track he had evidently played most often and the one to which he wanted particularly to call his love-object’s attention.

If that ploy was what Miller had supposed would work, or would constitute a romantic lure, he was swiftly disappointed. His strategy proved to be a disaster, in fact, precisely because it turned out to be a success.

On the following day, as he thanked me for the music, with an even politeness that to my ear couldn’t help diminishing the “great enjoyment” professed by his words, he added with a laugh, as between friends who shared exactly the same viewpoint on things: “How awful, though, to end up some old queen in a piano bar watering your drink every time they played ‘Some Enchanted Evening!’” Would it have done me any good if I had known at the time—what I did not learn until several years later—that by his own account he had burst into “hysterical sobbing” as soon as, through my good offices, he heard the very first bars of the song for which, a day after, he would convey to me his thorough contempt? As strange as it seems, I had always had a presentiment that my gift, on which I set great hopes, would prove futile. For I was attempting to impart to him that *homosexuality of one* which—even had he accepted it, or were himself to return the favor—must have restrained either of us from ever joining the other across a crowded room. (22–23)¹⁰

Gay desire typically seeks fulfillment, and finds it, in solitary queer pleasure. That is why gay desire is often the enemy of gay sociality. The emotions that gay men invest in the Broadway musical, like the emotions released by it, are best savored all by oneself. They are at home in privacy, secrecy, isolation, loneliness, and fantasy. The soli-

tude in which they flourish is not a sign of their fragility, but a testimony to their stubborn autonomy. For that solitude is where they have maintained themselves, and maintained their hold on the gay subject, since childhood. No wonder, then, that the pleasures bound up with these solitary transports remain entirely sufficient to themselves and require no supplementation from external sources, such as other people. No wonder that they are positively refractory to sexual exchange. They are not about being with anyone else. They are about being all alone with your dreams.

Those dreams may take the form of longing for a boyfriend, but they get in the way of having one. That continues to be true even in our more enlightened age, despite the availability of gay identity, the comparative acceptance of gay sexuality, and the visibility of gay relationships.

For example, it was the case for many years that gay men looking for partners on the Internet would attach the poster from *Brokeback Mountain* to their profiles. In so doing, they betrayed emotional instincts every bit as much at cross-purposes with their ostensible goals as D. A. Miller's were when he thought he could acquire a boyfriend by giving him that old recording of "Some Enchanted Evening." For what is the point of such a gesture if not to impart to your prospective love-objects a "homosexuality of one"?

Far from inviting another person to join you in romantic bliss, far from announcing to your suitors that you have learned the lesson of the film, opened your soul to the possibility of gay love, and made room in your life for someone to share it with, the invocation of *Brokeback Mountain* indicates that you have no need or place in your life for anyone else, because your inner world is fully occupied by the gay romance you are already living out in it with utter and complete sufficiency. You have so thoroughly anticipated your ideal relationship, along with the enchanted evening on which you will meet the love of your life across a crowded room, bar, or webpage, that you are in fact unable to accommodate the real thing. Which is just as well, since no actual relationship could possibly equal the satisfactions of

the imaginary romance you have been fervently enjoying in the solitude of your own imagination, in the isolation of your singular homosexuality.



Broadway, then, is not something that modern gay pride can be proud of. Because this kind of gay culture, as we'll see in Chapter 10, is so inimical to gay eroticism, so deflating of sexual intensity, so antagonistic to the displays of stolid virility that solicit gay male sexual desire, it produces widespread aversion on the part of gay men, at least when they want to appear modern instead of archaic—that is, when they wish to present themselves as sexual subjects and objects.

In fact, to judge from the evidence we have reviewed so far, gay men nowadays have a tendency to treat the Broadway musical—or Judy Garland, or Barbra Streisand, or grand opera, or any of the other cultural artifacts that supposedly encode similar forms of archaic gay male sentiment—with phobic rejection, avoidance, repudiation.¹¹ Like D. A. Miller's polite but skittish love-object, gay men pride themselves on their easy and casual contempt for such artifacts, enjoying the social and erotic credit they get by denouncing them, keeping them at arm's length, and disclaiming all personal susceptibility to them. What is more, gay men often dis-identify from such artifacts even or especially when they are profoundly moved by them. Or professionally involved in producing them.

For all his love of the Broadway musical, or indeed because of it, Miller himself was hardly immune to that tendency. On discovering that a man he was dating not only owned some recordings of Broadway musicals, but had actually amassed a *collection* of them, Miller suddenly heard himself exclaim,

“My God, you really *are* gay.” By which I must have been expressing, not my amazement at the sexual orientation of my new friend, already established to my complete satisfaction, but my suddenly altered sense of his standing *within* the gay milieu, as in a strange sort of

swimming pool where such acts of grown-up sex as we had been intending to perform took place at the shallow end, with little danger that, from whatever positions we came to assume, we couldn't at a moment's notice recover our land legs, while the kid stuff like listening to Broadway albums . . . had required him to submit to a nearly total immersion in what my first phobic ejaculation confirmed was pretty deep water. (22)

Pointing as it does to a formative, isolating experience of unshareable sentimentality, the queer appeal of the Broadway musical—which takes the gay subject back to its presexual but ecstatic enjoyment of “kid stuff” and to all the shameful, embarrassing emotional vicissitudes of its solitary childhood—is much harder, much hotter for gay men to handle than the identity-affirming adult pleasures of gay sex. To which pleasures, Miller implies, the Broadway musical, and the delights of listening to it, would seem to be inexorably and implacably fatal.

In short, post-Stonewall gay man, Miller suggests, tends to treat any cultural practice that may betray his archaic queer emotions, and thus reveal the affective structure of his early subjective formation, very much the same way as “the general culture around him persecutes and tolerates . . . his own homosexuality” (27). According to Miller, in other words, the Broadway musical and the discreditable sentimentality it encodes have come to signify to gay men the sort of shameful interiority that *homosexuality itself* once represented.

“Homosexuality” and “Broadway” have now traded places. As homosexuality has become increasingly public and dignified, the life of queer affect and feeling has become more and more demonized, more and more impossible to express openly, to explore, to celebrate. It has become an embarrassment. And so, like those playbills and original-cast Broadway musical albums, once proudly displayed and now hidden away, it has been closeted. Not because we are ashamed of our homosexuality, but because official post-Stonewall homosexuality is ashamed of our cultural practices and the distinctive pleasures they afford. With the result that queer feeling and queer subjectivity

are what gay men nowadays routinely disavow, consigning them to a zone that effectively functions as *homosexuality's closet*.

Which is exactly what Anthony Tommasini and David Daniels demonstrated.



Miller was determined to open homosexuality's closet door by at least a good crack or two. He proceeded to do so by means of literary and social analysis, demonstrating that it is possible to approach gay male subjectivity without recourse to ego psychology. If we return to examine the three instances of queer subjectivity that Miller ascribed to the proto-gay male child of the 1950s and that he identified as "early pre-sexual realities of gay experience," we find that they consist not in aspects of an originary pathological formation, but in psychic inscriptions upon the subject of the pathogenic consequences of living in a homophobic social world. The affects involved are not specific to the individual: they are collective and generic.

For example, "the excessive sentimentality that was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object" points not to some typical or characteristic or distinctive identifying feature of gay male subjectivity *per se*, but to the particular effects on the psychic life of the Cold War-era gay male subject of his compulsory membership in a society that made the merest possibility of openly expressing same-sex desire or gender dissidence unimaginable and inconceivable, let alone the possibility of acting on it and making it a prominent, public part of daily life.

Similarly, since the Broadway musical flourished at a historical moment when nothing specifically gay could be allowed to enter the realm of mass public representation, and since the gay men who created it could do so only by engineering the systematic and absolute exclusion of their own sexual identity from visibility within it, the proto-gay response to the particular gayness of the Broadway musical necessarily involved an awareness of the systematic and absolute exclusion of gay male identity from overt recognition within the musi-

cal itself. That awareness was not simply a recognition of the absence of gay men as such from the scene of cultural origination, but a realization of the hopelessness of their ever being acknowledged *under that description* by the cultural forms that they themselves had created—and thus an awareness of the utter hopelessness of any social acknowledgment of gay identity (32–39). The Broadway musical thereby taught its proto-gay adepts that their responsiveness to the gayness of the genre could be expressed only on the condition of their isolation and concealment.

[No boy was] ever so overwhelmed by his passion [for the Broadway musical] that he forgot to manage the secrecy in which he indulged it, or if he did, if once . . . he was by some chance distracted enough to omit to draw the curtains on his performance [i.e., singing and dancing along with original-cast Broadway albums], so that other boys in the neighborhood had been able to catch him in the act of vibrating sympathetically to the numbers that neither he nor they had ever seen, he soon understood—that is to say, too late—that his sense of embarrassment had been given to him, like the gag reflex in his throat, to warn against the social humiliation that must ensue if he were such a cockeyed optimist as not to heed it. (11)

The practice of listening to, and singing along with, recordings of Broadway musicals taught those who enjoyed that activity a cautionary lesson in shame, imparting to them an awareness of the impossibility of ever translating gay desire and gay sentiment into public expression or into a socially viable reality—as well as an acute consciousness of the danger involved in even trying. It is in that sense that the Broadway musical itself has come to stand, as Miller puts it, for “the solitude, shame, secretiveness by which the impossibility of social integration was first internalized.”

The very impossibility of expressing gay desire in a socially meaningful fashion served to magnify and intensify it, rendering all the more precious and pleasurable the aesthetic form of the Broadway musical through whose enjoyment alone that impossibility could be

suspended and the proto-gay subject's solitary, secret sentimentality could be given an exuberant, reality-defying expression. That is precisely what Miller means when he invokes "the intense, senseless joy that, while not identical to these destitutions, is neither extricable from them."



The genius of Miller's approach to the Broadway musical is that it enables him to inquire into gay male subjectivity and its constitution, while side-stepping the psychic life of the individual by using a mass-cultural form popular with gay men to document and to recover the distinctive organization of subjectivity produced in gay men as a group by a specific set of historical and cultural conditions. That is an irreducibly *social* approach to the constitution of gay subjectivity.

Miller's emphasis on collective rather than individual subjective formation was not, however, a strategy for escaping the psychic altogether. Rather, its effect was to locate psychic life in the social rather than in the merely personal.

Miller made that point clear in the course of explaining why gay men's peculiar but shared investments in particular works of mainstream popular culture might be a good source of information about the distinctive features of gay male subjectivity.

The stuff of mass culture (as our first culture) conducts psychic flows with an efficiency that the superior material of no second, later culture ever comes close to rivaling. It is by way of *Shane*, not Sophocles or Freud, that Oedipus stalks our dreams. . . . We do not begin to understand how fundamentally this stuff outfits our imagination of social space, and of our own (desired, represented, real) place in it, by refusing to acknowledge the stains that such psychic flows may have deposited in a given sample. On the contrary, our cathexes correspond to an objective structure of soliciting, shaping, and storing them that contributes far more to the significance of a work of mass culture than the hackneyed aesthetic design, or the see-through ideological proposition, that is all that remains when they are overlooked. (68–69)

This is in the first instance an argument for the significance of mass culture in “the sentimental history of social groups,”¹² and in the second instance an argument for bringing to the study of mass culture a brand of critique distinct from the purely ideological, a critique that focuses on the *content* of *form* itself. But it is also a manifesto for the project of using the documented appeal of mass culture as a point of entry into a non-individualizing, non-personalizing, and non-normalizing analysis of gay male subjectivity.



Ultimately, what the gay male love of the Broadway musical taught Miller is the very lesson on which I have been insisting here—a lesson I originally learned from him—namely, that gay identity is inadequate to the expression of gay subjectivity. Gay identity does a very bad job of capturing what it feels like to be gay, because it fails to translate into expressive form the full extent and range of gay desire. Even gay sex, or its telltale signs, or the presence of gay men, or their public visibility and acceptance are insufficient to the tasks of representing *what it feels like* to be gay and expressing what gay men want. All those things may stand in for us; they may denote who we are. But they do not convey what we feel; they cannot by their mere presence embody our emotional world, our longings and aspirations, our sentimentality, our pleasures, the feelings that make us queer. The Broadway musical, for all its lack of specifically gay subject matter, comes a lot closer and does a better job. As an aesthetic form, and as a specifically gay genre, it gives expression to a kaleidoscopic range of queer emotions, pleasures, and desires.

That does not mean that the Broadway musical performs such a function for all gay men. Barry Adam, for example, claims to be completely unresponsive to the gay appeal of the Broadway musical. And yet he does not hesitate to accept Miller's claim that the musical offers a clue to the workings of gay male subjectivity. “I, for one, am not alone in being left cold by the Broadway musical / opera complex that is undeniably an important facet of culture for many gay men,” Adam

writes, “but I nevertheless recognize the subjective location Miller points to. Musical theater is one of a number of possibilities that speak to *the sense of difference, desire to escape, and will to imagine alternatives* that seems a widespread childhood experience of many pregay boys.”¹³

What makes the Broadway musical so perfectly adapted to capturing and expressing that alternative outlook, that driving desire—the profound sense of difference that often reaches back into gay childhood—is, Miller argues, the musical’s very *form*. For Miller, the most distinctive formal property of the Broadway musical is its alternation of drama and music, of speaking and singing, which not only brings about an unnaturally close juxtaposition of those two quite contrasting modes, but also involves abrupt and deliberately disorienting shifts from one to the other.

That practice of mode-shifting achieves its most characteristic re-alization, and produces its greatest impact on the spectator, when it is heightened, as it often is in the Broadway musical, by the very brusqueness of the transition from one mode to the other—for example, when performers who have been speaking ordinary dialogue suddenly, without preliminary orchestral accompaniment or any other warning, break into song. The immediate effect is to cut us loose from a familiar reality and to catapult us into a more lyrical, more vital, more vivid, and more wacky universe. In its exhilarating determination to stop the show, “to send the whole world packing,”¹⁴ and in its shameless celebration of an alternate reality, of a magical Technicolor world somewhere over the rainbow, “theatrical rather than realistic,”¹⁵ where normal people (even major-league baseball teams) unexpectedly burst into song and dance, the lyrical ethos of the Broadway musical—its interruptive, reality-suspending, mode-shifting form—expresses gay desire, and answers to what gay men want, far better than anyone who literally denotes or embodies gayness. At least, it once did. It could also speak eloquently to the sense of difference, the desire to escape, and the will to imagine alternatives that were all such prominent parts of the childhood experience

of so many proto-gay boys in the pre-Stonewall era of the 1950s and 1960s, and that remain important parts of queer childhood experience to this day.

By virtue of its very form, then, whose function is to effect a break from the ordinary, to disrupt the normal order of things, to derealize the known world and banish its drab reality so as to open up a new and different realm—a realm with its own lyrical, harmonious, passionate, playful, vibrant, intense, manic, nonsensical ways of being and feeling—by virtue of its very form, *and what that form implies*, the classic Broadway musical actually succeeded and may still succeed in realizing homosexual desire. It constitutes a proper vehicle for the expression of queer feeling. It certainly corresponds to the structure of gay subjectivity, and to the requirements of gay existence, better than gay identity does. It may even convey better than gay sex what it means to have a gay sexuality. It doesn't disclose who we are—after all, we never appear in it, at least not as visible gay men. Instead, it projects what we want, what we aspire to, what we dream of. It translates into a concrete vision our sense of difference, our longing to escape, and our wish for an alternate reality. That is why the Broadway musical can serve as a figural representation as well as a powerful expression of gay desire. Everything depends on *the content of its form, on the meaning of its style*.

To establish that point, and to show in precisely what sense it is true, Miller undertakes a lengthy, detailed reading of the 1959 Arthur Laurents–Jule Styne–Stephen Sondheim musical *Gypsy* and tries to account for its emotional appeal to some gay men of the period (and to numbers of gay men ever since). His reading combines a critical description of the work itself with an original theory of gay male development and an attempt at autobiographical recovery and self-analysis. It is a performance of queer subjectivity in its own right. By adopting that strategy, Miller seeks to give substantive meaning to the proposition, often voiced by gay men in connection with the early impact on them of one or another work of popular culture, that such-and-such a work “made me gay” (66; that is another mark of Miller's

bravery: most of us would instinctively flinch at any explanation of homosexuality that is couched in the terms of an aetiology, an origin story, fearing as we do that any developmental account of how someone became gay necessarily implies a pathological cause). Because Miller's analysis takes the form of a unique experiment in critical writing, it is unparaphraseable. Interested readers are warmly advised to consult his demonstration in full.

Miller's important conclusion, however, can be quickly summarized. Because the form of the Broadway musical itself functions as a vehicle of gay male desire, no enlightened effort to inject a thematic element of gay identity into the musical itself—to make its gayness more overt, to add gay subject matter to it—can actually make it more gay. Rather the contrary. When at last gay men do appear in their own right on the Broadway stage, and when the musical attempts to achieve gayness *through* its explicit representation of homosexual subjects, the musical ceases to provide much of what gay men want. That is why making the Broadway musical more explicitly gay-themed—for example, by including characters who are gay men or even creating an entire musical about gay life (as in the case of *La Cage aux Folles*)—does not succeed in making the musical itself more satisfactory as a vehicle of gay desire, whatever novel identity-affirming pleasures this new gay musical may nonetheless afford.

Instead, according to Miller, the explicitly gay-themed musical “works positively against the recognition of the homosexual desire that diffuses through ‘other’ subjects, objects, relations, all over the form” (132). By containing and confining homosexuality to the fixed, local habitation of a particular character or theme—to a materialization of *gay identity*—the new gay musical implies that such a habitation is the only place in the musical where homosexuality resides, where gay subjectivity is at home. But as Miller demonstrates, with a subtlety and attention to detail that defeat summary, it is in the form of the Broadway musical itself that homosexual desire once took up pervasive (if unverifiable and unlocalizable) residence. For homosexual desire is a volatile affect, an elusive way of feeling, a solitary, sentimental projection. Only an aesthetic form as sly, as tricky, and as

queer as the Broadway musical could give it so powerful and moving an expression in an otherwise hostile world.

John Clum agrees.

The uncloseted gay musical, however earnestly it attempts to recreate gay experience, is not as complex or captivating as earlier closeted musicals. . . . [W]e show queens found more cause for joy, more recognition, in our readings of shows of the past than in more recent, more ostensibly gay musicals. . . . The irony of theater . . . is that there is often more gayness to be read in ostensibly straight characters. . . . For the most part, openly gay musicals are less “gay,” in all senses of the word, than their closeted Broadway predecessors. . . . The magical moments in the musical theater I know and love are extravagant allegories of our experience. . . . Gay critics can lament the ostensible heterosexism of the classic musical, but these shows offered an opulent world in which desire could go in a number of directions and could be read simultaneously in seemingly opposite ways. (10, 47, 246, 282)

The Broadway musical is “the most illogical of art forms”—just as opera is the most electrifying (xii).¹⁶ Musical theater is “the queerest of art forms, the one in which gender is most clearly a performance that can be exploded or radically altered, the form in which everything can be seen as drag. It is the most openly flamboyant of art forms, . . . less rarified than opera or ballet, but equally larger than life” (36, 28).¹⁷ In fact, if D. A. Miller is correct, it is not only gender that gets exploded by the Broadway musical, but straight reality itself. The Broadway musical, as a queer art form, is therefore *more gay* than any gay man, than anyone with a gay identity, could ever be.

And so, even when the Broadway musical appears to treat what Miller calls “other” (that is, non-gay) subjects, it contrives to be more gay than any representation of gay men or gay identity. Although the classic Broadway musical of the 1940s and 1950s strictly banished from its scene anyone or anything that could register explicitly as homosexual in the minds of its audience, it “can now seem to have rendered a far richer account of [gay] desire” than any explicit representation of that desire on the Broadway stage today can do (132).



The problem, or the paradox, is that the gay identity “to which we have entrusted our own politics, ethics, sex lives . . . stands in an essentially reductive relation to the desire on which it is based.” Gay identity is but “a kind of homogenous precipitate that can never in itself suggest how variously such desire continues to determine the density, color, taste of the whole richly embroiled solution out of which, in so settled a state, only a small quantity of it has fallen” (132). Gay identity is therefore not up to the job of capturing or expressing gay desire, which exceeds in its transformative, world-altering aspirations and uncategorizable pleasures the comparatively humdrum persons or themes that “gay” merely denominates.

In the era when all gay denotation was banned from Broadway, the musical performed a much more gay-expressive “double operation: not only of ‘hiding’ homosexual desire, but also of manifesting, across all manner of landscapes, an extensive network of hiding places—call them latencies—apparently ready-made for the purpose.” The Broadway musical created a world in which gay desire, though never visible, was everywhere at home.

What made the Broadway musical so gay, in the end, was not that it portrayed gay desire (it didn’t), but that it realized it. By its wide-ranging hospitality to gay desire as well as by its very form, whose interruptive mode-shifting abolished normal, ordinary reality and replaced it with a lyrical, playful, wacky, ecstatic alternative, the musical conveyed to certain kinds of gay spectators, “even as it was being denied, *the homosexual disposition of the world*” (132–133). Without ever recognizing gay men, and in the very act of disavowing their existence, the Broadway musical permitted them to partake in queer ways of being and feeling. It put them in imaginative and emotional possession of a queer reality. *It denied their identity, but it offered them a world.* Nothing short of that “sublime vision,” as Miller calls it (133), could adequately express—without reducing, simplifying, or betraying—the world-making force of gay desire.

THE QUEEN IS NOT DEAD

The inability of gay identity to capture the “sublime vision” that Miller speaks of is precisely what I discovered, at considerable personal cost, the first time I taught a course in gay male studies at the University of Michigan. Which I did the first semester I worked there, in the fall of 1999. It was, for once, a fairly conventional course—a survey of contemporary gay male literature.

In putting together that course, I had implicitly accepted the notion, derived from the premises of post-Stonewall gay liberation (to which I still uncritically subscribed), that gay identity was the key to gay studies. Accordingly, I assumed that what gay men wanted above all was the one thing that had always been denied them—namely, an opportunity to affirm their *identity* as gay men by seeing themselves literally represented in (for example) gay male literature and by taking part in an open, dignified, explicit, and communal gay male culture. Which they could now do at long last by, among other things, enrolling in a college course that focused explicitly on gay men and gay male literature, a course taught by an openly gay man, a course dealing with fiction about gay men written by gay men that could give voice to gay male experience. Wasn't that the kind of educational experience that the gay movement had long been working to make possible? And to make available to interested college students, whether they were gay or not?

The response I got, however, was quite different from what I expected. My gay male students, who on the first day of class had indeed said gratifying and predictable things such as “I’m taking this course because I’ve waited my entire time in college to be able to take a course like this,” soon acted as if they were having second thoughts. They certainly started looking very bored, and they ended up treating the course like just any other tedious English class with a lot of difficult reading to do and too many papers to write.

But that’s not because they were completely insensible to the appeal of gay culture. There was at least one thing that held their interest.

As the semester wore on, the attendance sheet I circulated to keep track of student participation kept taking longer and longer to make its way around the classroom. By the time it finally reached me, it was lusciously decorated—more and more floridly as the term drew to a close. Some of the gay male students in the class, it turned out, were compensating for their evident lack of interest in the assigned readings and the class discussions by embellishing the back of the attendance list with amusing drawings of various members of the class, including myself on occasion, decked out in drag and embodying various female characters from *The Golden Girls* or *Steel Magnolias* (Figures 2 and 3).¹

Those students may not have been fans of Judy Garland or the Broadway musical (though who knows?), but they knew what they liked.

In short, my students had no trouble responding to the queer charm of certain non-gay representations. They enjoyed appropriating and queering works of mainstream, heterosexual culture. In fact, they *preferred* doing that to reading gay novels. They got more of a charge out of non-gay sources than they got out of the explicitly gay texts we were supposed to be studying. At least, they discovered more queer possibilities in adapting and remaking non-gay material, and thus more uses for it, than they found in good gay writing.

The obvious conclusion was that the hard-won possibility of an



2 Attendance sheet for the course entitled "Contemporary Gay Male Fiction," University of Michigan, November 30, 1999. By kind permission of Brent Caburnay.



3 Attendance sheet for the course entitled "Contemporary Gay Male Fiction," University of Michigan, December 2, 1999. By kind permission of Brent Caburnay.

open, uncensored, explicit, and reflective gay male literature had not exactly extinguished the queer appeal of all that oblique, encrypted material so beloved of traditional gay male culture. It still hasn't. Coded, indirect, implicit, figural representations that somehow manage to convey "the homosexual disposition of the world" continue to exercise a powerful attraction that unencoded, direct, explicit, literal representations of gay men and gay life have trouble equaling. Such coded material, though not itself gay-themed (any more than the classic Broadway musical was), conforms to the requirements of gay desire more closely, and often succeeds in expressing such desire better, than gay identity or its tokens can do.²

Which is why gay men nowadays, who finally have the opportunity to watch TV shows about gay men and gay life and gay sex, like *Queer as Folk*, massively prefer *Sex and the City* or *Desperate Housewives*—just as D. A. Miller continued to prefer *South Pacific* or *Gypsy* to *La Cage aux Folles* or *Rent*. (Of course, the fact that *Queer as Folk* used to be the most moralistic show on television probably didn't help.)



Gay men routinely cherish non-gay artifacts and cultural forms that realize gay desire instead of denoting it. They often prefer such works, along with the queer meanings those works express, to explicit, overt, thematically gay representations. There are in fact quantities of non-gay cultural forms, artworks, consumer products, celebrities, and performers that gay men invest with gay value. Cultural objects that contain no explicit gay themes, that do not represent gay men, that do not invoke same-sex desire, but that afford gay men opportunities for colonizing them and making them over into vehicles of queer affirmation exercise a perennial charm: they constantly get taken up by gay male culture and converted to queer uses. These objects serve a purpose that even "positive images" of gay men do not fulfill.

Like the Broadway musical, non-gay cultural forms offer gay men a way of escaping from their particular, personal queerness into total, global queerness. In the place of an identity, they promise a world. So

long as it is the property of an individual, queerness always runs the risk of disfiguring the person: it marks the individual as weird, abnormal, disreputable, and subject to the demeaning judgment of the majority. It implicates the individual's identity and "spoils" that identity (to use Erving Goffman's apt term) by imparting to it a social taint of wrongness, repulsiveness, defectiveness.³ But while being faggy may be a bad thing for a *person* to be, it ceases to be disabling as soon as it stops referring to a person and applies instead to an entire world, to a weird or wacky universe of someone's creation. When we participate in such a universe, we trade in our individual fagginess for a universal fagginess that is no longer our personal property and that does not register as a personal defect or blemish. A fagginess that comes to be shared, that gets transferred to a common landscape of the imagination, that constitutes an entire world, and that becomes universal is a fagginess that no longer defines us as individuals, taints our identity, and disfigures us both personally and socially.

No wonder that gay identity, for many gay men, is an identity well lost. Not only is it, like all stigmatized identities, an irreparably spoiled identity. It is also an obstacle to the world-making pleasures of non-identity. The queer movement of the early 1990s, which elaborated that insight, merely rediscovered what earlier gay adepts of the Broadway musical had already known, and what my gay students had somehow figured out for themselves: certain non-gay cultural forms, such as the musical, or grand opera, or pop music, or women's daytime TV, provide a liberation far more complete than gay politics can offer, since the latter aspires only to improve the world and does not alter your situation in it or your subjection to it—not, at least, immediately. Instead of replacing your gay identity with a new and better one, participation in non-gay cultural forms exempts you from having to have an identity at all. You lose yourself and gain a world.

So when gay men appropriate non-gay cultural forms and bring out the queerness they find in them, they escape from their personal queerness into a larger, universal, non-stigmatizing queerness. From classical sculpture to techno music, from Saint Sebastian to Miss

Piggy, from Venice to Broadway, innumerable non-gay cultural forms and figures have succumbed to the cultural perversions of gay men. (What do perverts do, after all, if not pervert?) As a result of such queer world-making projects, in which gay men lose their individual homosexual identity through an appropriation of heterosexual culture as well as a deep immersion in *its* queerness rather than their own, many non-gay forms not only morph into gay forms but even turn into widely recognized symbols of gayness. Such once-straight but now-gay items ultimately come to function for straight society as a kind of shorthand for gay male culture itself: witness the fate of “Broadway” or “techno music.”

So it would be easy to take a leaf from Miller’s book and to demonstrate his point (about non-gay cultural forms being gayer than gay ones) by looking at other instances besides Broadway. For example, Alice Echols points out that, with the exception of Sylvester,

the biggest stars of gay disco were heterosexual African American women. Even though disco was powered in part by gay liberation, its deejays and dancers shied away from politically explicit music. Tellingly, Motown artist Carl Bean’s 1977 gay anthem “I Was Born This Way” fell flat with gay men. By contrast, optimistic tracks such as Sister Sledge’s “We Are Family,” McFadden and Whitehead’s “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now,” and Dan Hartman’s “Relight My Fire,” which invoked the righteousness of love, equality, and community but without reference to any specific group, were massively popular in gay discos.⁴

History loves to repeat itself—especially, Marx quipped, as farce. Echols’s account of Carl Bean’s failure to appeal to gay men with “I Was Born This Way” evokes a more recent fiasco of the same type, which illustrates the general point that non-gay forms are often gayer than gay-themed ones.

In 2011, Lady Gaga released a gay anthem of her own, “Born This Way,” which she performed at the Grammy Awards and on *Saturday Night Live*, and which she selected as the title track of her second studio album. It was billed (according to Out.com) as “the queer anthem

to end all queer anthems. Elton John went so far as to say it would erase ‘I Will Survive’ from our memories, our jukeboxes, and our pride parades.”⁵ Recognizing that she had been catapulted to pop stardom by her huge gay fan base, Gaga had been taking increasingly overt and explicit political positions in favor of gay and lesbian rights; in 2010 she had given political speeches and rallied her fans on behalf of the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the Congressional statute banning non-heterosexuals from serving openly in the U.S. military.⁶ This political engagement culminated in her new single, “Born This Way,” which insisted that “God makes no mistakes” and that all of “life’s disabilities” (among which Gaga explicitly includes non-standard sexualities and genders, homophobically enough, along with non-White racial and ethnic identities) are therefore natural and right. The song was a defiant defense of individual differences, particularly of stigmatized ones which “left you outcast, bullied or teased,” and an implicit rebuke to biblically based homophobia, especially of the evangelical Christian variety, which holds homosexuality to be a sinful choice rather than a natural, or innate, condition.⁷

Despite Elton John’s prediction, Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 disco classic “I Will Survive,” which makes not the slightest reference to gay men, will in all likelihood survive “Born This Way.” Gaga’s queer anthem has left her gay fans grateful but underwhelmed. Commenting on the general disappointment, Mark Simpson wrote, “This is an atrocious, disastrous mistake on Gaga’s part. . . . And it’s because I’m a fan I’m so disappointed. . . . It’s a catchy single, of course, and will make a lot of money, but everything about this song is backwards. . . . It’s as if someone decided to remake *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a GLAAD public service announcement, with Harvey Fierstein or Dan Savage in the role of Frank-N-Furter.”⁸

Gaga, in short, has simply mistaken the nature of her gay appeal. The latter has a lot to do with everything that is *not* explicitly gay-themed about her persona and her performance but that speaks to a queer sensibility and subjectivity—her outrageous look, her defiance of normality, her collaboration with Beyoncé, her reinvigoration of

pop music—and relatively little to do with her belated bisexual identification or political support for gay identity.⁹

Gaga has tried from the start to take control of her gay appeal. Much like Bette Midler before her, she has played explicitly to her gay audience, offering herself as a vehicle for gay male identification in particular. “Gaga’s music does not provide gay culture with straight artifacts to recode,” writes Logan Scherer, “but provides it with already recoded material—with a kind of ready-made gay culture. In effect, Gaga does the cultural work for gay men. She takes straight tropes of pop music and recodes them into consciously campy gay anthems, admitting that her music, while universally popular, is uniquely made for gay fans. Whereas someone like Beyoncé gives us, generally, unironically straight music that we can recode into gay culture, Gaga does the work for us.”¹⁰

Nonetheless, there is a difference, Scherer maintains, between Gaga’s earlier hits, like “Poker Face,” and “Born This Way”: the former is, “on the surface, a song about a flirty girl hiding her true emotions from the guy who’s pursuing her and whom she’s pursuing, but the subtext of the song is the poker face of the closet that hides and feigns sexuality, and this is what made the song such a hit with Gaga’s gay audience: the song incorporates the clichés of straight pop songs while ingeniously smuggling in this queer subtext.” With “Born This Way,” Gaga brings that queer subtext to the fore. As a consequence, the gay appeal of her song now resides in the pop-musical form, its rhythm and harmonies, rather than in the content of its painfully earnest lyrics.¹¹ It is the form of the song that saves it. Otherwise, by appealing openly, explicitly, thematically to her gay audience, Gaga—paradoxically—has cut her connection to it. (Enter Adele, whose apolitical sentimentality, combined with her extraordinary vocal talents, made her an instant hit with gay men, if not exactly a full replacement for Gaga.)



We keep being told that gay culture is dead. Traditional gay male culture, or so the story goes, was tied to homophobia, to the regime of

the closet, to the Bad Old Days of anti-gay oppression. That is why it is no longer relevant.¹² Now that we have (some) gay rights, and even gay marriage (in half a dozen states, at least, as well as in Canada, several European countries, South Africa, Argentina, and Nepal), the sense of exclusion, and of specialness, that gay men have long felt is out of date. Once upon a time, gay culture was rooted in “the aestheticism of maladjustment,” as Daniel Harris calls it. With those roots in social rejection and marginalization now definitively severed, traditional gay culture is certain to wither away. In fact, it has already withered away. “The grain of sand, our oppression, that irritated the gay imagination to produce the pearl of camp, has been rinsed away,” Harris explains, “and with it, there has been a profound dilution of the once concentrated gay sensibility.”¹³

Similar arguments also used to be made about drag, highlighting its outdatedness and forecasting its imminent disappearance. But since drag continues all too obviously to live on, no doubt to the embarrassment of many, and since it continues to take new forms—from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on the Logo Channel to late-night appropriations of deserted Walmarts for drag displays by queer youth—the reports of its demise that continue to be issued seem increasingly to lack confidence and conviction.

In the case of gay culture in general, however, a death knell is continually sounded, often by forty-something gay men projecting their sense of generational difference, as well as their utopian hopes for the future, onto younger guys—or anyone who represents the latest generation of gay men to emerge onto the scene. These kids are said to live in a brave new world of acceptance and freedom, mercifully different from that prison house of oppression, that “cage of exclusion” (albeit “gilded . . . with magnificent ornaments”), which their elders knew.¹⁴

If you want to gauge just how well younger gay men nowadays are assimilated into American society at large, you only have to look—or so the advocates of this view insist—at how ignorant of gay culture these boys are, how indifferent to it they are, how little need they have of it. That, you are assured over and over again, is a particularly

telling sign: it shows that gay kids nowadays are happy and healthy and well-adjusted. “For the first time,” starting apparently in the 1990s, according to Andrew Sullivan, “a cohort of gay children and teens grew up in a world where homosexuality was no longer a taboo subject and where gay figures were regularly featured in the press.” The result of that change in mass-media representation, Sullivan contends, was a complete merging of straight and gay worlds, as well as a new fusion between straight and gay culture, with the latter now losing its edge and distinctiveness:

If the image of gay men for my generation was one gleaned from the movie *Cruising* or, subsequently, *Torch Song Trilogy*, the image for the next one was MTV’s “Real World,” Bravo’s “Queer Eye,” and Richard Hatch winning the first “Survivor.” The new emphasis was on the interaction between gays and straights and on the diversity of gay life and lives. Movies featured and integrated gayness. Even more dramatically, gays went from having to find hidden meaning in mainstream films—somehow identifying with the aging, campy female lead in a way the rest of the culture missed—to everyone, gay and straight, recognizing and being in on the joke of a character like “Big Gay Al” from “South Park” or Jack from “Will & Grace.”¹⁵

Too bad no one bothered to tell my students. Maybe they would have stopped identifying with *The Golden Girls* and immersed themselves instead in *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Then I could have taught a successful class on contemporary gay male fiction. And I wouldn’t have had to write this book.



In fact, the new generation of gay kids on whose behalf such declarations are ostensibly made often refrain from making those kinds of categorical assertions themselves. My lesbian and gay male students, including the ones who later enrolled in “How To Be Gay,” may have been properly skeptical of claims that a lot of arcane material from obscure reaches of American popular culture in the distant past somehow constitutes *their* culture, but they did not insist that gay culture

was absolutely dead. I would have been perfectly willing to believe them, if they had told me so, just as I am prepared to accept at face value the triumphal obituaries for gay culture that we are repeatedly proffered. Andrew Sullivan is quite right, in a sense: public culture *has* changed, and homosexuality now is much more fully integrated into it. That certainly makes a big difference, and it makes traditional gay male culture at least *look* a lot less relevant. Already in the 1970s, my own generation thought we were well beyond having to find gay meaning in mainstream films, Broadway musicals, or other mainstream cultural objects. Moreover, my interest in gay history makes me inclined to see a close, specific, and contingent connection between the particular contours and contents of traditional gay male culture and the singular social conditions in the past under which it was formed—conditions that may very well have produced it—such as homophobia, the closet, and political oppression, which D. A. Miller so eloquently evoked.

Those conditions have hardly vanished, of course, and that is one reason gay culture is not a mere relic of times gone by. Despite occasional optimistic claims to the contrary, homophobia is still around and is wonderfully adaptable, assuming new guises and finding new means of expression every day.

There is another reason for the stubborn persistence of gay culture. Although much, indisputably, *has* changed, gay or proto-gay children still grow up, for the most part, in heterosexual families and households. A few of them may have children's books which teach them about the existence of gay people, or about families with parents of the same sex. They may watch TV sitcoms or reality shows with gay or (more rarely) lesbian characters. All of that certainly contributes significantly to the destigmatization of homosexuality. But a culture that places less stigma on homosexuality is not the same thing as a gay culture. And adding gay characters to mainstream cultural forms does not make those forms themselves queer.

So gay kids still have to orient themselves somehow in relation to mainstream, heteronormative culture, which remains their first culture. They still have to achieve—painfully or joyously, gradually or

almost instantly—a dissident, queer perspective on it. That process constitutes their earliest and most formative experience as cultural consumers and subjects. (We'll explore the implications of this further in Chapter 16.)

That is why I refuse to confine my account of gay male culture to some distant epoch, to some historical era well and truly over—if only minutes ago, depending on who is writing the obituary. It's not because I have some naive or dogmatic belief in gay culture's persistence, its eternal relevance, its unchanged and unchanging greatness. And it's not because I am living in the past. It's because just at the moment when I myself expected to find traditional gay male culture dead and buried, and when I thought modern gay identity had definitively triumphed over it, my own students told me different. Via that attendance sheet.



What all this indicates to me is that gay identity—the concept on which the entire design of my class on contemporary gay male literature was implicitly and uncritically based—does not answer, even now, to what many gay men want when they look for gay representations. Gay culture may or may not be dead, but the politicized and sexualized gay identity that was supposed to replace it, that many of us were convinced actually *had* replaced it, has not exactly prevailed over it. And traditional gay culture itself refuses to disappear completely. Like homophobia, it is adept at taking new forms and finding new expression.

Gay people have been reluctant to recognize this. And they have been even slower to acknowledge it. Gay identity, or some “post-gay” version of it, remains what many gay people think they want. It is what they think they prefer to traditional gay culture. But only until, for instance, they encounter an identity-based politics, or movement, or literature—a literature, written by gay authors, that actually portrays gay people and gay life. Confronted by such an identity-based culture, by the world they thought they had wanted, many gay people become rapidly and radically disillusioned with it.

There is something familiar, even classic about that sort of disillusionment, something that should resonate with the experience of many gay men. The disappointment in literary representations reflects and perhaps simply repeats a perennial erotic letdown. It echoes that old inability of gay sex to fulfill gay desire, the refusal of gay desire to find satisfaction in gay sociality—the persistence of what D. A. Miller called a “homosexuality of one.” Like a boy home alone, looking for romance with the ideal boyfriend, who imagines what a good time he might be having if he could just manage to pull himself together, get dressed, and go out . . . only to realize, on arriving at the place of his dreams, which is indeed populated by gay men, all of them similarly looking for romance, that those *real* gay men are all somehow the *wrong* gay men, not at all the ones he had been picturing to himself when he had originally thought about going out—the gay literature that gay men have written, in order to fulfill the demand for the kind of open, explicit representation of gay men, gay life, and gay male sexuality that gay men themselves had thought they wanted, often turns out to be the wrong gay literature, less gratifying to its gay readers than the non-gay culture that gay men had already appropriated and resignified to express their longings and their dreams.¹⁶

The perennial conviction on the part of gay men that they have now moved beyond the sad necessity of traditional gay culture turns out, in short, to be an illusion—a constitutive misrecognition through which every gay generation symptomatically repeats the reductionist program of identity, only to act out its discontent with that program, and ultimately to reject it, without ever quite admitting to itself what it is doing or feeling. So that is another reason traditional gay male culture never dies.



One implication of all this, and not the least surprising one, is that some young gay men today may well have more in common with gay men in the period before Stonewall than anyone of my generation has been prepared to believe or to admit. Perhaps, in some important

respects, Stonewall did not make such a huge difference after all. Despite the vast historical and social changes in the conditions of gay male life that have taken place over the past fifty years, gay kids continue to grow up in a straight world, straight culture continues to matter deeply to them, and gay male culture still operates through—and indeed thrives on—a metaphorical or figural reading of straight culture: a reappropriation of it that is also a resistance to it.

Furthermore, what gay men have always sought out is not only direct or literal representations of themselves, but also figural or metaphorical or encoded or encrypted representations of gay desire. *There seems to be something about figurality itself that they like.* And it's not hard to figure out what that is. For by freeing the imagination from the confines of a particular, literal representation of gay male identity, figuration is more easily able to convey what D. A. Miller called "the homosexual disposition of the world." It is better able to capture the kaleidoscopic range and breadth of gay subjectivity. It therefore stands a better chance of answering to the needs of gay desire and queer pleasure.

Another way of putting this is to say that gay identity affirms itself not only through *identity*, an experience of sameness with other gay men like oneself, but also through *identification*, the feeling of closeness to, or affinity with, *other people*—with anything and everything that is not oneself. Identification, too, expresses desire: a desire to bring oneself into relation with someone or something that is different from oneself.

So if gay men of an earlier era knew how to attune themselves to gay aspects of the Judy Garland persona, maybe it wasn't only because they didn't have Barney Frank or Rufus Wainwright or Anderson Cooper to identify with instead. And maybe it wasn't just because they were oppressed or did not enjoy the right to marry. Perhaps they were seeking a wider range of expression. Perhaps they were looking for a way of imaginatively expanding their experience, going beyond themselves, escaping from the known world, and realizing their desires without being limited by who they were. That may well have been the whole point of identifying with Judy Garland: she wasn't a

gay man, but in certain respects she could somehow express gay desire, what gay men want, *better* than a gay man could. That is, she could actually convey *something even gayer than gay identity itself*.¹⁷

Similarly, young gay men today evidently continue to find meaning and value in artifacts of heterosexual culture that were not created for them but that they can make their own and invest with a variety of queer significations. The kinds of relations they can create *with* those objects serve to express a richer sense of what it means to them to be gay than the more straightforward audience relations that they can establish with images of gay men.

Which is the point that D. A. Miller made about the pre-Stonewall Broadway musical: its queer figurality offered a more satisfactory answer to gay desire than any representation of gay men possibly could.

So here is the lesson I took from my failure to interest my gay male students in contemporary gay male fiction. Instead of asking what on earth we would still want with the Broadway musical—or with torch songs, divas, grand opera, old movies, or the perfect interior—now that we have gay identity and gay sex, I concluded, rather against my better instincts, that the more pressing question to ask was the opposite one: Why on earth would we want gay identity, when we have (as we have always had) gay identification? Why would we want Edmund White, when we still have *The Golden Girls*? Or rather, since there are very good reasons for wanting to have gay identity, and gay men, at least some of the time, we might wonder *what gay identification does for us that gay identity cannot do*. And what it is exactly that Judy Garland or the Broadway musical or other congenial artifacts of mainstream culture offer us that an explicit, open, unencrypted gay male culture does not provide. I actually didn't much like those questions; they didn't make me very comfortable. But I wanted to find some answers to them. That's why I decided to teach "How To Be Gay."



The only real reward for asking such difficult and unwelcome questions is the prospect that any successful answers to them we manage

to come up with will tell us something useful and enlightening about gay male subjectivity. At least, it seems likely that one possible approach to the non-pathologizing, non-homophobic understanding of gay male subjectivity lies in the study of gay men's cultural identifications, in gay men's emotional investments in non-gay social and artistic forms. The history of gay male cultural identifications reveals a virtually unlimited quantity of such investments, virtually all of them as yet untouched by gay critical analysis. And yet, gay critical analysis would not have very far to look for material.

Just for starters, a catalogue of supremely gripping moments from the history of classic Hollywood film, all of them consisting in notable dialogue spoken by one or another of the greatest female movie stars, has been provided by the gay Argentine novelist Manuel Puig. It takes the form of a series of quotations, each one appended to the beginning of a chapter in Puig's 1974 "detective story," *The Buenos Aires Affair*. No need to assemble a gay male canon of queer moments from Hollywood cinema: Puig has already done it for us.¹⁸

Another glimpse of this plenitude is afforded by Neil Bartlett, the gay English novelist, historian, playwright, and theatrical director, who speaks about finding his own sources of artistic inspiration in what passes for mainstream culture.

By "mainstream" I mean those points of entry which the mainstream allows me, to its mechanics and economics, *by accident*; certain moments . . . It's not a tradition so much as a cluster of artistic flash-points—points of aesthetic excess at which the mainstream becomes ripe for my evil purposes, for plucking. So my mainstream is very picky; one that most people wouldn't recognise. It is deeply queer, kinky, complicated, melodramatic, over-determined, disruptive and disrupted.¹⁹

All the more striking, then, that it has been so seldom examined. Queer studies of popular media abound, but nearly all of them focus on the cultural object, and perform an ideological critique of it, demonstrating how that object is shaped by and reproduces the regimes

of heteronormativity (or race or class or nation) and/or how it resists them. Almost no one except Miller has performed a *formal* critique of a gay male cultural object or been interested in reading mass culture from the point of view of the gay male subject who is the consumer of it.²⁰ And very few queer theorists have attempted to derive an account of gay male subjectivity from an *inductive* study of the history of gay male cultural appropriations rather than from a *deductive* application to them of psychoanalytic theory or some other theoretical dogma.

Which is a pity, because the study of gay male cultural practices provides an opportunity to apply Virginia Woolf's dictum about the difference between the sexes to the difference between sexual cultures: "The two classes still differ enormously. And to prove this, we need not have recourse to the dangerous and uncertain theories of psychologists and biologists; we can appeal to facts."²¹ If we are really interested in describing or accounting for the differences between gay and straight male subjectivity, then, we do not need to bother ourselves with such arcane matters as comparative hypothalamus size or perverse internalization of the Law of the Father. All we need to do is look at the highly distinctive uses gay men make of straight culture, beginning with the phenomena themselves, and focus on the details.

Which is what I will do now.

PART THREE



Why Are the Drag Queens Laughing?

CULTURE AND GENRE

My point of departure for this admittedly hazardous project may come as something of a surprise. If, in order to identify the distinguishing features of gay male subjectivity, I need to describe gay male culture in all its specificity—and to define, in particular, its queer relation to mainstream culture, its non-standard use of mainstream cultural objects—I must begin by invoking the literary-critical concept of *genre*. So let me explain why I have to talk about genre, if I want to talk about gay male culture.

A culture is not the same thing as a collection of individuals. Almost any statement one can make about a culture will turn out to be false as soon as it is applied to individuals. For example, French culture is characterized by a very particular relation to the production and consumption of wine. But that doesn't mean every French individual necessarily embodies such a relation or exhibits it in personal practice. Nor does it imply that wine has the same meaning or value for all members of French society. Although the French in general may indeed care more about wine than Americans do, some people in the United States care a great deal more about wine than do many people in France. Just because you're French doesn't mean you have to like wine, and you can refuse to drink a drop of wine and still be French. It also takes more than liking wine to be French: liking wine, however passionately, will not in itself make you French. At the same

time, certain social practices pertaining to wine *are* distinctive to French culture, and although not all or even most French people take part in those practices, to be French is to be alert to the cultural meanings of wine-drinking, to have at least *some kind of attitude* to the practice of wine consumption and appreciation, even if it is an attitude of total indifference or rejection.

The same sorts of things could be said about gay men and Broadway musicals. Or about gay men and any of the various cultural practices that are stereotyped as gay.

The lesson should be clear. The kind of coherence that a culture has will not necessarily be reflected in any uniformity of attitude or behavior on the part of a population. Conversely, the mere counting of individual preferences will not necessarily disclose the systematic, characteristic shape of a culture. A careful sociological survey of a population may produce detailed and accurate information about the tastes of individuals, and it may be able to tabulate variations in likes and dislikes among different demographic subgroups. But precisely because a culture is more than a mass of individuals, such statistical maps, though rich in implications, may still fail to identify leading cultural traits. Even worse, they may factor such traits out of the analysis altogether—by measuring empirical fluctuations (according to region, social class, race, gender, or sexuality) that have only a quantitative, descriptive value and remain culturally neutral instead of turning out to be qualitatively significant and culturally salient.

Yet culture is not an illusion. To stick with our previous example, there are real cultural differences between France and the United States. A few years ago I took some friends of mine from Paris, who were making their first trip to North America, directly from the Detroit airport to a local deli in Ann Arbor. From the effusive, familiar way the waitress greeted us and inquired about our feelings on various subjects, my French guests immediately assumed she was an old friend of mine. That was a mistake. But it was no accident. On the contrary, it was a misunderstanding that was also the logical outcome of a cultural difference.¹ Moreover, it reveals a basic truth about the form in which cultural differences appear and the medium in which

they are most flagrantly manifested. It shows that cultural differences are expressed less tellingly by demographic variations in matters of preference or taste than by divergences in observable discursive practice—by the *pragmatics of discourse* (how people interact with one another in concrete social situations) and, more specifically, by the *pragmatics of genre*.

Cultural differences are reflected concretely and pragmatically by the conventions of speech and behavior that govern personal interactions in particular social contexts. Such conventions specify, for example, what a waitress can say to a new customer without causing shock, confusion, disorientation, or outrage. Or, rather, the pragmatic considerations that determine the difference, in a particular social context, between what counts as a normal interaction and what counts as a bizarre, disturbing, or offensive one give rise to structural regularities in discursive practice that constitute conventions—and ultimately entire *genres*—of speech.

Those genres vary from one culture to another. “It is helpful to describe any given local culture as a specific array of genres,” Ross Chambers writes, “where genre is understood as a conventional habitus entailing understandings and agreements that don’t need to be specifically negotiated concerning the ‘kinds’ of social interaction that are possible under the aegis of that culture. . . . What genres regulate, with varying degrees of rigidity and flexibility, is the social appropriateness of discursive behavior.”² The regulatory work that genres perform produces the unique patterns of social and discursive practice that define specific cultures. So there is a mutually constitutive relation between culture and genre. Taken together, in combination or in different combinations, specific genres of speech and interaction help to endow each community, each subgroup within it, and each culture with its own distinctiveness. As the story about my French friends shows, the generic conventions governing what a server can say to a complete stranger in Ann Arbor without causing surprise differ from those governing similar interactions in Paris.

That is how I understand the pragmatics of genre.³ Genres are usually understood as formal kinds of literary discourse, such as “epic”

or “lyric.” But in fact routine patterns of speech connected to common social interactions also display the regularity and dependability we associate with literary genres. Moreover, these genres of speech perform the same regulatory function in codifying discursive practices that literary genres do—only they perform their regulatory function not in the realm of literary composition and reception, but in the sphere of communication, social behavior, and personal interaction—defining appropriate subject matter, forms of interpersonal relationality, and styles of communication.⁴ In that sense, genres are not only formal but also pragmatic: they provide people, *in their daily practices*, with concrete means of interacting with one another and negotiating specific social situations—and they instruct them in the right ways to do so.⁵

The systematic formal differences that distinguish conventional kinds of literary discourse from one another represent one example of the pragmatics of genre—indeed, the most familiar and obvious example of such a pragmatics—and much of what I have to say here will refer to those traditional generic divisions among kinds of literature. But, for the purposes of the present study, I have no interest in the formal properties of different kinds of literature in themselves and I will not be paying attention to genres as formal organizing principles of *literary* discourse. I am concerned with genres to the extent that they produce regularities in social behavior and discursive practice throughout a wide range of human interactions.⁶ The traditional divisions among formal kinds of literary discourse represent instances of such regularities, but they are far from being the only instances of them. So when I invoke those divisions here, my purpose will not be to distinguish different branches of literature, different modes of representation, or different formal systems of discourse, as much as to describe different horizons of expectation for speech and behavior.



Any number of considerations make the attempt to speak of “gay male culture” risky, problematic, even inadvisable. The foremost dan-

ger is that of *essentialism*, of seeming to imply that there is some defining feature or property of gayness that all gay men share—an untenable notion, which we should categorically reject. But we should likewise reject the accusation of essentialism that might be leveled against this undertaking. For to make such an objection, to condemn as “essentialist” any effort to describe the distinctive features of gay male culture, is to confuse a *culture*, and the practices that constitute it, with the indeterminate number of *individuals* who, at any one time and to varying degrees, may happen to compose it. There *is* such a thing as French culture, but it does not extend either universally or in its entirety to all the individuals who define themselves as French or who, at a given moment, find themselves residing within the borders of the French nation. And French culture, in some of its generic forms or features, may be shared by people who are not French but who live in France, or who admire French culture, or who identify with French culture, or who have adopted some of the standard practices that typify French culture.

In fact, “culture” seems a somewhat crude, imprecise, and downright culture-bound term to use in this context—a nineteenth-century, European, and occasionally chauvinist term, tainted by its implication in the rise of nationalism, the emergence of scientific racism, the development of Victorian social science, and the expansion of Western imperialism, for which the idea of cultural superiority sometimes provided a convenient justification. Nor is “culture” necessarily the best way to capture the distinctiveness of the activities, attitudes, feelings, responses, behaviors, and interactions that I am trying to describe. But “culture” remains our default term for covering the relation between *forms* and *social processes*; it is not an exact designation so much as a placeholder for a more general and more precise category articulating the formal with the social, for which there is no name—though “genre” comes close, at least at a molecular level.⁷ If I continue to invoke “culture” here, that is because I understand it in this categorical way. I want to distance it from its old-fashioned, exclusionary, elitist meaning, and to use it in a descriptive, quasi-

anthropological, and, above all, *pragmatic* sense—most immediately, as a designation for the totality of the generic practices that link social life with discursive forms and behavioral conventions,⁸ and that thereby define, within different social contexts, particular horizons of expectation for speech and personal interaction.

As in the case of French culture, so in the case of what I have been calling, perhaps unwisely, “gay male culture,” it is *practices*, not *people*, that are the proper objects of study. Gay cultural practices have a consistency and a regularity that gay people as a group do not have. Gay people are different from one another, whereas gay culture displays a number of persistent, repeated features.

Kinds of practice, to be sure, bear *some* relation to kinds of people. It is people, especially groups of people, who generate particular cultural practices. The origin of specific cultural practices can often be located in the histories and vicissitudes of specific groups of people. Otherwise, it would not be possible to speak of certain cultural practices as *French* practices or *gay* practices. Cultures do not exist independently of the people who produce them: they are shaped by the social life of human communities, and the forms they take reflect the local, particular, material situations that give rise to them. But cultural practices have their own unique constituencies, which are not exactly coextensive with any single demographic group, and their distribution in a population does not strictly follow the lines of demarcation—themselves extremely blurred—that mark the boundaries between different communities or different social collectivities. “Culture,” in our media age, is no longer the unique property of a “people,” as traditional anthropology would have it.

Hence, gay male cultural practices are not all, or even mostly, shared by all members of the gay male population in the United States, let alone the world, while at least some of those practices are shared by many people who are not gay themselves. Not every man who happens to be homosexual necessarily participates in gay male culture or displays a characteristically gay sensibility. (Sad, but true.) And plenty of non-gay people take part in gay male culture. Some, in fact, are quite brilliant at it.

Much contemporary youth culture draws freely on traditional forms of gay male irony, such as camp, to mock received cultural values.⁹ (I'll have occasion to return to that point, with reference to the indie rock band Sonic Youth, in Chapter 18.) But not all straight people who embrace gay male culture are young radicals, hipsters, or counter-cultural types. Newt Gingrich chose ABBA's song "Dancing Queen" as the standard ringtone on his cell phone, while John McCain liked to play "Take a Chance on Me" at his campaign rallies during the 2008 presidential election cycle.¹⁰ ABBA itself, of course, was not a gay band, being composed of two married heterosexual couples, but some of its songs were popularized in gay clubs and became gay anthems—before being reappropriated by straight culture . . . and taken up by professional homophobes like Gingrich and McCain.

Just as jazz and hip-hop were originally invented (as already composite forms) by African Americans, and just as they took shape, flourished, and developed in and through the life of that particular social group—only to be taken up later by others, who sometimes built them into new and hybrid forms, and sometimes diluted them almost beyond recognition—so camp was first elaborated by gay men as a collective, in-group practice before other social groups, seeing its subversive potential and its wide applicability, claimed it for their own purposes.

Being homosexual is therefore neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for participating in gay culture. Culture is a practice, not a kind of person. The account of gay male culture I am about to offer here refers, accordingly, to *genres of discourse* and to *genres of social interaction*, not to individuals or populations.



One advantage of focusing our inquiry on *gay culture*, instead of on *gay people*, is that it allows us effectively to side-step essentialist questions. We can avoid becoming entangled in debates about whether gay people are different from non-gay people, or whether "gay culture" applies only, or primarily, to some classes or races or generations or nationalities, but not to others. The point is not to evade the

politics of class or race or nation, or to obscure the specific ways those variables may determine the social construction of homosexuality or gay subjectivity in certain contexts. It's simply that for the purposes of understanding gay male culture, we are concerned necessarily not with *kinds of people* but with *kinds of discourse* and *kinds of interaction*, irrespective of who happens to be the subject of them. It is gay culture, after all, which is our topic—not gay men, and not gay identity. The immediate goal is to bring to light some pragmatic features of gay male culture and to describe the forms of subjective experience, or the collective structures of feeling, that particular ways of interacting and communicating express or produce in those persons, gay or straight, who participate in the culture constituted by such generic practices.

It would surely be possible to apply this procedure to specific minority subforms or species of gay male culture—ethnic or racial or national or generational or sexual—and to identify, describe, and specify the generic features that define Latino gay cultures, or Jewish gay cultures, or working-class gay cultures, or deaf gay cultures, or S/M gay cultures, or gay drag cultures, or the gay cultures of urban American youth. Even those subspecies of gay male culture all designate multiple cultures, and one would need to differentiate each specific instance of gay male culture from the others, as well as to identify the genres or subgenres that set them off from one another, that generate their distinctive, characteristic features, and that thereby define them. Such a project would be extremely valuable; it would provide a total description of gay male cultures in the United States. But it far exceeds my ambition, and it would occupy many, many volumes.¹¹ It will be difficult and delicate enough simply to identify some of the generic or pragmatic elements that endow gay male culture with its specificity, determine its difference, and distinguish it from mainstream, heterosexual culture.

One obvious inference to draw from this limitation is that the gay male culture I will be describing is a culture of White, middle-class men. But it is not at all certain that middle-class men played a leading

role in shaping traditional gay male culture or wielded a preponderant influence on it. And although the racial constituency of that culture was overwhelmingly White, the participants in it cannot be delimited so as to be made securely coextensive with any specific social group, as defined by race, ethnicity, nationality, age, ability, or even sexuality.

So, in what follows, I will not speak specifically of White American middle-class gay male culture, any more than I will assume that membership in gay male culture is restricted to gay men. That is not because I wish to give my statements a falsely universal application, let alone because I wish to promote White supremacy, but because it is impossible to determine with any precision the specific *population* that qualifies as the subject of a specific *culture*. I prefer to allow the exact ethnic or racial contours of the gay culture under consideration to shift as the particular points of reference change in the course of the analysis.

Inasmuch as that analysis takes gay culture to be defined by a set of generic practices, it necessarily looks for a systematic and coherent account of that culture's specificity not to sociology or anthropology, but to the most traditional method for describing genres—namely, *poetics*. It is poetics—the social and formal analysis of different kinds or conventions of discourse—that, ever since Aristotle, has given us a systematic anatomy of genres.

By specifying poetics as the category in terms of which I have chosen to frame and orient my analysis, I mean to emphasize that this study will focus above all on *social and cultural forms* in their positivity, as autonomous objects of description and interpretation, and will not reduce them to mere expressions or products of social process. My analysis, to be sure, will not ignore the social life of cultural forms. On the contrary, the social and political contexts of gay male culture will often provide the keys to understanding it, as well as an empirical basis for interpreting specific texts, objects, and practices. I will certainly be considering how particular social and political conditions give rise to particular social and cultural forms. But this project is not

a historical or sociological investigation, and social processes in themselves do not constitute its chief concern. So the focus of the analysis will not be on the sociology of taste, the ethnography of specific sexual communities, the relations of particular audiences to popular culture, the operations of the mass media, social inequality, structural violence, or the play of power—which may seem surprising, given how much all those areas of study can contribute to understanding gay male culture. But in order to bring out the specificity and distinctiveness of gay male culture, to give a systematic account of gay male cultural difference, it is necessary to examine gay male culture's pragmatics, especially its genres of discourse and social interaction. And just like any exercise in poetics, a study of gay male cultural poetics must concentrate on the definition and articulation of *forms as things in their own right*.

If, despite everything, this inquiry into the poetics of gay male culture still risks coming off as essentialist, I am willing to take that risk—not only because, having spent much of my career trying to contest essentialist approaches to lesbian and gay male history,¹² I consider my own anti-essentialist credentials to be impeccable, and beyond reproach, but also because to be deterred by such a risk from exploring gay male culture would be to surrender any hope of identifying its distinguishing features and defining its particular genius.



Let's begin with an observation made forty years ago by the anthropologist Esther Newton. In her 1972 book, *Mother Camp*, a pathbreaking ethnographic study of female impersonators and drag queens in Chicago and Kansas City, Newton remarks that “one of the most confounding aspects of my interaction with the impersonators was their tendency to laugh at situations that to me were horrifying or tragic.”¹³

According to her own admission, Newton was “confounded” by a queer violation of the boundary between genres. Situations that are “horrifying or tragic” should not elicit laughter from those who

witness them. If or when they do, conventional bystanders are confounded, because their social and discursive expectations—far from being met—have been turned upside down.

In fact, the drag queens' transgression of the pragmatic conventions of discursive behavior that govern human interaction in ordinary social life was so confounding to the lesbian anthropologist, and so disturbing, that she allows (in the passage just quoted) for the possibility of error in her observation—the possibility that she might have simply got it all wrong or that she might have been the victim, like my Parisian friends in Ann Arbor, of some basic cultural misunderstanding. Making an effort to give the drag queens the benefit of the doubt, Newton hedges, conceding that the situations laughed at by the female impersonators were specifically horrifying or tragic "to me."

That skeptical qualification provides a means of saving the day for normative conventions of discourse and behavior, for standard genres of social practice. It leaves open the possibility that the situations the drag queens laugh at aren't *really* horrifying or tragic—or aren't horrifying or tragic *to them*. Maybe, from *their* perspective, those situations look absurd or comic in ways that Newton simply cannot fathom. In which case, it would be completely normal (according to the generic conventions that govern social interaction in Newton's culture) to laugh at those situations. Laughter, after all, is a perfectly conventional response to comedy. So perhaps that is why the drag queens are laughing. Perhaps the problem lies not with them but with Newton, who is unable to locate the comedy at the origin of all that hilarity. In which case, Newton would be registering some sort of misunderstanding on her part, but not something far more unsettling—such as a disruption of the conventional patterns of normal human feeling, or a violation of those basic social expectations that define the limits of the comprehensible within a given culture.

What laughter is *not* a conventional generic response to is . . . tragedy. And yet, despite her doubts, Newton suspects that in fact it is tragic situations at which the drag queens are laughing. Whence her

confusion and perplexity. After all, she insists, those situations were horrifying or tragic “to me” in ways she could not apparently deny. Bizarre as it might seem, and reluctant as Newton was to believe it, laughing at tragedy is really what Newton’s drag queens appeared to her to be doing. No wonder Newton was confounded. But, then, that’s why anthropologists do ethnography in the first place. People who belong to other cultures do strange things, things that mystify anthropologists, and it is the business of anthropologists to inform us about them and, if possible, to explain them.



Gay male culture, it turns out, actually has a long history of laughing at situations that *to others* are horrifying or tragic. “One must have a heart of stone,” Oscar Wilde said, “to read the death of Little Nell [in Charles Dickens’s novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*] without laughing.” Straight sentimentality—especially when its arm-twisting emotional power seems calculated to mobilize and to enforce a universal consensus, to impose a compulsory moral feeling—is just begging for an ironic response, and gay male culture readily provides it by treating such sentimentality as a laughable aesthetic failure, thereby resisting its moral and emotional blackmail.

Similarly, the scenes of sadistic cruelty and abuse in Robert Aldrich’s gothic psycho-thriller, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*—scenes that shocked American audiences with their brutality and horror when the film was released in 1962—elicit gales of laughter from gay male audiences, who delight in the melodramatic confrontations between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, those ancient Hollywood rivals, both playing once-glamorous and now-fallen stars locked in a demented battle for supremacy: grotesque, extravagant images of a monstrous, abject femininity.

Tony Kushner’s apocalyptic play *Angels in America* offers a more recent example of this gay male cultural tendency to violate the generic expectations proper to comedy and tragedy, and to do so once again by taking a degraded femininity as its comic target. At one particu-

larly poignant moment in the play, the suffering Prior Walter, ravaged by AIDS and demoralized by his lover's abandonment of him amid the misery of his illness, encounters the dowdy Mormon mother of the clean-cut, square-jawed man his former boyfriend has run off with. This personage, newly arrived in New York from Utah, asks him curiously if he is a "typical" homosexual. "Me? Oh I'm *stereotypical*," he replies grimly and defiantly, making an effort to overcome his pain and exhaustion. "Are you a hairdresser?" she pursues. At which point Prior, breaking down and bursting into tears, exclaims, "Well it would be *your* lucky day if I was because frankly . . ." ¹⁴

Prior's inspired repartee wittily defuses a potentially hurtful encounter by at once embracing and refuting gay stereotypes, contesting their power to pigeonhole, reduce, trivialize, and exotify him. His biting mockery turns the tables on his clueless tormentor, even as he stereotypically asserts—in the midst of physical and emotional collapse—his undiminished critical capacity to adjudicate matters of taste and fashion. The jarring effect produced by such an incongruous, wrenching juxtaposition of the horrifying and the hilarious is what gives a particularly sharp edge to the emotional intensity of the scene. Here the audience is actually being provoked, propelled—and, in that sense, instructed—by the gay playwright to laugh at a situation that is both horrifying and tragic, and that remains so even as the audience's emotional involvement in it is punctured, though by no means halted or abolished, by the camp put-down of straight imperiousness to self-lacerating gay irony, to the doubleness of gay male speech.

This technique of pivoting from horror to humor and back again is in fact typical of gay male cultural production—and it is a prominent element in the broader gay male response to HIV/AIDS. The English playwright Neil Bartlett, in an interview given in the early 1990s, at about the same time that Kushner was finishing *Angels in America*, describes a similar moment in a different play that also deals with mortal illness. The play is by Charles Ludlam, whose Ridiculous Theatrical Company in New York specialized in pastiche, as well as

in outlandish drag restagings of various classics from the history of world drama. Although Ludlam's *Camille* (an adaptation of George Cukor's 1936 film *Camille* starring Greta Garbo, based on Alexandre Dumas's novel *La Dame aux camélias* and Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata*) was first performed in 1973, nearly a decade before anyone had heard of HIV/AIDS, what Bartlett says about it is silently informed by an acute awareness of the surrounding epidemic, which claimed Ludlam himself in 1987.

I think the blow-job gag in the final act of *Camille* is the funniest thing ever performed. It's this absolutely great moment where you're really crying—it's the final act of *Camille* and she's in bed [dying of consumption] and Armand [her lover] is there. . . . [I]t's very moving and you're going, "I am about to be terribly moved, this is really going to get to me." And she starts coughing, and he [the actor playing Camille] reproduces precisely Maria Callas's cough, and Armand is sitting by the side of the bed, and she starts coughing and coughs more and more, and eventually collapses into Armand's lap, and everyone thinks that she's coughing, and then the maid comes in and goes, "Oh! I'm sorry!" The leap from *Camille* to this terrible, terrible gag . . . And the maid communicates this delicious sense of, "Oh, they've got back together again, she can't be too bad, things are looking up." It's heaven! That is one of the great moments of world theatre.¹⁵

That wrenching switch from tragic pathos to obscene comedy leaves the horror of mortal agony intact, but it does not hesitate to interrupt the tearful sentimentality that such a tragic scene might seem to solicit or to demand from its audience. Bartlett even describes the "gag"—and never was that term more apt—as "the *funniest* thing ever performed," although by his own account it occurs at a moment of tragic poignancy "where you're really crying."

Once again, we are confronted with the incongruous eruption of laughter at a scene of horror. That was in fact a hallmark of Ludlam's theatrical technique, as one of his collaborators has recently emphasized:

What Charles Ludlam mastered, both as actor and director, was an ability to sustain the pathos of a tragic situation even as he dipped into moments of ridiculousness. Comedy and tragedy could exist simultaneously in his world because as an actor he identified with, experienced, and communicated the tragic dimension of whatever role he was playing. He could quickly pivot out from this tragic stance to a comic take, joke, or so-called “camp” signification and just as quickly pivot back into tragedy. He was skilled enough to take his audience along on a journey through many such twists and turns in the course of a play. As an audience member, you laughed your ass off and cried your eyes out at the same time.¹⁶

This deliberate crossing of tragic and comic genres is rooted, as Neil Bartlett observed in the interview just quoted, in long-standing traditions of gay male culture, including drag performance, which has served to canonize, preserve, and renew those traditions.

If you don't take such traditions into account, and if you don't recognize the systematic violation of the generic boundary between tragedy and comedy enshrined in them for what it actually is—namely, a gay male cultural habit, a deliberate *anti-social* aesthetic intervention—then you simply cannot comprehend the gay male cultural response to HIV/AIDS. For that response has often featured works of outrageous impertinence, even apparent heartlessness. Consider, for example, “AIDS Barbie's New Malibu Dream Hospice,” a graphic on the back cover of the ninth issue of *Diseased Pariah News*, a zine created by Tom Shearer (who died in 1991) and Beowulf Thorne, a.k.a. Jack Henry Foster (who died in 1999). *DPN* was a “publication of, by, and for people with HIV disease” which encouraged “infected people to share their thoughts” and to hook up “in an atmosphere free of teddy bears, magic rocks, and seronegative guilt.”¹⁷ Accordingly, *DPN* no. 9 invented an imaginary accessory for a new version of the iconic Barbie doll, updated to reflect the grotesque reality of the epidemic (Figure 4).

Shearer justified the decision to approach “the plague of the cen-

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Ask for *Diseased Pariah News* at these fine bookstores:

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4 Back cover of *Diseased Pariah News*, no. 9 (1994).

tury from the angle of *humor*" in an editorial in the opening issue: "So what we're hoping to do here is bring some much-needed levity to the experience of HIV infection. We should warn you that our editorial policy does not include the concept that AIDS is a Wonderful Learning Opportunity and a Spiritual Gift From Above. Or a punishment for our Previous Badness. Nor are we much interested in being icons of noble tragedy, brave and true, stiff upper lips gleaming under our oxygen hoses."¹⁸

Other instances of this refusal by gay men to treat HIV/AIDS as a "noble tragedy" range from Robert Patrick's play *Pouf Positive* (1987), with lines such as "It's my party and I'll die if I want to" (reappropriating the title and refrain of a classic 1963 pop song by Lesley Gore, "It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to"), to the Sodomy Players' *AIDS! The Musical!* (1991) by Wendell Jones and David Stanley, to John Greyson's musical comedy film about the epidemic, *Zero Patience* (1993). Gay male culture has produced so many "comic representations of AIDS," in fact, that the Canadian critic Scott Alan Rayter was able to devote an entire volume to the topic.¹⁹

The gay Australian activist artist David McDiarmid, who died of complications from HIV/AIDS in 1995, and whose late work attempted to promote acceptance for the sexuality of HIV-positive gay men in an era pervaded by anxiety and desperation, can serve as another exemplar of this gay male cultural habit of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic. For instance, in 1994 McDiarmid created a computer-generated laser print on craftwood, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, which similarly invokes Lesley Gore: it features against a rainbow-colored background a contrasting rainbow-colored text that reads, "IT'S MY PARTY, AND I'LL DIE IF I WANT TO, SUGAR."²⁰ (Compare the title of Randal Kleiser's 1996 film about an AIDS suicide, "It's My Party.") McDiarmid also produced a mock-up of a pornographic magazine for HIV-positive gay men, an equivalent of *Playboy*, called *Plagueboy*, which purported to feature such articles as "Half-Dead and Hot" and "Sex and the Single T-Cell." And in his spoof on the popular magazine

Vanity Fair, which he titled *Vanity Bear*, McDiarmid composed an obituary for a friend in the form of an “obitchery.” He even went so far as to craft the following headline for the obituary of Peter Tully, his longtime collaborator and best friend of twenty years, in the *Sydney Star Observer*: “Moody Bitch Dies of AIDS.”²¹

This determination to treat as funny what is undeniably heart-breaking is hardly a universal feature of gay male responses to HIV/AIDS. But it is also not untypical, and it expresses an attitude that may well be distinctive to gay male culture. Many stigmatized social minorities fashion a shared identity and a sense of in-group solidarity by extracting from the history of their persecution a number of defining tragic episodes and by transforming those episodes into sources of communal self-assertion and political activism. In most instances, that collective traumatic history is effectively sacrosanct, off-limits even to in-group parody. Think of the Holocaust, for example. Or slavery. There have been, admittedly, a few irreverent treatments of them—by Mel Brooks or Sarah Silverman, Kara Walker or Isaac Julien.²² Indeed, there are always *some* exceptions to any generalizations of this sort. But those exceptions are the kinds that typically prove the rule. A Broadway musical comedy about the Third Reich is unimaginable—and when Mel Brooks does imagine such a thing in his 1968 film *The Producers*, complete with an opening number called “Springtime for Hitler,” he represents it as calculated almost scientifically to flop, to elicit an ineluctably certain rejection from New York Jewish audiences. (The show’s ultimate success is a perverse, unforeseeable, comic accident—and an unanticipated tribute to its camp aesthetic.)

Whereas the gay filmmaker Isaac Julien, in his brilliant short film *The Attendant* (1993), does not hesitate to examine the history of slavery, its representation, and its afterlife in contemporary Britain by staging gay interracial sadomasochistic scenes in the Wilberforce House Museum, an institution located in the city of Hull that celebrates the life and work of the anti-slavery abolitionist William Wilberforce and contains some of the most celebrated art objects produced by the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement. In Julien’s

eerie, witty exploration of this hushed institutional space, the characters in the paintings come to life; the unstable relations of authority, domination, submission, control, and surveillance that characterize the interaction among the staff and the visitors to the museum get theatricalized, played out, and reversed; and the mode of documentary realism, typically employed to expose historical atrocities, is shattered when the sequences shot in black and white are suddenly infiltrated by tiny, hunky Technicolor cupids or cross-cut with erotic tableaux in extravagant color. This is not, to be sure, a spoof in the style of Mel Brooks, but neither is it a standard approach to the legacy of slavery or the politics of racial inequality. It is not, despite all the supernatural elements, a devastating tragic vision on the order of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The Black gay artist attends to the erotics of both slavery and abolitionism, bringing out the sentimental pornography implicit in abolitionism's propagandistic anti-slavery art, and drawing on the aesthetics of gay male culture for his camp depiction of social, institutional, and racial domination.²³ In this remarkable and original queer film, as in many gay male responses to HIV / AIDS, nothing is sacred.²⁴



In order to specify the exact nature of the cultural work performed by this insistent, and persistent, violation of generic boundaries—a transgressive practice characteristic of gay male culture, which seems determined to teach us to laugh at situations that are horrifying or tragic—I am going to examine in detail the gay male reception, appropriation, and queering of one classic artifact of American popular culture. The analysis of that artifact will occupy the central portion of this book, spanning Parts Three and Four. By taking up this one example, I will try to describe how gay male culture generates and elaborates a distinctive way of feeling, and a unique way of relating to the world, through its practice of reappropriating bits of mainstream culture and remaking them into vehicles of gay or queer meaning. Instead of attempting a comprehensive survey of gay male

culture and demonstrating how each and every instance of gay male cultural appropriation works—how it decodes a mainstream heterosexual cultural object and recodes it with queer values—I will focus on the queering of one particular item. I will have everything I can do simply to account for its gay male appeal and its queer uses and re-uses. For I will be dealing with the ethos of a genre—with the particular way a genre makes you feel—and, thus, with the content of form itself. What I'll have to specify, in particular, is not the meaning of a representation, but the *substance of a style*.

And I'll have to consider this single instance of gay male cultural subversion from a number of different angles in order to bring out all of its dimensions. Its challenge to heteronormative culture is wide-ranging; its implications are complex and vast.

At the same time, the logic behind gay male culture's selection and reutilization of this particular item appears more clearly when that choice can be examined in the light of the highly distinctive gay male cultural practice that Esther Newton described—namely, the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic.

The reappropriation and queering of this one object, then, will not only confirm the typicality of that gay male cultural practice. More important, it will illustrate how gay male culture produces *through* that practice a set of crucial and profound transformations in a constellation of mainstream values—values that bear on sex and gender but that go far beyond them.

THE PASSION OF THE CRAWFORD

Mildred Pierce, the film directed by Michael Curtiz for which Joan Crawford won an Oscar in 1945, is a gay male cult classic. To be sure, it is only one of many old movies that hold a place of honor in traditional gay male culture, and it is hardly the most prominent among them. But it has never entirely lost its appeal. Along with such films as *The Women* (1939), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), and *Strait-Jacket* (1964), *Mildred Pierce* helped Crawford achieve her status as a notorious gay icon.

Just how notorious is Joan Crawford's gay cult status? Well, check out Michael Lehmann's 1989 film *Heathers*. When in that movie Christian Slater and Winona Ryder kill two football jocks at their high school and disguise the murder as a gay double suicide, they establish the sexual identity of their victims beyond a shadow of a doubt by planting on them, along with a fake suicide note, a number of telltale "homosexual artifacts," as they call them—including mascara, a bottle of mineral water, and, most notably, a "Joan Crawford postcard."

That joke works because it appeals to homophobic clichés—the kind of homophobic clichés that dumb football jocks and their doltish parents are likely to accept as gospel. But the Joan Crawford cult is not just an outmoded stereotype. Gay boys are still collecting Joan Crawford postcards. Two decades after *Heathers*, the spring 2008 issue of a gay travel magazine called *The Out Traveler* (a spin-off from *Out*

magazine) offered its presumably more enlightened readership a list of community-based destinations devoted to various gay cult figures, designed for out-and-proud tourists who want to make “the ultimate gay pilgrimage.” Inviting them to “celebrate the lives and times of gay-popular icons old and new at these carefully (sometimes obsessively) curated private collections and diva museums,” the magazine recommended seven different locales, among them “The Legendary Joan Crawford Collection” in San Francisco, assembled not by some aged movie queen but by a youthful Crawford enthusiast.

The clippings, cigarette cards, rare vintage photos, letters, film reels, and scrapbooks of 32-year-old San Francisco resident and Crawford devotee Neil Maciejewski’s expansive collection prove just why this classic Hollywood “mommie” truly was the dearest. Get a history lesson and a preview of the wares on his website, then e-mail for a private viewing at his Noe Valley home. *LegendaryJoanCrawford.com*¹

Contrast all this with the response of straight film critic David Denby: “Must we hate Joan Crawford?”² Denby’s presumptively inclusive “we” ignores, and excludes, a lot of gay men.

So what *is* it about Joan Crawford? And where do we locate the source of the apparent truth, universally acknowledged, that a young man in possession of a Joan Crawford postcard must necessarily be gay—or, at least, could not possibly be straight? What produced that bit of seemingly incontrovertible folk wisdom?

And what, to take another example, is the particular point of featuring Joan Crawford in the opening section of an elegy to the generations of men lost to AIDS by the Black gay poet Craig G. Harris?

“Marc with a ‘c’
Steven with a ‘v’
and a hyphen in between,
thank you,”
he’d explain,
and God help you

if you spelled either
incorrectly

couldn't cook to save his soul,
except for baked chicken
and steamed broccoli

couldn't match his clothes
and I never found him
particularly handsome
but he was my first true love
and a seminal thinker

he could interpret Kant,
Descartes, and Fanon
over breakfast or half asleep,
pump out a more than respectable
first draft of a one-act
in two hours or less,
and recall every line
Joan Crawford
ever spoke before a camera³

The full weight of Crawford's importance can be measured by her climactic position in this sequence and the way her name occupies an entire line of verse—coming right after the word “line” for extra emphasis, in case we missed it.

And similarly: What is the cultural or sexual logic that accounts for the presence of the following item, halfway down a widely circulated Internet list of “100 Best Things about Being a Gay Man”? “46. You understand, viscerally, Joan Crawford.”⁴ Where does that visceral gay understanding come from? What, in short, explains gay male culture's obsession with Joan Crawford and with her most famous and only Oscar-winning performance?

A complete answer to those large, over-determined questions would probably require many volumes of cultural history and social

analysis. But we can narrow down the topic, and get a manageable grip on it, by concentrating our attention on *Mildred Pierce* and by making use of the framework set up in the previous chapter. To judge from that one movie, and a number of other Crawford vehicles as well, Joan Crawford excelled in the portrayal of strong women who nonetheless fall victim, at least for a while, to the potential *horror and tragedy* of normal family life. In the decades following *Mildred Pierce*, Crawford tried to capitalize on her success in that film, specializing in similar roles and making them her trademark, her own personal brand, defined by a signature combination of *glamour* and *abjection* (that is, extreme, degrading humiliation).⁵

Does gay male culture teach us to laugh at Joan Crawford, then? It would be inaccurate to reduce the gay male cultural response to Crawford, and to the horrifying or tragic domestic situations into which Hollywood loved to plunge her, to anything quite so simple as “laughter”—though laughter clearly does contribute to that response. At least, there is nothing simple or straightforward about the kind of laughter that emanates from those audiences whom gay male culture has trained to respond to horrifying or tragic situations with such incongruous, confounding hilarity. In this case, laughter itself, the mere fact of it, does not register other crucial aspects of the gay male cultural response—such as the intensity of the identification with the female star, or the depth of intoxication with her and her dramatic situation—although it may be a sign of them.



So let’s take a closer look at *Mildred Pierce* and examine a few details in it, one at a time. We can begin by considering a single line spoken by Crawford in a single memorable scene, the most notoriously shocking and celebrated scene in the entire movie.⁶ Not coincidentally, the line solicits parody and reperformance from gay men—at least, if one of my former boyfriends is at all typical.

Here is the context. Mildred Pierce is a doting, dutiful, self-sacrificing, martyred mother, blindly devoted to her selfish, unfeeling, ungrateful, scheming, vicious, hateful, greedy, no-good daughter,

Veda (played by Ann Blyth). Separated from her unemployed, erratic husband, she has been forced to become a self-reliant, hard-working, hard-headed businesswoman, and she has managed to translate her humble domestic skills into the lucrative ownership of a successful restaurant chain. When the scene begins, Mildred and Veda have just come home from a formal meeting with a wealthy family. The family's sweet, good-looking, dopey son has secretly married Veda, and the boy's worldly, snobbish mother is determined to have the marriage annulled. But at the family conclave, Veda, on the advice of Mildred's sleazy business partner, Wally, claims that she is pregnant by the son, a claim that is at least sufficiently plausible for the family lawyer to recommend paying Veda off to the tune of \$10,000. With that, the meeting concludes, and Mildred and Veda return to their modest bungalow. Veda has the check in hand.

In the format of this book, the best I can do is transcribe the scene and include a few stills from it (Figures 5–9).

Lighting, facial expression, vocal inflection, music, camera angles, and the visual rhetoric of classic Hollywood film noir cinematography contribute considerably more to the impact of the film on the spectator than mere text and editing. I will come back to some of these elements. In the meantime, readers are advised to have a look for themselves. The film is widely available on DVD.

SHOT (1) *Fade up on VEDA, reclining on sofa. She takes the check in both hands and kisses it.*

VEDA: Well, that's that.

VEDA *rights herself. Pan out to reveal MILDRED standing nearby.*

MILDRED: I'm sorry this had to happen. Sorry for the boy. He seemed very nice.

VEDA: Oh, Ted's all right, really. [*laughs*] Did you see the look on his face when we told him he was going to be a father?

MILDRED: I wish you wouldn't joke about it. [*crosses behind sofa*]

VEDA: Mother, you're a scream, really you are. [*turns to face MILDRED, kneels on sofa*] The next thing I know, you'll be knitting little garments.

MILDRED: I don't see anything so ridiculous about that.



5 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Mildred and Veda struggle over the check.



6 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Veda slaps Mildred.



7 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Mildred collapses against the railing of the stairway.



8 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). "Get out before I kill you."



9 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). A parting glance.

VEDA: If I were you, I'd save myself the trouble. [*rises, crosses room*]

MILDRED [*realizing, crosses to VEDA, puts hands on her shoulders*]: You're not going to have a baby?

VEDA [*turning away*]: At this stage it's a matter of opinion, and in my opinion I'm going to have a baby. [*puts check into purse*] I can always be mistaken. [*closes purse, puts it on table*]

MILDRED: How could you do such a thing? How could you?

VEDA: I got the money, didn't I?

MILDRED: Oh, I see.

VEDA [*crosses to stairs*]: I'll have to give Wally part of it to keep him quiet, but there's enough left for me.

SHOT (2) *close up on MILDRED*

MILDRED: The money. That's what you live for, isn't it? You'd do anything for money, wouldn't you? Even blackmail.

SHOT (3) *return to (1)*

VEDA: Oh, grow up.

MILDRED: I've never denied you anything. Anything money could buy I've given you. But that wasn't enough, was it? All right, Veda, from now on things are going to be different.

VEDA [*turns, crosses to MILDRED*]: I'll say they're going to be different. Why do you think I went to all this trouble? Why do you think I want money so badly?

MILDRED: All right, why?

SHOT (4) *close up on VEDA, with MILDRED in foreground of frame*

VEDA: Are you sure you want to know?

MILDRED: Yes.

VEDA: Then I'll tell you. With this money I can get away from you.

SHOT (5) *reverse of (4)*

MILDRED [*with a slight gasp*]: Veda!

VEDA: From you and your chickens and your pies and your kitchens and everything that smells of grease.

SHOT (6) *return to (1)*

VEDA: I can get away from this shack with its cheap furniture, and this town and its dollar days, and its women that wear uniforms and its men that wear overalls. [*turns back to table, picks up purse*]

MILDRED: Veda, I think I'm really seeing you for the first time in my life, and you're cheap and horrible.

VEDA: You think just because you made a little money you can get a new hairdo and some expensive clothes and turn yourself into a lady.

SHOT (7) *return to (4)*

VEDA: But you can't. Because you'll never be anything but a common frump,

SHOT (8) *return to (5)*

VEDA: . . . whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing.

SHOT (9) *return to (4)*

VEDA: With this money I can get away from every rotten stinking thing that makes me think of this place or you.

SHOT (10) *return to (1). VEDA turns and runs upstairs with purse.*

MILDRED [*raises her voice*]: Veda!

VEDA turns and stops. MILDRED crosses to stairs.

SHOT (11) *new establishing shot of VEDA and MILDRED on stairs*

MILDRED [*reaching for purse*]: Give me that check.

VEDA: Not on your life.

MILDRED [*taking purse*]: I said give it to me.

MILDRED opens purse, removes check, tears it up. VEDA slaps her very hard.

MILDRED falls against stair railing with a look of horror, then pulls herself back up on her feet. Pull in close on her face.

MILDRED: Get out, Veda. Get your things out of this house right now before I throw them into the street and you with them. Get out before I kill you.

SHOT (12) *close on VEDA*

SHOT (13) *return to (11). VEDA turns and runs upstairs.*

SHOT (14) *close on MILDRED. We hear a door slam. Pull in, then fade out.*

I can still hear the note of pleasure in my ex-boyfriend's voice as he practiced saying, to no one in particular, in his best Joan Crawford accent (complete with palatalized l's), "Get out. Get out before I kill you." My question is: What is so gratifying about this particular line,

and what is so funny—or at least so delectable—about this horrific scene, with its physical and emotional violence? What accounts for the mesmeric fascination that this and other notorious highlights from Joan Crawford's performing career have exercised on gay male culture, and what can they tell us about male homosexuality as a queer—that is, anti-social—sensitivity or subjectivity?

These are obvious questions, but they are almost never asked.⁷ They are no doubt fiendishly difficult to answer, especially without recourse to some ready-made theory. So let's defer that daunting task for the moment, until we have assembled the empirical evidence we'll need—and until we have built up, on that basis, a framework sufficiently robust to guide our interpretation with some measure of security.

Ethan Mordden, the gay novelist and critic, gives us a few hints about how to think about the figure of Joan Crawford and her gay appeal. In his book-length cultural history of "the women who made Hollywood," he sketches with a few quick brush-strokes the situation in which Crawford found herself during the latter part of her career, and produces a picture rich in implications for the questions we are trying to answer. "Joan Crawford is one of stardom's tragic figures, because she was one of the few who knew exactly how it worked and what it meant, yet even she could not master it. . . . Even as convinced fans called her the greatest of movie stars, the definition of kind, even as writers told of her climb to the summit, even as drag queens did Mildred Pierce into their mirrors, in the opulent, pathetic homage of the loser to the winner . . . she was dying alone in despair."⁸ This horrifying and piteous portrait of Crawford focuses on the contrast between her glamour and her abjection, a characteristic combination never displayed to more spectacular effect than in *Mildred Pierce* itself, and especially in the scene we have just witnessed, where her austere elegance and dignified bearing contrast with the abuse she suffers and the social and emotional mortification her face so eloquently registers. Also worth remarking is Mordden's casually knowing reference to the constant tribute paid to Crawford's most famous character by

her homosexual fans, in the double register of adoring imitation and vengeful parody. Mordden implies that Crawford's performance of glamorous and abject femininity in *Mildred Pierce* was so potent, so intense, so perfect, and at the same time so extravagantly theatrical, that no drag queen could either resist it or equal it. But that, on Mordden's own account, does not seem to have kept drag queens from trying. . . .

So what exactly is the relation between feminine glamour and feminine abjection in the eyes of gay male culture? What is the logic that underlies their combination and makes it so gripping and so suggestive? How is that combination of glamour and abjection connected to gay male culture's distinctive violation of the generic boundaries between tragedy and comedy, specifically the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic?

In order to arrive at an answer to those questions, let's consider another example, closely related to the previous one.



In real life, Joan Crawford adopted five children, the eldest of which was a girl named Christina. In adulthood, Christina Crawford wrote a best-selling memoir about Life with Mother, called *Mommie Dearest*, in which she recounted Crawford's demented, alcoholic abuse of her adoptive children.⁹ The autobiography was made into a film of the same title in 1981, with Faye Dunaway in the title role.

That movie is an even more notorious gay male cult classic than *Mildred Pierce*. It is famous in particular for the scene in which Crawford, in a drunkenly sentimental mood, enters her children's bedroom at night and, suddenly appalled at the sight of a wire hanger incongruously suspended amid the delicate, matching upholstered hangers carefully chosen for her daughter's wardrobe, violently beats Christina with it and trashes her room. In the same issue of *The Out Traveler* that encouraged its readers to visit "The Legendary Joan Crawford Collection" in San Francisco, so that they could discover "just why this classic Hollywood 'mommie' truly was the dearest," a sepa-

rate article entitled “The Best Gay-Owned Spas in the U.S.” noted that the “Mexican-born gay skin care guru Enrique Ramirez” was offering female clients at his Face to Face spa in New York “the Mommie Dearest Massage to relieve edema and back pain during pregnancy (don’t worry, no wire hangers are used).”¹⁰

Mommie Dearest contains a number of other scenes that replay, in their own extravagant way, the mother-daughter conflict so memorably portrayed in *Mildred Pierce*. Here is one of them, along with the background you need to understand it. Christina has been caught making out with a boy at her boarding school; her mother has been called and—against both her daughter’s wishes and the advice of the headmistress—has indignantly removed her daughter from the school. Mother and daughter (the one righteous, the other sullen) arrive home, where a reporter from a women’s magazine has taken up residence in order to do an in-depth story about Joan Crawford’s professional and domestic life (Figures 10–16).

SHOT (1) *Night. Car pulls into driveway, stops.*

SHOT (2) *Interior of car. TINA in foreground; JOAN in background, at the wheel.*

JOAN [*turning to TINA, with quiet intensity*]: All right. Tina, look at me. Barbara Bennett is here from New York doing a cover story on me for *Redbook*. Tina, look at me when I’m talking to you.

SHOT (3) *reverse of (2). TINA turns to face JOAN.*

SHOT (4) *return to (2).*

JOAN: This is very important to me.

SHOT (5) *return to (3)*

JOAN: I don’t want any trouble from you.

SHOT (6) *return to (2). JOAN exits car.*

SHOT (7) *Interior of house. BARBARA in foreground at desk, back to camera, typing. JOAN enters from rear.*



10 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). Joan slaps Christina for the first time.



11 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). Joan checks out the damage.



12 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). "Why can't you give me the respect that I'm entitled to?"



13 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). Joan loses it.



14 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). Joan strangling Christina.

JOAN: We're back.

BARBARA: You're gonna love this.

SHOT (8) reverse to BARBARA's face.

BARBARA: Movie star manages to have it all: career, home, and family. [*stretches out arms*]

SHOT (9) return to (7). JOAN laughs, imitates BARBARA's gesture.

JOAN: Let me see that.



15 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). Joan and Christina, seen from above amid the wreckage.



16 Frame capture from *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). Joan defiant.

JOAN crosses to BARBARA at desk. TINA enters from rear.

BARBARA: My God, Christina. It can't be.

SHOT (10) return to (8)

BARBARA: The last time I saw you, you were four.

SHOT (11) close on TINA.

TINA: How are you, Miss Bennett?

SHOT (12) *close on JOAN.*

BARBARA: God, call me Barbara. Teaching you some fancy manners at Chadwick.

JOAN: That's not *all* they're teaching her.

SHOT (13) *new close up on BARBARA.*

BARBARA [*slight pause, then trying to cover the tension*]: Well, how do you like school?

TINA: Very much, thank you.

SHOT (14) *return to (12)*

JOAN [*bitterly*]: She got expelled.

SHOT (15) *new close up on TINA.*

TINA: That's a lie.

SHOT (16) *JOAN from rear. Her head snaps around.*

SHOT (17) *return to (15)*

SHOT (18) *return to (16). JOAN rises.*

JOAN: Excuse me, Barbara.

JOAN turns and crosses forward toward camera—i.e., toward TINA.

JOAN: Tina, I want to talk to you.

SHOT (19) *return to (15)*

SHOT (20) *return to (18)*

JOAN [*meaningfully*]: In the other room.

SHOT (21) *return to (8)*

SHOT (22) *return to (7). TINA and JOAN exit.*

SHOT (23) *TINA and JOAN proceed through foyer to opposite side, TINA in lead. Pan along through to room opposite. JOAN slams purse on table, faces TINA.*

JOAN [*now raising her voice*]: Why do you deliberately defy me?

SHOT (24) *reverse to TINA's face.*

TINA: Why did you tell her I got expelled?

SHOT (25) return to (23), only tighter. JOAN crosses to TINA.

JOAN: Because you did get expelled.

SHOT (26) return to (24)

TINA: That is a lie.

SHOT (27) return to (25). JOAN slaps TINA.

SHOT (28) return to (24)

SHOT (29) return to (25). JOAN slaps TINA again.

SHOT (30) return to (24)

SHOT (31) return to (25)

JOAN: You love it, don't you?

SHOT (32) return to (24)

JOAN: You love to make me hit you!

SHOT (33) shot of BARBARA entering room.

BARBARA: Joan.

SHOT (34) return to (25)

JOAN: Barbara, please! Please, Barbara!

SHOT (35) return to (33)

JOAN: Leave us alone, Barbara. If you need anything, ask Carol Ann.
[BARBARA turns and leaves]

SHOT (36) return to (25)

JOAN: This is wonderful. This is WONDERFUL! [pull out] You, you deliberately embarrass me in front of a reporter. A reporter! I told you how important this is to me. I told you! [turns her back to TINA]

SHOT (37) return to (24)

TINA: Why did you adopt me?

SHOT (38) *return to (36). JOAN wheels around.*

JOAN: What?

SHOT (39) *return to (24)*

TINA [*with even intensity*]: Why did you adopt me?

SHOT (40) *return to (36)*

JOAN: Because I wanted a child. Because I wanted someone to love.

SHOT (41) *return to (24)*

TINA: Don't you act for me. I wanna know. Why did you adopt me?

SHOT (42) *return to (36)*

JOAN: Maybe I did it for a little extra publicity.

SHOT (43) *return to (24)*

SHOT (44) *return to (36)*

JOAN: That's not true. You know that's not true.

SHOT (45) *return to (24)*

TINA: Maybe just a little true.

SHOT (46) *return to (36). TINA crosses out of frame to right.*

SHOT (47) *new establishing shot. TINA in foreground, JOAN in background on riser.*

JOAN: I don't know what to do with you.

SHOT (48) *tight close up on TINA's face as she turns.*

TINA [*loud*]: Why not?

SHOT (49) *close on JOAN, as she walks toward camera—i.e., toward TINA.*

JOAN: I don't ask much from you, girl. WHY CAN'T YOU GIVE ME THE RESPECT THAT I'M ENTITLED TO? WHY CAN'T YOU TREAT ME LIKE I WOULD BE TREATED BY ANY STRANGER ON THE STREET?

SHOT (50) return to (48)

TINA: BECAUSE I AM NOT ONE OF YOUR FANS!

SHOT (51) new establishing shot. TINA in foreground, JOAN in background, facing each other. JOAN raises hands to TINA's throat, falls forward, shrieks.

SHOT (52) shot of glass-topped end table with lamp. TINA falls backward onto it, JOAN on top of her, her hands around TINA's throat. Table buckles, lamp crashes to floor.

TINA [*choking*]: Mommie!

JOAN: Dammit, love me, you!

SHOT (53) close on TINA, choking.

TINA: Mommie!

SHOT (54) close on JOAN, strangling.

JOAN: Say it! Say it! Say it! You've hated me—

SHOT (55) TINA and JOAN viewed from behind, JOAN on knees astride TINA.

JOAN: You never loved me!

SHOT (56) return to (53)

JOAN: You never, you've always taken and taken—

SHOT (57) return to (54)

JOAN: You never wanted to be my daughter—

SHOT (58) TINA and JOAN viewed in profile.

JOAN: You've always hated everything! Everything, everything! Love me!

SHOT (59) return to (54). BARBARA and CAROL ANN enter and pull JOAN off TINA.

CAROL ANN: Joan, get off! Get off, you're gonna kill her!

JOAN rises, screaming.

SHOT (60) return to (58). *TINA* manages to kick *JOAN* off. *JOAN* rises to her knees, grabs her crotch. *BARBARA* and *CAROL ANN* on their knees in the background. *TINA* rolling around and choking in foreground.

JOAN: Get out! Get out.

SHOT (61) close up on *TINA*.

TINA [crying]: Mommie.

I once heard an entire movie theater full of gay men (or was it a video bar?) shout at the screen, in unison with the actress, and in a single voice, “I AM NOT ONE OF YOUR FANS!” The better-known line, however, which some of those gay men also declaimed, is the one immediately preceding it: “WHY CAN’T YOU GIVE ME THE RESPECT THAT I’M ENTITLED TO?”

Once again, the same questions arise. Why these lines? Why this scene? Why the delectation with which gay male culture affectionately rehearses these moments of horror and abuse? And how does the scene in *Mommie Dearest* repeat and reinterpret similar dramatic moments from *Mildred Pierce*?

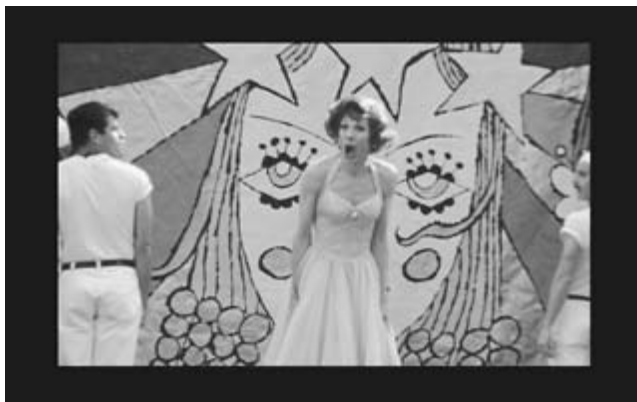
Instead of trying to answer those questions right away—we will get to them, eventually—let us consider a third and final cinematic example.



Half a century after the release of *Mildred Pierce*, John Epperson—a gay male drag performer, better known by his stage name, Lypsinka—restaged the foregoing scene from *Mommie Dearest*. In a performance at the New York drag festival called Wigstock, Epperson combined the scene from *Mommie Dearest* with other moments from the same movie, plus the rousing song “But Alive” from the Broadway musical *Applause!* (based on that other gay male cult classic, Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s 1950 film *All about Eve*), where the song is set in a gay bar. (Epperson has since gone on to mount entire one-man/woman shows about Joan Crawford called *Lypsinka Is Harriet Craig!* and, more recently, *The Passion of the Crawford*.)¹¹ The performance was recorded



17 Frame capture from *Wigstock: The Movie* (Barry Shils, 1995). Lypsinka: “You, you deliberately embarrass me in front of a reporter.”



18 Frame capture from *Wigstock: The Movie* (Barry Shils, 1995). Lypsinka being fierce.

in a 1995 film called *Wigstock: The Movie*, directed by Barry Shils, which includes both performance clips and interviews with the performers. No transcription can do justice to Epperson’s routine (Figures 17–18). Here’s the best one I can provide.

SHOT (1) shot from audience. Musical fanfare. *LYPSINKA* removes her black cloak to reveal a petite, cream-colored dress beneath.

LYPSINKA: Well, how do I look? [*laughs*]

SHOT (2) *shot from stage right.*

LYPSINKA: Barbara Bennett is here doing a cover story on me for *Red-book*. I don't want any trouble from you! [*Admonishing gesture to her entourage of male dancers, who fall away from her. Music begins. LYP-SINKA has sudden look of horror as she casts her eyes downward.*]

SHOT (3) *shot from audience. LYP-SINKA crouches down, runs her hand over back of a loudspeaker as though checking for dirt, then rises, examining her hand.*

SHOT (4) *shot from audience. LYP-SINKA, standing, addresses audience.*

LYPSINKA: This is wonderful. This is wonderful!

SHOT (5) *shot from audience. LYP-SINKA addresses entourage and audience alternately.*

LYPSINKA: You, you deliberately embarrass me in front of a reporter. A reporter! I told you how important this is to me. I told you!

SHOT (6) *shot from stage right. LYP-SINKA turns from entourage in resignation.*

LYPSINKA: I don't know what to do with you.

SHOT (7) *shot from stage right. Entourage dancing.*

SHOT (8) *shot inside studio, as LYP-SINKA and entourage rehearse this number out of costume. LYP-SINKA crouches in front of room, examining hand as before, then rises to address entourage.*

LYPSINKA: How? How could this happen? How could you humiliate me this way? [*LYPSINKA mimes slapping member of entourage.*]

LYPSINKA: Look at me. Why can't you give—

SHOT (9) *return to shot of stage from audience.*

LYPSINKA: —me the respect that I'm entitled to? [*audience cheers*] Why? Why? [*LYPSINKA jumps up and down*] Answer me. This is appalling. [*dances*]

SHOT (10) *shot from stage right. LYP-SINKA crosses stage right. Dancing*

stops. “BARBARA BENNETT”—a little person in drag—enters stage left with steno pad and pencil.

BARBARA: [sings] I’m known—

SHOT (11) shot of BARBARA from audience.

BARBARA: —as Barbara.

LYPSINKA: Barbara—

SHOT (12) shot of studio rehearsal.

LYPSINKA: —please! Please, Barbara!

LYPSINKA shoos BARBARA away. BARBARA reclines on back of entourage member stage left; LYPSINKA sits on back of entourage member stage right.

LYPSINKA [sings]: I feel groggy and weary and tragic—

SHOT (13) shot of stage from audience.

LYPSINKA: Punchy and bleary and fresh out of magic,
But alive! But alive! But alive!

LYPSINKA and BARBARA rise.

LYPSINKA: I feel twitchy and bitchy and manic—

SHOT (14) shot of BARBARA from stage right. BARBARA mimes pulling something off of LYPSINKA’s skirt and stomping on it.

LYPSINKA: Calm and collected and choking with panic,
But alive—

SHOT (15) shot of LYPSINKA and BARBARA from audience. BARBARA taking notes.

LYPSINKA: But alive! But alive!

SHOT (16) cut to interview of LYPSINKA out of drag.

LYPSINKA: The name “Lypsinka” tells you what you’re going to see, but it also drips with irony, I think, this name, um, and I wanted the name to evoke also an exotic, one-name fashion model, i.e., Verushka, or Dovima, or Wilhelmina: Lypsinka.

SHOT (17) *cut back to stage, shot from audience.*

LYPSINKA [*sings*]: I'm a thousand different people—

SHOT (18) *shot from stage right.*

LYPSINKA: —every single one is real.

SHOT (19) *cut to audience view of BARBARA, who is pursuing LYPSINKA across stage to right and becoming entangled in her skirts.*

LYPSINKA: I've a million different feelings—[*LYPSINKA pushes BARBARA away to left.*]

SHOT (20) *audience view. LYPSINKA turns to address BARBARA.*

LYPSINKA: Okay, but at least I feel!

SHOT (21) *shot of BARBARA, taking notes.*

LYPSINKA: And I feel—

SHOT (22) *shot from audience.*

LYPSINKA: —rotten, yet covered with roses,
Younger than springtime and older than Moses,
But alive—

SHOT (23) *shot of LYPSINKA and BARBARA from upper stage right.*

LYPSINKA: But alive! But alive!

SHOT (24) *cut to interview.*

LYPSINKA: Sooner or later, um, it just sort of became real that, um, I was used as a female model, and in '91 Thierry Mugler actually had the nerve to put me on his runway in Paris. And I've done a lot of fashion stuff since then.

SHOT (25) *cut back to stage, shot from upper stage right.*

LYPSINKA [*sings*]: And I feel brilliant and brash and bombastic—

SHOT (26) *cut to shot of LYPSINKA and BARBARA from rear of stage.*

LYPSINKA: Limp as a puppet, and simply fantastic,
But alive! But alive! But alive!

SHOT (27) shot of BARBARA from audience. BARBARA crosses to center stage, where she is picked up, held aloft and spun around by entourage.

ENTOURAGE [sings]: She's here, she's here, can you believe it?
She's here, oh, god, I can't believe it!
She's here, it's just too groovy to believe! Woooh!

Pan out to include LYPSINKA, stage left. LYPSINKA rolls her eyes, sticks out tongue at audience.

SHOT (28) shot from upper stage right. Having put BARBARA down, entourage dances, arms upraised.

SHOT (29) shot of BARBARA dancing in unison with entourage downstage left, near LYPSINKA.

LYPSINKA [hands on hips]: Barbara, please! [LYPSINKA shoos BARBARA stage right.] Please, Barbara! [LYPSINKA kicks a foot in BARBARA'S direction.]

SHOT (30) shot from audience. LYPSINKA center stage. Dance. LYPSINKA, appearing to grow dizzy, staggers upstage.

SHOT (31) shot from upstage right. LYPSINKA crosses upstage to join entourage.

SHOT (32) shot from audience.

ENTOURAGE [sings]: I admit I'm slightly cuckoo,
But it's dull to be too sane.

As they sing they surround LYPSINKA, screening her from the audience's view. On "sane," they jump away stage left and right. As they do so, LYPSINKA rips off her skirt to reveal her legs.

LYPSINKA [sings/speaks]: And I feel brilliant! Bombastic! [cheers from entourage] Super! Fantastic! [BARBARA enters stage right.] Alive! [BARBARA slaps LYPSINKA on now-exposed thigh.]

LYPSINKA [to BARBARA]: Barbara, please! [pan out] Alive! [BARBARA slaps LYPSINKA on thigh again. To BARBARA]: Barbara, please! [pan

left] Alive! [BARBARA grabs onto LYPSINKA's leg. LYPSINKA, walking, drags her across stage to left. LYPSINKA turns and shakes fist at BARBARA, who detaches herself and flees right to join entourage, pursued by LYPSINKA. Pan right.]

LYPSINKA [turning to audience]: Don't fuck with me, fellas!

In reading the transcription of this film clip, you will have noticed how the crowd of mostly gay men watching Lypsinka's performance cheers wildly at her delivery of the line, "Why can't you give me the respect that I'm entitled to?" They know that line. They hear it coming. They love it. They respond to it. And they celebrate Lypsinka's delivery of it.

Not only, then, has Joan Crawford, along with her implication in these violent scenes of mother-daughter conflict, been taken up by gay male culture and made the focus of reperformance and parody. She has also elicited a characteristic response that is both distinctive and specific to gay male culture. Straight male culture does not reproduce itself by transmitting to each new generation of boys a detailed knowledge of these movies, nor does it teach its members to learn selected lines from *Mommie Dearest* by heart, nor does it stage festivals at which those lines are repeated in front of audiences who await them with anticipation and greet them with enthusiasm. Lesbian bars may occasionally show clips from *Mommie Dearest*, but the movie is not a staple of heterosexual female cultural institutions, nor does it enjoy the cult status among women of, say, *Thelma and Louise*.

To be sure, not all gay men know these movies, reperform these lines, or restage these scenes of horror in a comic mode. And the Joan Crawford cult, though still current, is undoubtedly showing its age. But the gay male world has created certain enduring social institutions that make it possible for these particular moments from straight, mainstream culture to be selected, decontextualized, replayed, and recorded with queer meanings. And the circulation and communal sharing of these queered cinematic moments appear to play a crucial

role in the social process by which people, both gay and straight, are initiated into the culture of male homosexuality, come to recognize it as such, and gradually forge a sense of personal and cultural identity—if only to the extent of participating in festivals like Wigstock. This procedure is one crucial element of the cultural practice of male homosexuality, an important part of the initiatory process by which gay men as well as many others learn how to be gay.



If there were any doubt that straight culture and gay culture, irrespective of the sexuality of the individuals who happen to participate in those cultures, understand the logic of genre differently, and therefore respond dissimilarly to the staging of horrifying or tragic situations—if there were any doubt about any of that, a glance at the next example would suffice to dispel it.

Consider a few of the 230 comments on the movie version of *Mommie Dearest* that have been posted to the Amazon.com retail website. Some of the writers see nothing humorous about the film or about Faye Dunaway's performance. They say things like this (I am quoting them directly):

I find nothing funny about it. It has the usual jokes now and then, but truly I've never even cracked a smile while watching this movie, it was never meant to be funny. There is nothing funny about child abuse, alcoholism, or any of the other themes shown in this movie.

I've always believed that this film has been misunderstood. Admittedly I can understand why people would laugh at scenes like the one where Faye Dunaway shouts to her daughter, "Tina, bring me the ax!" But is child abuse really funny? I don't think so. I must admit that the scenes of child abuse, perhaps exploitative, are chilling and realistic.

This movie was downright brutal. How could anyone treat their kids that way? I mean, she got mad if her daughter used wire hangers. She only allowed her kid to have one toy for their birthday and Christmas. If she was my mom I would have to kill myself to be in peace!!!

I didn't laugh or smile at any of this the slightest bit. I guess you people are incredibly insensitive to child abuse or something. You just lowered my opinion of the human race by several notches. I'd like to move to another planet where people don't think this movie is funny.

Motives for wanting to be known as the parent of someone else's child should always be questioned—like Crawford's motive for publicity. Also, money does not guarantee a healthy, happy environment. For all her wealth, Crawford provided an extremely dysfunctional home for her adoptees. And the abuse an adoptee suffers is compounded by the emotional damage that comes with adoption itself, so please watch this movie with Christina in mind.

It would be careless to overlook the underlying message here—how Joan Crawford adopted the children for all the wrong reasons, and hence treated them in the manner that she did. And tormenting a child over wire hangers etc. is no laughing matter, even if it appeared like that in the movie to some. This other side of Joan Crawford was a manifestation of her addiction to ostentation, insecurities, fear, work stress, non-maternal instincts, power hungry, calculating ways. There was no real depth to her love for the children. She was self-centered, and so everything she did revolved around that.

Earnest, judgmental, sententious, moralistic, therapeutic, *literal*: How much straighter can you get? Could anyone doubt that these views, with their essentially documentary relation to the movie and its supposedly serious portrayal of important social and psychological problems, could spring from anything but a heterosexual culture, regardless of the sexuality of the individuals who penned those remarks?

Now consider some of the other reactions.

If you don't love this movie you're dead. It made me uneasy when I first saw it as a young teenager. Now it's so horrible that it soars on every level. It's a train wreck, and you'll love it.

I have to say that I'm baffled by the people who actually take this movie seriously and are seemingly offended by those of us who feel it has well deserved its claim to the title—campiest movie of all time!

My favorite line in this movie is not the over-used "No wire hangers!" but another line from later in the same scene. Joan has beaten the ungrateful brat Christina over the head with Dutch Cleanser, and seeing what she has done, Joan looks at the mess she has made and barks at Christina, "Clean up this mess." Christina stares up at her and asks, "How?" Joan responds, "You figure it out." Words to live by.

I sat in a movie theater watching in wide-eyed wonder at the image of Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford, and I knew I was in for a treat! And boy, did Faye deliver! She was always a bit over the top with directors that didn't know how to handle her (much like Crawford herself) but I wasn't ready for the spectacle I was about to witness! And I howled with laughter and loved her for it! Yes, Crawford would not likely be voted "Mother of the Year," but the image of Faye, dressed in black and her face covered in cold cream and a slash of red lipstick, is nothing less than a camp nightmare as she stalks about, ripping clothes from the dreaded wire hangers, her face a Kabuki mask of torment! Faye took her place as a Camp Madonna with this performance and, if you dare, watch it more than once, even twice.

The most awesome movie of all time. It's incredible from beginning to end. I've seen it close to 100 times, and can lip synch absolutely every scene in my sleep. The planets and stars lined up on this one.

A trainwreck with eyebrows. Faye Dunaway chews, swallows, and spits out the scenery, the script, and the co-stars—subtlety and sensitivity take a back seat to glaring color, great thumping plot points, and a diva's performance that would make the best of Bette look rank. Miss D's performance is so over the top and so incredibly awful that the release of the DVD is a blessing—we can now control the Dunaway Dosage, and watch it a bit at a time.

Joan Crawford, with her impossibly-arched eyebrows and gargantuan shoulderpads, was a camp icon long before *Mommie Dearest* even went

before the cameras. Thanks to Faye Dunaway's performance in the film, Joan Crawford rose to the position of camp's High Priestess, and fans wouldn't have it any other way.

Girl, this movie is too much! Miss Dunaway deserved an Oscar for playing the legendary Joan Crawford, who adopted two blonde brats who constantly interfered with her career. Tina got a ghetto beating for using wire hangers and not eating her rare meat for lunch. How DARE that blonde jezebel wench disrespect Miss Crawford?! I also liked the part when Joan choked Tina after she made that flip comment "I'm not one of your FANS!" That'll teach her! All in all, an excellent movie with fabulous costumes, makeup, set design, and what-not. You go, Miss Crawford!¹²

It would be hasty, I think, to conclude that the authors of the second set of comments endorse child abuse or approve of adopting children for the purposes of publicity or professional advancement. It would also be a mistake to believe that they are heartless or insensitive to the horrors depicted in the film. On the contrary, they admit that "it made me uneasy," that it is like a "trainwreck"; and they take it seriously enough to watch it repeatedly and to find in it "words to live by." So their enjoyment of it does not exclude an awareness of everything about the incidents depicted in the film that had horrified the first set of commentators. The second set of commentators laugh at what their straight (or straight-acting) comrades found *merely* tragic or horrifying.

Of course, we have no way of knowing whether the authors of the second batch of reviews are all gay men (some of the most enthusiastic commentators talk of seeing the movie with their husbands or wives), any more than we have any way of knowing whether the authors of the first batch of reviews are all straight (some of the most solemn commentators mention seeing the movie before or after coming out). But we don't need to know what their sexuality is; what we need to know is their cultural affiliation, the particular standpoint from which they view and interpret the movie. Whether or not they happen to be gay, the second set of reviewers subscribe to a mode of

viewing and relating to the movie that they recognize as “camp.” By invoking that category, they acknowledge their participation in gay male culture, as well as their personal identification with it. They may not be fully aware of doing that, for they may not all realize to what extent *camp* is a gay male genre. But their appeal to camp is nonetheless an admission of their engagement in a cultural and aesthetic practice characteristic of gay men, their willingness to enter into a specific relation to the film that has been devised for them by gay male culture, and their eagerness to assume an attitude that they understand at some level to be representative of a distinctively gay male style of cultural dissidence, a gay male style of resistance to received mainstream values.¹³

In what do that attitude and that style consist? Let us consider a particularly eloquent example.¹⁴



At the annual “Invasion of the Pines”—a drag event that takes place every Fourth of July in New York’s gay vacation colony on Fire Island—a prominent presence for years was the contingent of “Italian widows.” These were gay men of Mediterranean descent who dressed in the black frocks and veils donned by Italian peasant women upon the death of their husbands.¹⁵

In southern Italy and Sicily, the permanent wearing of black sets these women apart and makes them highly visible figures of mourning, authority, seniority, and autonomy in traditional village life. The Fire Island Italian widows *could* be seen as a mere spoof of that conventional female role and of the potent performative identity of Italian widowhood—an outright parody of straight society’s high moral drama of family values, gender subordination, and sentimental seriousness—if it weren’t for the fact that the Italian widows at the Pines were all men who had themselves lost lovers, friends, or members of their local community to AIDS.

The Fire Island Italian widows were not just performing a mockery of mourning, then. They were also performing the real thing. Their grief was at once parodic and real. Their annual appearance at

the Fire Island festival constituted something of a ritual—a public, communal enactment of loss and pain—and in that way the widows came to serve as unofficial mourners on behalf of everyone in the local community.¹⁶ Just as they made fun of their Mediterranean heritage while also proudly parading it, so they mocked their suffering even as they put it on prominent display. They insisted on expressing that suffering, and on representing it to the larger social world, without expecting the world to accord them the pious deference and the formal acknowledgment of their losses that real Italian widows demand and receive. By over-performing their grief as well as their ethnicity, they mocked the claims to high seriousness that heterosexual culture willingly grants both family tragedy and communal membership, and they made fun of an identity that was actually their own—even as they continued to clamor, *Mommie Dearest*-style, for the respect they were entitled to.

And they did it for a very particular reason. As gay men mourning their friends or partners in public, the Italian widows would have known that the emotions they felt and displayed were necessarily consigned by conventional cultural codes to the realm of the incongruous, the excessive, the melodramatic, the hysterical, the inauthentic—at any rate, the less than fully dignified. Their grief, however genuine, was disqualified from being taken seriously, partly because male widowhood can never claim the kind of hallowed public space that female widowhood routinely occupies (has any grieving man in American history achieved the iconic status of Jackie Kennedy?), and partly because gay love constitutes a public obscenity, and so the pain of gay lovers evokes smirks at least as often as it elicits tears.

Gay loss never quite rises to the level of tragedy. No would-be gay tragedy can escape a faint tinge of ridiculousness, as Charles Ludlam understood, and as the multiple online parodies of the trailer for *Brokeback Mountain* attest. It is no accident that the most effective public expression of gay mourning for the generations lost to AIDS, the NAMES Project Quilt, took the form of a homely, humble artifact—and of a feminine (that is, devalued) cultural production characteris-

tic of the rural working class: the American equivalent of the peasant class to which black-clad Italian widows belong. The Quilt took care not to aspire to the dignity or grandeur of a conventional (heroic, masculine) funerary monument. Instead, it positively courted an appearance of unseriousness, even of laughable triviality (albeit on a vast scale), thereby both anticipating and preempting potential depreciation.

Public expressions of grief for the death of gay lovers tend to come off as a bad imitation, a spoof, or at most an appropriation of heterosexual pathos, and thus an unintended tribute to it. The Fire Island Italian widows, occupying as they already did the cultural space of parody—of the fake, the derivative, the out of place, the disallowed, the unserious—had only one way to impose their grief publicly, and that was by embracing the social devaluation of their feelings through a parodic, exaggerated, melodramatic, self-mocking, grotesque, explicitly role-playing, stylized performance.

Through drag, in short.

“Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable,” concludes Esther Newton.¹⁷



Here, then, is yet another instance in which gay men appear to express their distinctive subjectivity, and to perform acts of cultural resistance, by channeling flamboyant, hyperbolic, or ludicrous displays of female suffering. Which raises a disturbing question. It might seem that gay male culture incites us to laugh *not* at situations that are horrifying or tragic *in general*, but at certain situations that feature *women*, from Little Nell to Joan Crawford, in particularly horrifying or tragic circumstances—exposed, insulted, betrayed, humiliated, assaulted, hysterical, dying, mourning, out of control. Over and over again in the examples I have cited, it turns out to be a woman whose extravagant, histrionic style of emotional expression gets taken up by gay male culture, parodied, and appropriated as a vehicle for individual or collective gay male self-expression. It might also seem to be women,

often lower-class women, whose feelings, and whose pain, gay male culture finds to be consistently funny.

I shall have much to say about the question of misogyny and gay male culture in Chapter 18. In the meantime, the Fire Island Italian widows shed a revealing light on this consistent pattern, which is indeed pervasive in gay male culture and defines a particular style of gay male cultural resistance. The Fire Island Italian widows suggest—contrary to the impression we might have gotten from the evident pleasure gay male culture takes in the delirious scenes of woman-on-woman abuse in *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest*—that gay male culture does not teach us to laugh at the horrifying or tragic situations of *women only*. What the example of the Fire Island Italian widows demonstrates, and what the earlier examples of Tony Kushner, David McDiarmid, Tom Shearer, Beowulf Thorne, and Isaac Julien all implied as well, is that it is gay male subjects' *own* suffering which drives this characteristic form of self-lacerating irony and supplies the motive and the cue for laughter. It is not women alone whose suffering gay male culture represents as funny: gay male culture also and above all sees itself, *its own plight*, in the distorted mirror of a devalued femininity.

The appalled and anguished hilarity with which gay male culture views that spectacle indicates how clearly it perceives the cruel absurdity of its own situation reflected in it. The ridiculousness that attaches to undignified feminine pain in a society of male privilege would have resonated particularly with the experience of gay men during the first fifteen years of the AIDS crisis, from 1981 to 1996, before the introduction of anti-retroviral therapy, when AIDS was an invariably fatal condition and straight society routinely dismissed the reality of gay men's suffering, denying them the sympathy it grudgingly accorded the epidemic's "innocent victims."¹⁸ In that context, the laughter with which gay male culture greeted its own horrifying and tragic situation expressed, as so often, a simultaneous identification with the values and perspectives of both the privileged and the abject. Inasmuch as gay men are empowered as men, but disempow-

ered as gay, such a double identification is logical.¹⁹ At the same time, the paradoxes and contradictions it generates account for some of the most distinctive and pervasive features of gay male culture. Gay male culture typically operates in two social registers at once, adopting the viewpoint of the upper and lower strata of society, of the noble and the ignoble, and relying on the irony fundamental to camp to hold aristocratic and egalitarian attitudes together in a delicate, dynamic equipoise. The brand of humor that results may be demeaning, but it is not just demeaning, or not demeaning of other people only. It is also highly self-reflexive and self-inclusive: it applies to gay subjects themselves.

What is so funny, in this context, about traditional Italian widows? It is not their feelings, emotions, or sufferings. It is the performative dimensions of their social identity, the deadly serious act they solemnly, unironically carry out. That is what the Fire Island Italian widows exaggerated, and poked fun at, through their incongruous reperformance of it. Far from displaying their indifference to the actual suffering of actual Italian widows, or laughing at the pain of grieving women, the Fire Island Italian widows put on a show that testified to their envy, admiration, and unrealizable desire for the prestige and social credit—for the *éclat*—of that undeniably dramatic but wholly conventional, time-honored feminine role. Their act was a kind of homage—rather like those drag queens doing *Mildred Pierce* into their mirrors (according to Ethan Mordden's formula), driven to endless longing and despair by the very power and perfection of women's feminine masquerade.

It is because the role of widow is a feminine role that it qualifies in men's eyes as performative, as having an *enacted* dimension, just as all feminine roles, all feminine forms of embodiment and self-presentation, necessarily come off in a male-dominated society as performative, at least to some degree. In this, feminine roles differ from masculine roles, which can assert straightforwardly their claims to naturalness and authenticity (even men in uniform look less costumed, less artificial, than do conventional women in evening dress:

that is what spells the difference between feminine *masquerade* and masculine *parade*). Hence, feminine roles are less serious than masculine ones, and that in turn makes them relatively more available for reappropriation and parody. The Fire Island Italian widows did not hesitate to exploit that vein of misogyny in the ambient sexism of the larger society for the purpose of staging their act of social defiance.

It was in fact a brilliant tactic on the part of the Fire Island Italian widows to seize and take up the hallowed, demonstrative role of widow, since it was the one role in their ethnic tradition that allowed—indeed, that positively required—bereaved individuals to make *a life-long public spectacle of private pain*. By transferring that role from a female to a male subject, and by performing it year after year, the Fire Island Italian widows exaggerated it, denaturalized it, and theatricalized it, which did have the effect of calling attention to its performative dimensions and making it even more laughable. But that was merely a consequence of their larger strategy.

For by bringing out the performativity of Italian widowhood, the Fire Island Italian widows made widowhood itself mobile, portable, transposable to others, and thus available to themselves. The effect of their masquerade was not to devalue the social performance of widowhood or to dismiss the reality of the pain it dramatizes—which would have completely defeated the point of reperforming it—but to reclaim it, figuratively and ironically, for themselves. The Fire Island Italian widows might be guilty of cultural theft, but not callous enjoyment of female suffering. They could well be accused of lacking proper respect for actual Italian widows. And indeed their act was disrespectful. But not because it expressed contempt for widows in particular, or for women in general, or for the pain of widowhood, but because it implied a principled disrespect for all socially constructed and asymmetrical gender polarities, for the cultural prestige that accrues to those who embody them, and for all social performances that demand to be taken straight—and that are the privileged domain of those with the authority to impose such demands on others. The ultimate thrust was to challenge the monopoly of dignity held by

those whose mourning is endowed with authenticity and, to that extent, with immunity to devaluation and derision.²⁰

In their quest to create a social space and an expressive language for representing their own experience of loss, the Fire Island Italian widows turned to the nearest available cultural resource, to a model of *permanent, inconsolable mourning* thematically appropriate to their emotional and ethnic situation but wildly at odds with their gender. The result was much less dignified and respectable than even the flamboyant feminine role they parodied. They sought to gain by that ridiculous means an admittedly tenuous access to an established social identity that—unlike their own identity—legitimated and authorized the ongoing public expression of grief. They must have known that their title to such an identity was dubious at best. In their social and cultural situation, their claim to the status of “widow” was in fact laughable. Insisting on their right to it nonetheless, they managed to acquire an absurd, and obviously fake, but—in practice—quite effective license to translate their personal and communal pain into a demonstrative, assertive social form and to stage an imposing performance of public mourning. *No real Italian widows were harmed during the making of this performance.* Instead, those real widows furnished a model, a metaphor, an image, a role, that could serve as a kind of *proxy* for a gay male Mediterranean widowhood under performative construction—a widowhood that was itself, necessarily and agonizingly, both outlandish and valid, facetious and all too real.

SUFFERING IN QUOTATION MARKS

The Fire Island Italian widows, like David McDiarmid, Tom Shearer, and Beowulf Thorne, make fun first and foremost of their own suffering. If they laugh at situations that are horrifying or tragic, that's not because they do not feel the horror or the tragedy of them, but because they do. They laugh in order not to cry, in order not to lapse into maudlin self-pity.¹ But that's not the whole story. For the pain does not cease when they laugh at it—it may, if anything, become sharper and more precise. But now it has an acknowledged place, a specific social and emotional location, which means it is no longer quite so incapacitating, or so isolating. The effect is not to evade the reality of pain, but to share it and, thus, to cope with it. Or, in the words of Joan Crawford, as played by Faye Dunaway and quoted by one of our Amazon reviewers, to “figure it out.” Esther Newton puts it succinctly: “The humor does not cover up; it transforms.”²

Whence this general truth: *camp works to drain suffering of the pain that it also does not deny*. This explains why horror can cohabit with hilarity in the poetics of gay male discourse, and human calamities like the HIV/AIDS epidemic can become vehicles of parody without the slightest implication of cruelty, distance, or disavowal—without that “momentary anaesthesia of the heart” which the philosopher Henri Bergson thought all comedy required.³

According to a heterosexual and heteronormative cultural stan-

dard, which measures the sincerity of public sentiments by how straight they are intended to be taken—by the vehemence of their categorical refusal to cop to their own performativity, by their solemn avoidance of any acknowledgment of theatricality or role-playing, of any winking complicity with their audience about the formal or conventional nature of their expression and about the prohibition against admitting to it—according to that standard, the Fire Island Italian widows would certainly seem to have been trivializing their feelings, not taking them fully seriously. Their purpose, after all, was to preempt the social disqualification of their suffering, and to escape being seen as merely pathetic, by withdrawing any claim to the serious consideration from which they were in any case debarred, while at the same time exposing the relentless earnestness of heterosexual theatrics which confuse compulsory social roles with essences and refuse to recognize personal authenticity as a cultural performance.

And, indeed, when viewed from a mainstream, heteronormative perspective, the tactic of presenting one's own suffering as *a performance of suffering* can only undercut both that suffering's authenticity and its dignity. But since the suffering in question was their own, neither David McDiarmid nor the Fire Island Italian widows could exactly be accused of breezy indifference to it or skepticism about its reality. If their brand of humor seemed to trivialize suffering, that is not because they were heartless, unfeeling, cavalier, or insensitive to pain and grief—whether their own or other people's. Unlike the kind of mockery that fortifies you in an illusory sense of immunity to what other people are going through, that insulates you from their suffering, the sort of trivialization that is involved in this kind of humor is not an exercise in denial. For despite its outrageous impertinence, it has an egalitarian, inclusive thrust: it implies that no tragedy, not even yours, can or should claim so much worth as to presume an unquestionable entitlement to be taken completely seriously—that is, to be taken straight—in a world where some people's suffering is routinely discounted.

To make your own suffering into a vehicle of parody, to refuse to

exempt yourself from the irony with which you view all social identities, all performances of authorized social roles, is to level social distinctions. By disclaiming any pretense to be taken seriously and by forgoing all personal entitlement to sympathy, sentimentality, or deference, you throw a wrench into the machinery of social depreciation. When you make fun of your own pain, you anticipate and preempt the devaluation of it by others. You also invite others to share in your renunciation of any automatic claim to social standing, and you encourage them to join you amid the ranks of people whose suffering is always subject, at least potentially, to devalorization—and whose tragic situations are, thus, always susceptible of being laughed at. You thereby repudiate the hierarchies of social worth according to which modern individuals are routinely classed. You build a collective understanding and sense of solidarity with those who follow you in your simultaneous pursuit and defiance of social contempt. And in that way, you lay the foundation for a wider, more inclusive community.



The distinction between the kind of humor that is socially inclusive and the kind of humor that is socially exclusive is part of a larger cultural poetics. For example, and not coincidentally, that distinction is also what defines the generic difference between *camp* and *kitsch* in the pragmatics of discourse, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The application of the “kitsch” designation, Sedgwick argues, entails a superior, knowing dismissal of *someone else’s* love of a cultural artifact, a judgment that the item is unworthy of love and that the person who loves it is the “unresistant dupe” of the “cynical manipulation” that produced it. When I label an object “kitsch,” I treat the appreciation of it as a fault, as a lapse of taste, as evidence of a debased sentimentality that I myself have transcended and that I do not share. I thereby exempt myself “from the contagion of the kitsch object.”

In keeping with the social logic that Sedgwick carefully traced and analyzed under the now-canonical description “epistemology of the

closet,” accusation here operates as a vehicle of individual self-exoneration. The very act of calling something “kitsch” is a way of demonstrating that the person who makes that “scapegoating attribution” is himself above loving such unworthy stuff—though the very vehemence attaching to the phobic dis-identification implicit in that denial inevitably casts doubt on its genuineness. “Kitsch,” in short, is a word one never applies to objects of one’s own liking, but employs only to disqualify the sentimental, uncritical, bad object-choices made by other people.⁴

Whereas a judgment that something is *camp*, Sedgwick contends, does not confer a similar exemption on the judge. Camp is not about *attribution*, but about *recognition*. It declares your delight and participation in the cultural subversions of camp. “Unlike kitsch-attribution, then, camp-recognition doesn’t ask, ‘What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?’ Instead, it asks *what if*: What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*?”⁵ Camp ascription therefore produces an effect precisely opposite to that of kitsch labeling. It marks the person making the judgment as an insider, as someone who is in the know, who is in on the secret of camp, already initiated into the circuits of shared perception and appreciation that set apart those who are able to discern camp and that create among such people a network of mutual recognition and complicity. It takes one to know one, indeed—and that, camp implies, far from being shameful, is fabulous.

The ability to identify a particular object as camp, and to induce others to share that perception, thereby creates a basis for community. It inducts those who appreciate and who savor camp into a common fellowship of shared recognition and *anti-social aesthetic practice*. (By “anti-social,” I do not mean *hostile to communal belonging*, then, but *contrary to social norms*.) Unlike kitsch, but like David McDiarmid and the Fire Island Italian widows, camp allows no possibility for distance, dis-identification, or self-exemption. On the contrary, the recognition of something as camp is itself an admission of one’s own

susceptibility to the camp aesthetic and of one's willingness to participate in a community composed of those who share the same loving relation to the ghastly object.

No wonder clips from *Mommie Dearest* are played in gay video bars. No wonder they tend to be consumed in company, among friends, rather than by oneself.



David Caron makes a similar point about camp. In a brilliant, unpublished lecture (you had to be there, darling), he said, “Far from reproducing an exclusionary class structure, camp simultaneously produces and is produced by a community of equals. In its most outrageous manifestations it mocks social inequalities by enacting them to an absurd degree. Camp, then, is a mode of being-with-friends. I am talking of collective, group friendship here, not of a one-on-one relationship here.” And Caron adds, “Collective friendship, [like camp,] exists only in and through its own enactment. It is decentered and unruly. It goes nowhere and produces nothing other than itself. It is, therefore, a social critique at work, in that it flouts the supposedly mature models of socialization—the couple, the production of children—and reclaims an evolutionary stage we were supposed to discard long ago, along with sexual indeterminacy.”⁶ (It was for similar reasons that D. A. Miller called the enjoyment of Broadway musicals, even on the part of adults, “kid stuff.”)

Caron's description of camp as “a social critique at work” is precise and well judged. Camp is not criticism, but critique. It does not aim to correct and improve, but to question, to undermine, and to destabilize. In this, it differs from satire, which would be an appropriate way of responding to kitsch, since satire functions as a *criticism*, a put-down of inferior objects and practices. Whereas camp makes fun of things not from a position of moral or aesthetic superiority, but from a position internal to the deplorable condition of having no serious moral or aesthetic standards—a condition that it lovingly elaborates

and extends, generously or aggressively, so as to include everybody. Camp doesn't preach; it demeans. But it doesn't demean some people at other people's expense. It takes everyone down with it together.

That instinctive race to the bottom, that impulse to identify with the outrageously disreputable and the grotesque, may explain why, as feminists sometimes complain and as we have already seen, camp particularly delights in and systematically exploits the most abject, exaggerated, and undignified versions of femininity that a misogynistic culture can devise.⁷ In such a culture, even glamorous women have something caricatural about them. "Divas—or at least the personae divas choose—are cartoon women," John Clum observes. "They express in an exaggerated way parts of women, which become separate from an entire personality."⁸ Those caricatures of femininity constitute the epitome of what our culture regards as unserious, and they dramatize the full consequences of the social and symbolic violence which a male-dominated society directs against anyone who qualifies as "feminine." But for camp, the unserious is not just a disqualification. It is also a potential source of collective strength—hence, a strategic opportunity. By seizing that opportunity, camp endows its anti-social aesthetics with a political dimension.

Michael Warner accordingly discerns a democratic thrust, and ultimately an ethical vision, in the pragmatics of camp discourse. This egalitarian impulse, he argues, springs from an awareness and understanding of the irredeemable, ineradicable indignity of sex (especially, but not exclusively, queer sex).

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn't announced as an ethical vision, that's what it perversely is. In queer circles, you are likely to be teased and abused until you grasp the idea. . . . A relation to others, in these contexts, begins in an acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock. Queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward one another, but because abjection is understood to be the

shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity. No one is beneath its reach, not because it prides itself on generosity, but because it prides itself on nothing. The rule is: Get over yourself. Put a wig on before you judge. And the corollary is that you stand to learn most from the people you think are beneath you. At its best, this ethic cuts against every form of hierarchy you could bring into the room.⁹

Caron's and Warner's points about the anti-hierarchical, communitarian tendencies of gay male culture recall the views of the early French gay liberationist Guy Hocquenghem, who argued that male homosexuality implied the novel possibility of "horizontal" social relations, instead of the "vertical" ones promoted by heterosexual reproduction and filiation. According to this vision, homosexuality might lead to the multiplication and expansion of non-hierarchical structures of coexistence in place of the usual graduated social relations of parents and children, bosses and workers, superiors and inferiors.¹⁰

We can begin to make out here a series of logical and emotional connections among a number of the phenomena we have observed. What we may be dealing with, in fact, is *a constellation of related cultural values*, linked internally both by the way they seem to reinforce one another and by the shared anti-social vision that informs them. This network of ideas and values includes: the notion that the stigma of homosexuality can be overcome not by resisting it, but by embracing it; the surrender of any statutory claim to be taken seriously; an ironic perspective on all social identities; the habit of treating authenticity as a *performance* of authenticity; the refusal to accord dignity to the suffering of individuals who find themselves in horrifying or tragic situations, even or especially when you happen to be one of them; the simultaneous taking up of a socially superior and a socially inferior attitude, which entails a constant put-down of yourself; the frankly acknowledged indignity of sex and the democratizing impulse to spread that indignity around; the anti-hierarchical inclusive-

ness of camp humor, its lack of self-exemption, and its constitutive function in creating community.



Implicit in everything we have seen so far is the assumption, basic to camp and drag culture, that *all identities are roles*. That is what Susan Sontag means when she remarks in her famous 1964 essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.”¹¹ In this passage, Sontag may be overplaying the insincerity of camp, its alienation and distance from the objects and practices it takes up, and underplaying its genuine love of them, its passionate belief in them.¹² But she is right to emphasize the fundamental perception of all identities as roles.

Sontag is wrong, however, to insist on that basis that “the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical.” After all, the denaturalizing effect of all those quotation marks can be profound. Sontag derives the apolitical nature of camp from the axiom that camp emphasizes style and slights content; she speaks of camp as incarnating “a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’” though it would be more accurate to say, as Sontag hastens to do, that camp introduces “an attitude which is neutral with respect to content.”¹³ In other writings of hers from the same period, Sontag inveighs against the kind of criticism that ignores or trivializes “style” and that gives primacy instead to the “interpretation” of “content”; she calls for putting the notion of content in its place.¹⁴ When it comes to camp, however, the victory of style over content that gay male culture achieves makes Sontag nervous.

Sontag elsewhere tries to advance the cause of style, arguing that the denigration of style as purely “decorative” is ultimately political: it “serves to perpetuate certain intellectual aims and vested inter-

ests.”¹⁵ And in “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Sontag recognizes that “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious.”¹⁶ But all this makes her claim that camp is depoliticized, or at least apolitical, all the more bizarre. For though such a claim may represent a good description of the thematics of camp, its effect is to dismiss the possibility of an anti-social politics that would consist precisely in an undoing of the serious—or whatever succeeds in qualifying as such. This anti-social politics would deprive “content” in favor of the abjected, abominated, effete category of “style”; it would undermine the legitimacy of gender hierarchies that elevate masculinity to the rank of seriousness (concerned with reality and the true content of things), while downgrading femininity to the status of triviality (concerned with such frivolous matters as style and appearance); it would challenge the authenticity of naturalized identities and call into question the conventional scale of values that determines relative degrees of social dignity.

Such an anti-social politics would begin by reversing the conventional valences of style and content. And that is exactly what camp does. Camp, as Richard Dyer observes, is “a way of prising the form of something away from its content, of reveling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial.” Dyer cites a number of instances in which gay male culture treats style as valuable, while bracketing content as neutral or irrelevant:

Gay men have made certain “style professions” very much theirs (at any rate by association, even if not necessarily in terms of the numbers of gays actually employed in these professions): hairdressing, interior decoration, dress design, ballet, musicals, revue. These occupations . . . are clearly marked with the camp sensibility: they are style for style’s sake, they don’t have “serious” content (a hairstyle is not “about” anything), they don’t have a practical use (they’re just nice), and the actual forms taken accentuate artifice.¹⁷

For Sontag, this very tendency of camp to prise the form of something away from its content and thereby to convert “the serious into the trivial” is a “grave matter.”¹⁸ And, in a sense, she is quite right. For

that gravity is a sign of exactly how much is at stake when “the serious” is dethroned, when it stands to lose its preeminence over “the trivial,” when style manages to prevail over content. By taking an ironic distance on the ethical-political value of seriousness to which Sontag so earnestly clings, camp poses a fundamental political challenge to what normally passes for politics. And that is a political function camp can perform only by being apolitical.¹⁹

It is camp’s alienated queer perspective on socially authorized values that reveals Being to be a performance of being (“Being-as-Playing-a-Role”) and that enables us to see identities as compelling acts of social theater, instead of as essences. That alienated vision performs a vital, indeed a necessary function for stigmatized groups. By refusing to accept social identities as natural kinds of being, as objective descriptions of who you are, and by exposing them, instead, as performative roles, and thus as *inauthentic*, stigmatized groups achieve some leverage against the disqualifications attached to those identities. By putting everything in quotation marks, especially everything “serious”—and thereby opening a crucial gap between actor and role, between identity and essence—camp irony makes it possible to get some distance on “your” self, on the “self” that society has affixed to you as your authentic nature, as your very being. Embracing the stigma of homosexuality becomes possible as a tactic for overcoming it only when those who embrace it also refuse to recognize it as the truth of their being, when they decline to see themselves as totally, definitively, irremediably described by it.²⁰ Forgoing your claim to dignity is a small price to pay for undoing the seriousness and authenticity of the naturalized identities and hierarchies of value that debase you. Converting serious social meanings into trivial ones is not only an anti-social aesthetic practice, then. It is also the foundation of a political strategy of social contestation and defiance.



There are in fact many good reasons why the queer perspective on identity should be alienated. In order to escape persecution in a ho-

mophobic world, queers have to do their best to conceal the appearance of queerness, to hide the visible stigmata of homosexuality, and to pass as straight, at least some of the time. Which means that queers who wish to remain covert must figure out how to impersonate normal people. They have to *act* straight. They have to get into straight drag.²¹

Not only does this requirement explain the distinctive value that gay male culture places on both *style* and *role-playing*; it also explains the logic of the connection between them. Why are style and role-playing so intimately associated? “Because,” as Dyer says, “we’ve had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in—we couldn’t afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms: style.”²²

The stakes in manipulating appearances and social forms, in mastering style and passing for normal, are highest in the case of males who happen to be gay, since the social rewards for success in performing masculinity are so lucrative. In order to reap those rewards, Esther Newton observes, “the covert homosexual must in fact impersonate a *man*, that is, he must *appear* to the ‘straight’ world to be fulfilling (or not violating) all the requisites of the male role as defined by the ‘straight’ world.”²³ And if he is to succeed in bringing off that act, a gay man will first have to do some rigorous anthropological fieldwork of his own: he will have to take very careful note of how the members of his own society behave. He will have to study, in particular, how straight men perform heterosexual masculinity.

Straight men, of course, also have to learn how to act like straight men. But straight men do not routinely regard masculinity as a style, nor do they consider their own impersonation of straight men to be a performance. They do not have a *conscious* consciousness of embodying a social form. Part of what is involved in being straight is learning

to imitate straight men, to perform heterosexual masculinity, and then forgetting that you ever learned it, just as you must ignore the fact that you are performing it.²⁴

Gay men, by contrast, are distinguished precisely by their conscious consciousness of acting like straight men whenever they perform normative masculinity. Gay men must represent to themselves the social form they seek to embody in order to embody it: they are necessarily aware of behaving according to a preexisting social model. In the course of remembering and reconstituting what straight men have forgotten, in the course of consciously reproducing the acts that straight men are no longer conscious of performing, gay men inevitably come to see what heterosexual culture considers to be a natural and authentic identity—a form of being, an essence, a *thing*—as a social form: a performance, an act, a *role*.

There are other factors that explain why gay men tend to perceive masculinity as a social form, rather than as a natural ontology. Gay men's study of straight men's performance of straight masculinity is not only self-protective; it is also erotic. Masculinity, in at least some of its incarnations, is typically a turn-on for gay men. So you have an erotic motive to try to identify the precise lineaments of the look or style that so arouses your desire whenever you encounter it in certain guys. And if you are to understand the social logic that renders that *particular* look or style so powerfully attractive to you, you are going to have to observe it very closely. You will have to define its exact composition, its distinctive features, and the stylistic system in which those features cohere. After all, even a slight deviation from that style, even a slight modification of that look could have momentous consequences: the minutest alteration could ruin the whole effect, puncture your excitement, and deflate your interest. So the details matter. You need to figure out what they are.

The very exigency of your desire forces you to specify, and to clarify (if only to yourself), what it is about the masculinity of the men who turn you on that so moves you, what precise erotic meaning is encoded in this or that embodied feature (as opposed to minor varia-

tions on it), and what about it so inspires you and causes you to find it so compelling. You have to do your best to identify the specific erotic value of each and every fine point of that masculine performance—to capture the exact meaning of *that* gesture, *that* walk, *that* way of speaking, *that* set of the shoulders, *that* shake of the head, *that* haircut's neckline, *that* hang of the sweatpants, *that* light-hearted way of flirting with other men or dismissing an idea considered to be foolish.

You have to determine (*pace* Richard Dyer) what a hairstyle is “about.”

In short, *you have to grasp a social form in all its particularity*. In order to get to the bottom of the mystery of homosexual attraction, you have to focus your attention on the object of your desire in its most complete contextual realization, its full social concreteness, its specific social systematicity. You have to understand it not as an idea, or as a representation of something, or as a figure for something else, but as *the thing itself*—a thing that, in itself, is social to its very core. That is what Proust ultimately discovered, and that is what became the starting point for his grand literary experiment, *In Search of Lost Time*: in order to seize things in their essence, you have to seize them in their social being. Social forms are things in themselves, whose meaning lies in nothing other than their style and resides nowhere except in the formal qualities that define them.

Heterosexual desire is also a mystery, of course, and straight people could also engage in a similarly searching inquiry into the relation between their erotic desires and particular social forms. Some of them surely do: witness Nabokov's *Lolita*. But the tormented book-length quest that constitutes that novel—Humbert Humbert's “endeavor . . . to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets”—stems precisely from the perverted nature of the narrator's attraction to prepubescent girls. To the degree that heterosexual desire approaches the social definition and ideal of normality, it ceases to force itself on the consciousness of heterosexuals as a mystery in need of elucidation. The very blatancy, ubiquity, prevalence, obviousness,

even vulgarity of the canonical definitions of sexual attractiveness in heterosexual culture relieve straight people of the imperative to define the exact social forms that correspond to their desires. Which is why they tend not even to see those forms as *social* in the first place.



From a gay male perspective, forged precisely by a lack of exemption from that imperative, every *thing* in the social world is also a *performance*. Every thing is a “thing.” The barest bones of social life acquire the look of a full-scale costume drama.

So it is easy to understand how the social vicissitudes of gay male subjectivity inexorably conduce to an expansion and generalization of the category of drag. For drag, in at least one of its manifestations, as Newton points out, “symbolizes that the visible, social, masculine clothing is a costume, which in turn symbolizes that the entire sex-role behavior is a role—an act.”²⁵ The result is to universalize “the metaphor of life as theater.” Every identity is a role or an act, and no act is completely authentic, if authenticity is understood to require the total collapse of any distinction between actor and role. Rather, every identity is performative: social being *is* social theater, and vice versa.

There is no relation of externality for gay male culture between *being* and *playing a role*, between actor and act. They may be distinct, but they are not separate; rather, they constitute each other.²⁶ That doubleness, that twofold aspect of social existence, is not an ontological split but a single composite nature, an intrinsic property of things.²⁷ Playing a role *is* the mode of existing in the social world. That is what social being is. (The *locus classicus* of this queer insight is Genet’s play *The Maids*.) Which is also what heterosexual culture represses and cannot acknowledge, since to do so would be to forgo the privileges that attach to authenticity, to the social status of being a natural thing, whose existence is nothing but the truth of its essence.

Whereas for gay male culture—which understands being as playing a role, essence as an effect of performance—*taking something seri-*

ously does not preclude treating it as an act. There is no opposition between the two. Conversely, if seriousness is an act, a performance, and if seeing something as an act is not to take it seriously, then gay male culture is perfectly entitled to convert the serious into the trivial, to laugh at what passes for serious—at what achieves seriousness by the very excellence and solemnity of its performance.²⁸

And indeed, what could possibly be more appropriate, more *realistic* to take unseriously, to laugh at, than the hostile and unalterable realities of the social world, even or especially when they are horrifying or tragic, when they are matters of life and death—and when they are happening to you? Camp, after all, is “a form of self-defence.”²⁹ How else can those who are held captive by an inhospitable social world derealize it enough to prevent it from annihilating them? (That is one of the themes of Sartre’s *Saint Genet*.) If that is what “trivializing” your own or someone else’s feelings means, if it means not taking them literally or unironically, then to trivialize them is hardly to devalue or to cheapen them. On the contrary, it is the very mode of claiming them and, if you’re lucky, surviving in spite of them.

This doubleness of a perspective that is also one, that operates by means of irony to hold multiple points of view in dynamic equipoise, is crucial to the effectiveness of camp. Camp undoes the solemnity with which heterosexual society regards tragedy, but camp doesn’t evade the reality of the suffering that gives rise to tragedy. If anything, camp is a tribute to its intensity. Camp returns to the scene of trauma and replays that trauma on a ludicrously amplified scale—so as to drain it of its pain and, in so doing, to transform it. Without having to resort to piety, camp can register the enduring reality of hurt and make it culturally productive, thereby recognizing it without conceding to it the power to crush those whom it afflicts.³⁰ In this way, camp provides gay men with a cultural resource for dealing with personal and collective devastation: a social practice that does not devalue the suffering it also refuses to dignify.

THE BEAUTY AND THE CAMP

The literature on camp is vast. Theoretical debates have raged over what exactly camp is and how it should be defined. And the topic continues to attract academic critics.¹ But professors hardly hold a monopoly on efforts to describe the distinctive features of camp: those efforts began long ago among communities of gay men. As Richard Dyer wrote in 1977, “Arguments have lasted all night about what camp really is and what it means.” Dyer mentions two varieties of camp, which describe two major instances of it: “camping about, mincing and screaming; and a certain taste in art and entertainment, a certain sensibility.”² What those two instances share is the alienated, ironic perspective on socially authorized (or “serious”) values that we have already observed.

There are good reasons to avoid becoming entangled in these larger debates over the meaning and definition of camp. Such debates have already gone very far; they have become highly specialized and sophisticated; in any case, they exceed the topic before us.³ Camp is worth exploring here only insofar as it enables us to identify and to understand the peculiar features of gay male discourse, its unique pragmatics. The distinctive nature and operations of camp, it turns out, make particular sense when they are brought into relation with the long-standing gay male cultural habit of refusing to exempt one-

self from social condemnation, as well as the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying or tragic.

The connection between camp and that characteristic way of crossing the genres of tragedy and comedy emerges with particular clarity from some further observations by Esther Newton. She reminds us that before “camp” was the name of a sensibility, it was the designation of a kind of person. Her account of that figure also demonstrates that the function of camp can be more easily specified and explained when camp is situated in the context of the social environment from which it emerged. Gay male cultural practices are better and more systematically understood when they are restored to their original, concrete, pragmatic discursive and social situations than when they are abstracted from them and analyzed in terms of aesthetic theory, as Susan Sontag preferred to do, however brilliantly.

Commenting on “the fundamental split between glamour and humor” in both drag performance and gay male subculture as a whole, Newton made a series of ethnographic observations about gay male social life that remain of far-reaching significance.

At any given homosexual party, there will be two competing, yet often complementary people around whom interest and activity swirl: the “most beautiful,” most sexually desirable man there, and the “campiest,” most dramatic, most verbally entertaining queen. The complementary nature of the two roles is made clearest when, as often happens, the queen is holding the attention of his audience by actually commenting (by no means always favorably) on the “beauty” and on the strategies employed by those who are trying to win the “beauty’s” favors for the night. The good party and the good drag show both ideally will feature beautiful young men and campy queens. *In neither is it likely that the two virtues will be combined in the same person.* The camp, both on and off stage, tends to be a person who is, by group criteria, less sexually attractive, whether by virtue of advancing age or fewer physical charms or, frequently, both. Whatever the camp’s “objective” physical appearance, his most successful joke is on himself.⁴

What characterizes the camp, according to this account, is his deliberate refusal of self-exemption from the mockery he directs at the larger social world, as well as his tendency to make fun of his own abjection—to laugh, like the Fire Island Italian widows, David McDiarmid, Tom Shearer, or Beowulf Thorne, at his own suffering. Camp is not only a mode of cultural appropriation, a way of recycling bits of mainstream culture; it is also productive, a creative impulse in its own right, a strategy for dealing with social domination.

What explains the phenomenon observed by Newton? Why is it that, in order for a party composed of gay men to be truly successful, there has to be at least one each of two different species of gay man present: the beauty and the camp? What makes each essential?

Well, if, on the one hand, no one beautiful is in attendance, the gathering loses all erotic interest. It declines into a tea party, a meeting of the “sisterhood,”⁵ a merely congenial get-together of like-minded individuals, with nothing to prove to each other and no one to put on a butch act for. Under those conditions, the participants can afford to let their hair down and abandon all pretense of being better or sexier than they are. That may make for a fun and convivial evening, but it will be lacking in sexual excitement—and as a mixer, as an occasion for romance, it will clearly be a dud. But if, on the other hand, no camp is present, the party becomes a relentlessly competitive struggle for the most attractive available partners, an exercise in mutual one-upmanship, an endless display of humorless butch theatrics, which takes place at everyone’s expense and produces relentless posturing and suffocating seriousness. So the camp and the beauty are equally necessary, and both are indispensable to successful gay male social life.

The opposition between the beauty and the camp that Newton describes appears in all its antagonistic splendor in a scene toward the end of the first act of Mart Crowley’s 1968 play *The Boys in the Band*, the first breakthrough theatrical hit that explicitly and successfully put gay male social life (as it was being lived in New York City) onto

the international stage. The Cowboy, a stunningly handsome male hustler who has been brought to a birthday party as a sexual gift for its guest of honor, happens to complain about and to seek sympathy for an athletic injury he lately sustained at the gym: “I lost my grip doing my chin-ups,” he says—no one is much interested in the details, but he rattles on, with endearingly clueless self-absorption—“and I fell on my heels and twisted my back.” Emory, the camp, rejoins, “You shouldn’t *wear* heels when you do chin-ups.”⁶

The joke does a lot of social and cultural work. It highlights the Cowboy’s typically macho imperviousness to irony, his lack of any awareness of the possible doubleness of his own speech; it points up his glaring absence of wit (which is both a defect and, at least for the purposes of butch attractiveness, a cardinal virtue); it crosses, in classic camp fashion, the codes of masculinity and femininity⁷ (compare the apocryphal quip by Tallulah Bankhead to a priest at High Mass swinging his censer: “Honey, I love your frock, but your purse is on fire”); it punctures the atmosphere of masculine seriousness surrounding straight male athletic performance and its erotic appeal to gay men; it testifies to the camp’s inability even to imagine a male world inhabited exclusively by “normal” men; it shifts the tenor of the conversation from a tediously, unironically masculine one to an ironically effeminate one; it cuts the Cowboy down to size by pretending to mistake him for a practicing drag queen, hence several rungs lower on the scale of sexual prestige than the rank he actually occupies; and it implicitly rebukes the other men present for taking the Cowboy so seriously, while at the same time doing nothing to alter the attractiveness that continues to make him an object of their erotic interest.



The categorical split in traditional gay male culture between beauty and camp, between glamour and humor, turns out to be isomorphic with a number of other symmetrical and polarized values, which correlate in turn with a basic opposition between masculine and femi-

nine gender styles. (Camp, obviously, “is not masculine. By definition, camping about is not butch.”)⁸ This basic opposition between masculine and feminine shapes gay male subjectivity and produces many of the systematic contrasts that structure the gay male world and its values. One of those contrasts is between male homosexuality as a sexual practice and male homosexuality as a cultural practice. The ancient antagonism between beauty and camp helps us to understand why gay culture is so incompatible with gay sex.

We have been concerned with gay culture, not with gay sex, so we have been dwelling on the feminine side of this traditional gender polarity—where camp and drag are also located. But now it is time at least to notice the existence of the other half of the polarity, and to say something about gay masculinity, if only to explain why we have been, necessarily, neglecting it.

The traditional split between camp and beauty, or between humor and glamour, coincides, specifically, with the old sexual division between queens and trade: that is, between effeminate and virile styles of performing male sex and gender roles. On one side of the divide are gay-acting men—effeminate or, at least, not “real” men—who lack the virile credentials that would make them seriously desirable to other gay men. On the other side are straight or straight-acting men, who are able to carry off a butch performance without too much seeming effort but who are nonetheless willing, for whatever reason, to enter into sexual commerce with a queen.⁹ Since effeminacy is a turn-off, whereas masculinity is exciting, queens are attracted to trade, but not to each other. So the division between queens and trade involves a whole system of polarized gender styles, gender identities, erotic object and subject positions, sex-roles, sexual practices, and sexual subjectivities.

The opposition between queens and trade was supposed to have disappeared with gay liberation, when gayness was fashioned into a singular, unified, homogeneous identity—and when, as many observers noted about the rise of “clone” culture, gay men all suddenly started to look and act like trade (and to sleep with each other).¹⁰ But

the hoary division between queens and trade continues to resurface within gay male sexual culture. The queer movement at the turn of the 1990s temporarily rehabilitated gender-deviant styles, and traces of them remain. Moreover, drag shows continue to be popular, and they continue to pair drag queens with muscle boys, just as the Broadway musical pairs divas with chorus boys.¹¹ Meanwhile, polarized sexual roles (top versus bottom) have not ended up on the garbage heap of history, as gay liberationists of the 1970s had predicted. Instead, they proliferate all over the online gay cruising sites that have sprouted up on the Internet.

Consistent with the ancient division between queens and trade is the split between ironic camp complicity and earnest butch posturing, between sisterhood and sex, between conviviality and eroticism. Those divisions, which structure all traditional gay male culture, are grounded in the opposition between the beauty and the camp and enforced by the law that prevents them from being the same person.

That opposition, for example, is what explains the gay male habit of tricking with strangers instead of with friends. It also explains the difficulty of making it to a second date, let alone a third one. For romantic interest depends on a certain mystery, or at least a degree of blankness, in the love-object. The love-object has to be able to accommodate the fantasy of butch desirability that the would-be lover projects onto it. Familiarity—and gay recognition, in particular—may spoil that accommodating blankness. They breed erotic disillusionment, even as they also enable friendliness, affection, congeniality, complicity, and solidarity.¹²

Thus, a man who arouses your desire initially appears to you as a pure archetype, as an embodiment of the masculine erotic value that makes him attractive. In your perception, he is *the jock*, *the paratrooper*, *the boy next door*. But as soon as you have him, he becomes an individual instead of an essence, an ordinary queen instead of a Platonic idea.¹³ He ceases to be pure Beauty and starts to become camp. He becomes a sister. So you stop sleeping with him. He may continue to frequent the gym, but he might as well be working out in high heels, so far as you are now concerned.

Beauty, because it is the object of sexual desire—because it is *hot*—has nothing intrinsically ironic about it. Gay male culture takes it very seriously. Beauty evokes literal, witless, pathetically earnest longing, the sort of longing that has no distance on itself and no ability to step aside and look critically at itself from an alienated perspective.

That is what camp is for. The camp takes revenge on the beauty for beauty's power over gay men (which is why it is fitting that the camp be unattractive himself), and he does so on behalf of the community of gay men as a whole, with whom he shares a cozy if ambivalent complicity. The camp's role is to puncture the breathless, solemn, tediously monotonous worship of beauty, to allow the gay men who desire and who venerate beauty to step back ironically from their unironic devotion to it, to see it from the perspective of postcoital disillusionment instead of anticipatory excitement.

So that explains why camp is about cutting everyone down to size, especially anyone whose claim to glamour threatens to oppress his less fortunate comrades, such as the camp himself. Camp is about deflating pretension, dismantling hierarchy, and remembering that all queers are stigmatized and no one deserves the kind of dignity that comes at the expense of someone else's shame. That is also why camp, as we have seen, is inclusive and democratic, why it implies a world of horizontal rather than vertical social relations. And that is why it both presumes and produces community.

The function of the beauty, by contrast, is to promote a different and conflicting set of values, values that gay male culture cherishes no less than it cherishes the value of community. Beauty is aristocratic, not democratic. By its very nature it is above average, distinguished, extraordinary, precious, and rare; it therefore occupies an elite rank. The desire for beauty is not about making common cause with others, but about wanting to have—and, by having, to be—the best. Beauty holds out the possibility of transcending shame, escaping a community of the stigmatized, acceding to the rapt contemplation of pure physical and aesthetic perfection, leaving behind all those sad old queens, forsaking irony for romance, attaining dignity, and achieving true and serious worth, both in your own eyes and in other

people's. Beauty is noble, heroic, masculine. Those are qualities we associate not with humor or comedy but with grandeur and dignity—the sorts of values that are at home in tragedy.

Camp and beauty are not just opposed, then: each is the other's competitor and antagonist. The camp's function is defined in opposition to the beauty's, and vice versa. In its original pre-Stonewall social and pragmatic context, as described by Esther Newton, camp emerged as a weapon that gay male culture fashioned in a hopeless if valiant effort to resist the power of beauty. Camp and beauty operate in strict relation to each other, and camp is best understood when it is seen in this *relational* context—as gay male culture's way of trying to disintoxicate itself from its own erotic and aesthetic passion for masculine beauty. Camp represents gay male culture's attempt to undo its romantic seriousness, to level the invidious distinctions between queens and trade that gay male culture has borrowed from the opposition between masculine and feminine in the dominant, heteronormative gender system and that it has made fundamental to its own vision of the world.

Now, the association of masculine beauty and glamour with social superiority, seriousness, sexiness, dignity, and romance may well strike you as sexist and politically retrograde—probably because that is exactly what it is. But it is unreasonable to expect gay male culture to dismantle the dominant social and symbolic system of which it is merely the lucid and faithful reflection. Gay male culture's virtue is to register—and then to resist—forms of social stratification that continue to structure our world, but that modern liberal societies routinely deny, and that a host of contemporary hypocrisies and pieties, including popular, sentimental varieties of feminism, typically work to obscure.



If gay male culture teaches us (whether we are gay men or not) to laugh at situations that are horrifying or tragic, that is because it strives to maintain a tension between *egalitarian ethics* and *hierarchical*

aesthetics. It insists on keeping those mutually opposed values in permanent, antagonistic equipoise. For it is only by preserving that polarity, promoting that contradiction, and by making each set of values balance the other out that it can maintain the right and necessary doubling of perspective that keeps everybody sane.

The tension between egalitarian ethics and hierarchical aesthetics pervades gay male culture, spanning its democratic and aristocratic tendencies, its feminine and masculine identifications, its divisions between femme and butch, between queens and trade. That tension defines, produces, and perpetuates a distinctive brand of gay male subjectivity. It is a subjectivity formed in dichotomy. On the one hand, gay culture and queer sensibility; on the other hand, sexual desire.

Tony Kushner, distinguishing what he calls “Fabulousness” from eroticism, bears witness to this opposition between sensibility and desire, between culture and sex. “What are the salient features of Fabulousness? Irony. Tragic history. Defiance. Gender-fuck. Glitter Drama. It is not butch. It is not hot. The cathexis surrounding Fabulousness is not necessarily erotic. The Fabulous is not delimited by age or beauty.”¹⁴ The only item out of place in this list, it seems to me, is “tragic history.” Its inclusion says a lot about Kushner, and his preoccupations with historical drama, or melodrama, but not much about the usual gay definition of fabulousness.¹⁵ Nonetheless, what Kushner’s statement reveals and emphasizes is the fundamental conflict in gay male subjectivity between culture and eroticism.

It is precisely because gay male cultural practices are inimical to gay male sexual practices, because they are so deflating of sexual excitement, that gay culture (falsetto singing, Broadway musicals, fashion and design) arouses such powerful aversion among gay men who like to think of themselves as sexual subjects—even when those gay men are themselves producers and consumers of gay culture. That is also why gay culture causes so much embarrassment and why its persistence elicits so much denial. Gay culture is something of a dirty secret to out-and-proud gay men, to any gay men in fact who wish to affirm their eroticism, their masculinity, their worth as sexual subjects

and objects, who ground their identity in their sexuality and define themselves by their same-sex desire instead of by their queer sensibility. As D. A. Miller demonstrated, gay culture is at the opposite pole from the unironic pose of virile stolidness that apes normality, commands respect, and solicits gay men's sexual desire. And, conversely, sexual desire among gay men carefully avoids trafficking in the cultural subversions of camp, which after all would entail the subversion of that very desire: the deflation of its butch theatrics, the ruin of its masculine parade.



The polarity between camp and beauty, though strict, is not absolute. Cracks regularly do appear in the partition. Drag queens and muscle boys always perform together; each of them requires the presence of the other. And some gay men do desire feminine men; drag queens do not lack boyfriends. The opposition between the beauty and the camp may itself be an element internal to camp culture, a camp projection rather than a natural reality. In practice, the camp and the beauty often can—and do—coincide.

And that can make for some novel, unprecedented cultural effects. In a leather and backroom bar in Mexico City, called Tom's, which I visited in the summer of 2006, gay porn played soundlessly on the video screens while soprano arias from grand opera blared over the speaker system. The overall effect was surprisingly sweet—at once very apt, very funny, and even rather hot. Sophisticated gay male culture actually delights in playing with the opposition between the feminine and the masculine: between camp and beauty, culture and sex, queer subjectivity and gay male identity. Much contemporary gay male culture represents a sustained effort to recombine the beauty and the camp. Substantial skill and ingenuity are required to do so in the case of men, and the droll task of rising to that challenge affords gay male culture a multitude of incitements and opportunities to display its dynamism and inventiveness, as well as to manifest its perpetual capacity to startle and surprise.

The opposition between the beauty and the camp corresponds ex-

actly to the contrast between glamour and abjection. But whereas glamour and abjection (or glamour and humor) take some ingenuity to combine in the case of masculinity—since they represent a fundamental, categorical split, a polarity between good and bad, noble and ignoble, virile and effeminate, serious and unserious men—glamour and abjection coincide easily in the case of femininity. Because even glamorous women, as John Clum observed, are cartoon women—who express only parts of women, aspects of femininity exaggerated to an outlandish degree—and because femininity always has something performative and artificial about it, exceptional feminine glamour is never far from caricature.

The more pronounced or elaborate femininity is, the more it lends itself to parody, and the more it leads to a loss of dignity, to a fall from seriousness. For that reason, representations of feminine abjection do not always feature—they do not need to feature—humble women, lower-status women, impoverished, sick, miserable, or struggling women. They can focus just as easily on wealthy, stylish, glamorous, or formerly glamorous women who are hysterical, extravagant, desperate, ridiculous, passionate, obscene, degraded, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, or simply unable to carry off successfully a high-quality feminine masquerade, who fail to sustain the dignity required to be taken even somewhat seriously as women.

That account reads like a description of drag. And now we are at last in a position to understand why gay male drag specializes in combined portrayals of glamorous and abject femininity. For it is through identification with femininity that gay men can manage to recombine the opposed values of beauty and camp that divide gay male culture. It is through identification with a femininity that is at once glamorous and abject that gay men are able to meld upwardly mobile aesthetic aspiration with the ethical leveling of social distinctions.

Femininity functions here, as it did in the case of the Fire Island Italian widows, as a kind of *proxy identity* for gay men. The combination of feminine glamour and abjection that gay men assume through feminine identification and appropriation—through drag, in other words, or through the cult of Joan Crawford—makes available to gay

men a position that would otherwise be difficult for them to claim in their own persons, so long at least as they retained a masculine gender identity: namely, a position at once dignified and degraded, serious and unserious, tragic and laughable. For that is the only position that can hope to be, according to the terms of gay male culture's value system, unitary and complete.



The two poles of gay male subjectivity are represented, aptly though oddly enough, by two classic American novellas, both of them published more than a hundred years ago. The generic difference that grounds this cultural binary, then, has been in existence for quite some time.

The title character of Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" (1905) encapsulates in his person the full range and breadth of gay male sensibility. Cather grotesquely lards her text with every sign and marker of gayness she can think of—except homosexual desire.¹⁶ Her narrator describes Paul as follows.

His clothes were a trifle out-grown and the tan velvet on the collar of his open overcoat was frayed and worn; but for all that there was something of the dandy about him, and he wore an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his button-hole. . . . Paul was tall for his age and very thin, with high, cramped shoulders and a narrow chest. His eyes were remarkable for a certain hysterical brilliancy, and he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy. The pupils were abnormally large . . . [and] there was a glassy glitter about them [etc., etc.].¹⁷

Like the classic invert of nineteenth-century medical discourse, according to Michel Foucault's famous, satirical portrait of him, Paul emerges from Cather's lugubrious description as "a personage—a past, a case history and a childhood, a character, a form of life; also a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (this is Foucault speaking, not Cather).¹⁸

To be specific, Paul is an effete, hysterical dandy. He is addicted to theater and music, though he has no real understanding of the arts; nonetheless, he is given to a “peculiar intoxication” with middle-aged foreign sopranos, especially when they wear tiaras and are surrounded by an aura of fame (120). He is drawn to artificiality in all its forms—anticipating Sontag’s assertion that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”¹⁹—and he excels at playing roles. Paul is inauthentic and sterile, a constant liar and fantasist, with delusions of grandeur. He is happy to give up his life in exchange for the incomparable thrill of spending a week at the old Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, a deeply affirming experience which gives him “a feeling that he had made the best of it, that he had lived the sort of life he was meant to live” (135).

Paul is perhaps the gayest character in all of literature,²⁰ if only in the sense that large portions of Cather’s narrative seem single-mindedly designed to affix to his every attribute and action an over-determined gay meaning.²¹ But he is all queer sensibility and no homosexual desire. At no point in the story does Paul express the slightest sexual interest in anyone of his own sex (or in anyone else, for that matter). He feels no attraction to other people. In fact, with one exception, he spends the entire story in no one’s intimate company but his own. “He was not in the least abashed or lonely,” Cather’s narrator tells us. “He had no especial desire to meet or to know any of these people” at the Waldorf (132).

The single exception, however, is telling. One afternoon in New York, Paul falls in with “a wild San Francisco boy, a freshman at Yale” (another heap of gay clichés—how did Cather know?), and the two of them spend a night out on the town, “not returning . . . until seven o’clock the next morning.” Their after-hours escapade has not been a success, however. “They had started out in the confiding warmth of a champagne friendship, but their parting in the elevator was singularly cool” (132). Their disillusionment is quick indeed: they don’t even have to bed down in the Waldorf in order to lose interest in each other.

Homosexuality in Paul’s case is not about other people. It is cer-

tainly not about same-sex attraction; it is not even about sexual contact. In fact, it is not about erotic desire at all. Homosexuality is about lounging around by yourself in a luxurious hotel room, wearing silk underwear and elegant clothes, sprinkling your body with violet water, smoking cigarettes, drinking champagne, surrounding yourself with fresh flowers, enjoying a sense of power, and being “exactly the kind of boy [you] had always wanted to be” (130). It is about solitary queer pleasure—what D. A. Miller called a “homosexuality of one.”²²

Neil Bartlett, writing about Oscar Wilde, says, “Whenever I imagine him posed, it is not naked or against a bare wall. It is not with other people (other men) but, most characteristically, as a single man in a room, in an interior.”²³ Bartlett’s image of the representative gay man is not one of human relatedness or sexual communion but of *an individual alone in a room with his things*. This is gayness not as perverted sexuality but as solitary queer sensibility, which is of an aristocratic rather than a communitarian kind. “Paul’s Case” represents a brilliant thought-experiment by means of which Cather tries to imagine how Oscar Wilde might have turned out if he had been born into a lower-middle-class family in Pittsburgh.²⁴ Paul is Wilde’s American avatar, as Cather intended him to be. He isn’t beautiful. He isn’t sexy. He isn’t your idea of a hot date, the boyfriend you always wanted. He is more queen than trade. His nervousness, hysteria, impulsiveness, love of glamour, and “morbid desire for cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers” (122) are all socially coded as unmanly traits, and they inscribe his gay sensibility under the signs of neurosis and, specifically, femininity.



Herman Melville, by contrast, banishes almost all trace of femininity from the human landscape of “Billy Budd” (1891). Something of “the feminine in man,” to be sure, may still linger dangerously in the manly heart, but at least there are no fresh flowers in Melville’s depiction of the British Navy.²⁵ Melville portrays a tough all-male world, lacking even the faintest hint of queer sensibility, but at the same time

utterly besotted with male beauty—with its “comeliness and power, always attractive in masculine conjunction” (292)—and universally shot through with same-sex desire. His sailors are all in love with Billy, but nothing about them is gender-deviant, artificial, or abnormal. They may “do his washing, darn his old trousers for him,” or even make him “a pretty little chest of drawers” (296), but if they ever aspire to wear silk underwear, they certainly don’t let on about it. The contrast could not be starker: Paul represents a case of queer sensibility and pleasure without same-sex desire, whereas Billy occasions rampant same-sex desire without evincing or eliciting the slightest spark of queer sensibility.

Unlike Paul, Billy is hot. “A fine specimen of the *genus homo*,” thinks Captain Vere—mentally undressing him under the cover of a hastily assembled set of biological, biblical, and artistic alibis—“who in the nude might have posed for a statue of a young Adam before the Fall” (345). Billy is in fact the ideal one-night stand, endowed with a physique worthy of idolatrous worship, but not exactly a lot of fun to have around at breakfast the next morning. (What on earth would you talk to him about?) Melville underscores the point by giving him a stutter. Billy’s desirability is exactly commensurate with his inability to speak. Happily removed from verbal communication, let alone from any knowing, ironic complicity with others (“To deal in double meanings . . . was quite foreign to his nature”; 298), he has almost no subjectivity whatever. He’s all good-natured, innocent physicality—it’s rather as if he were a big, friendly pet. Melville’s narrator does not shrink from the demeaning comparison. “Of self-consciousness he seemed to have little or none, or about as much as we may reasonably impute to a dog of Saint Bernard’s breed” (301; the analogy recurs at 358–359). In short, Billy is the apotheosis of trade: a sublimely beautiful object, but only an object, with no interiority, no psychology, no wit, and no sensibility to spoil the dazzling surface effect of his perfect physical form.

Which is why, for all his romantic glamour, Billy has no staying power. Once you’ve had him, you can’t wait to get rid of him. No

wonder the main characters in the story, Vere and Claggart, are both in such a hurry to see him dead. Even the ship's chaplain exploits Billy's vulnerability the night before his execution in order to kiss his cheek, but it never so much as occurs to him to think of trying to save the hunky sailor from annihilation: "the worthy man lifted not a finger to avert the doom of such a martyr to martial discipline" (373). After all, the moral agony to which innocent Billy is subjected by his court-martial and ensuing condemnation only serves to add a new, titillating, and troubling dimension of inwardness to what had been his perfection as a physical object: "the rare personal beauty of the young sailor" is "spiritualized now through late experiences so poignantly profound" (375).

That nascent spiritualization of Billy's magnificent flesh offers his admirers a spectacle far too captivating to interrupt by putting an end to his suffering. If that weren't creepy enough, Billy is also made to love, forgive, bless, and even embrace those who murder him, a kind of medieval ordeal climaxing in a cunningly orchestrated, intensely charged, unseen emotional and physical exchange with Captain Vere—an ecstasy of sacrificial cruelty and mutual submission far more shattering than sex, but the closest thing to sex that this butch world has to offer. And once dead, Billy can attain immortality as an object of endless, elegiac desire. Melville both anticipates and reverses Wilde: each man may kill the thing he loves, but each man also loves the thing he kills. Let that be a warning to partisans of virility, to those who prefer gay eroticism to gay culture. Murder is precisely where a total absence of camp will lead you.

This point was made again by Rainer Maria Fassbinder, in his film adaptation of Jean Genet's *Querelle*, a novel which merely takes the extra step of transforming Melville's tale of moral pornography into gay pornography. And, speaking of gay pornography, the lesson I have derived from Melville has now been brilliantly if inadvertently illustrated by Chris Ward's 2008 foray into cowboy porn, *To the Last Man*, a "Western epic" in which the story line is dotted with a series of dramatic murders—something of a novelty in gay porn—as if noth-

ing less could serve to guarantee the virility of the male characters who have sex with one another on-screen. (Ward has, however, released a non-violent version of the movie for squeamish or morally rigorous consumers, who like their gay sex manly but not to the point of being homicidal.)²⁶



The polarity of queer sensibility and sexual desire reminds those who participate in gay male culture of their inescapable implication in gendered values, erotic dichotomies, and other social meanings. Whether it is the epistemology of the closet and its multiple double binds, the pervasive regime of heteronormativity and homophobia, the supreme significance of gender, the unarguable allure of masculinity, the unquenchable desire for beauty, or the impossibility of experiencing homosexuality naively and innocently as something wholly natural, the world gay men inhabit constantly reminds them of their lack of exemption from the brute realities of sexual stratification, cultural signification, and social power. The Fire Island Italian widows do not have the possibility, the capability, of choosing whether or not to accede to a dignified public role that both acknowledges and honors their grief; they cannot determine whether or not their losses will ever be allowed to rise to the status of tragedy in the eyes of the world. Their drag performance, their simultaneous act of fake and real mourning, is a response to social conditions and cultural codes that they cannot alter, but can only resist.

The political function of camp appears clearly in this light. "Camp," as Esther Newton says (borrowing a phrase from Kenneth Burke), "is a 'strategy for a situation.'"²⁷ Camp works from a position of disempowerment to recode social codes whose cultural power and prestige prevent them from simply being dismantled or ignored. It is predicated on the fundamental gay male intuition that power is everywhere, that it is impossible to evade power, that no place is outside of power.²⁸ Camp is a form of resistance to power that is defined by an awareness of being situated within an inescapable network of rela-

tions of meaning and force, by the perception that the encompassing regime of heteronormative signification is unalterable, but that a certain freedom is nevertheless attainable in relation to it. Dominant social roles and meanings cannot be destroyed, any more than can the power of beauty, but they can be undercut and derealized: we can learn how not to take them straight. Their claim on our belief is weakened, their preeminence eroded, when they are parodied or punctured, just as sex and gender identities are subverted when they are theatricalized, shown up as roles instead of as essences, treated as social performances instead of as natural identities, and thus deprived of their claims to seriousness and authenticity, of their right to our moral, aesthetic, and erotic allegiance.

But to derealize dominant heterosexual or heteronormative social roles and meanings, to disrupt their unquestioning claims to seriousness and authenticity, is not to do away with them or to make their power disappear. It is to achieve a certain degree of leverage in relation to them, while also acknowledging their continuing ability to dictate the terms of our social existence.²⁹ That explains why gay male culture has evolved an elusive cultural practice and mode of perception, known as camp, which involves not taking seriously, literally, or unironically the very things that matter most and that cause the most pain. It also explains why gay male culture encourages us to laugh at situations—such as those portrayed in *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest*—that are horrifying or tragic. Just as camp works to puncture the unironic worship of beauty whose power it cannot rival or displace, so gay male culture struggles to suspend the pain of losses that it does not cease to grieve.



Perhaps that is another reason why gay male culture produces so much aversion in gay men, why it elicits so much denial, and why contemporary gay men tend to project it onto earlier generations of archaic, pathetic queens—onto anyone but themselves. Traditional gay male culture is a way of coping with powerlessness, of neutraliz-

ing pain, of transcending grief. And who nowadays wants to feel powerless, who wants to think of himself as a victim? Who even wants to admit to vulnerability? Liberalism is over, people! It's no longer fashionable to claim you are oppressed. Our society requires its neoliberal subjects to butch up, to maintain a cheerful stoicism in the face of socially arranged suffering. It teaches us not to blame society for our woes, but to take responsibility for ourselves—to find deep, personal meaning in our pain, and moral uplift in accepting it.

Gay pride itself is incompatible with an identity defined by failure, disappointment, or defeat. American manliness, and therefore American gay masculinity, mandate rugged independence, healthy self-confidence, high self-esteem: in short, the denial of need, pain, "resentment, self-pity, and various other unconsolated relations to want."³⁰

So it is understandable that a set of cultural practices designed to cope with the reality of suffering, to defy powerlessness, and to carve out a space of freedom within a social world acknowledged to be hostile and oppressive would not only fail to appeal to many subordinated people nowadays, but would constitute precisely what most of us—including women, gay men, and other minorities—must reject in order to accede to a sense of ourselves as dignified, proud, independent, self-respecting, powerful, and happy in spite of everything.

And in the particular case of gay men, gay culture is what many of us must disavow in order to achieve gay pride—at least, a certain kind of gay pride. It's not that gay pride reflects a different and less agonizing social experience of homosexuality. In its own way, gay pride, too, is a response to continuing stigmatization and marginalization. As Lauren Berlant writes, "no population has ever erased the history of its social negativity from its ongoing social meaning."³¹ Rather, gay pride offers a different solution to the same problem, by aspiring to a better future—better, that is, than the world as we know it.

That is a worthy aspiration. It helps to explain the continuing appeal of utopianism, both in queer theory and in the lesbian and gay movement as a whole.³² But it indicates, as well, why traditional gay male culture—which reckons with the world as it is, with the way

we lived and still live now, and which seeks less to change the world than to resist its inflictions (even at the cost of appearing reactionary, rather than progressive)—affords such an important emotional and political resource, not only to gay men but also to many different kinds of socially disqualified people, at least to those whose sense of irredeemable wrongness makes them willing to pay the achingly high price for it.

PART FOUR



Mommie Queerest

II

GAY FAMILY ROMANCE

What does culture have to do with sexuality? What is the relation between sexual preferences and cultural preferences? How can gay male culture's infatuation with *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest* help us to understand that relation? And what is it about those two movies that explains the secret of their gay appeal?

For answers to those questions, we must look to the poetics of gay male culture and, in particular, to the meaning of social forms. But we need not ignore or exclude other styles of reasoning, other explanations that might recommend themselves to us. It would in fact be better to take advantage of the insights that different interpretations afford, so as to arrive at an understanding of gay male culture that is plausible, inclusive, wide-ranging, undogmatic, and hospitable to various points of view.

So let's return to those movies and consider some psychological and thematic hypotheses about their gay appeal, before moving on to a social, pragmatic, and, necessarily, formal analysis. This roundabout approach may seem digressive, but it is actually designed to be incremental and cumulative: it aims to construct, step by step, on the basis of a series of interconnected observations, a coherent and, ultimately, systematic description of male homosexuality as a cultural practice.



We can pick up where we left off at the end of Chapter 10, and interpret the gay appeal of those movies, and of the two previously highlighted scenes in them, in the light of our understanding of camp.

The spectacle of the angry mother would function, according to this interpretation, as a way of reperforming and working through one of the greatest terrors, or potential terrors, of queer childhood. If one of the functions of camp humor is to return to a scene of trauma and to replay that trauma on a ludicrously amplified scale, so as to drain it of the pain that camp does not deny, then the camp appropriation of these dramas of mother-daughter conflict might be thought to confront the fear that haunts many a gay boyhood and that leaves a traumatic residue in the inner lives of many gay adults: the fear that the adored mother might express—if only unawares, or despite herself—her unconquerable aversion to her offspring, her disgust at having begotten and raised a deviant child. Even the most loving mother would be hard-put never to betray to her queer son at least a modicum of disappointment in him. The possibility that your mother might turn against you, and reject you, doubtless remains a perennial nightmare scenario in the minds of many queer kids, a source of panic never entirely laid to rest, and often exacerbated by the volatility of the emotional relations between gay boys and their mothers. It is this volatility that is captured by the dual focus on *both* mother and daughter in the scenes from *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest*.

The potency of those scenes can be attributed in part to the way they solicit the spectator's identification with each character, the way they invite a simultaneous emotional involvement with the rebellious child and the indignant parent. Each scene tempts its audience to take both sides in the quarrel it portrays. And that is only logical. For in its appeal to the emotions of the adult spectator, each scene replays the divided loyalty that originally characterized the gay child's (and perhaps every child's) struggle for love and recognition, his simultaneous efforts to be the spontaneous object of his mother's attention and to exercise sufficient power over her to command that attention. In that

struggle, the child is bound to be self-divided, to feel a split allegiance, insofar as he is compelled to be both for and against his mother. (According to Proust, who understood this ambivalence so well and portrayed it so vividly in the first section of *Swann's Way*, the child's struggle for control of his mother's love inexorably sets the stage for subsequent, similarly foredoomed adult attempts to possess the subjectivity of other love-objects.) By inviting the spectator's double identification with the mother and the daughter, each of the two scenes provides a vehicle for staging and replaying the impossibly divided loyalties of the abject and power-hungry child.

It is not hard to discover how each scene solicits the gay male spectator's identification with the daughter, though the solicitations are different in the case of each scene. In *Mommie Dearest*, the daughter claims power through her moral triumph over the mother, and she invites the spectator to join her in taking a vengeful pride in her (temporary) assertion of personal autonomy. What begins as adolescent rebellion ends in heady moral victory as the parent is at last indicted, judged, and condemned out of her own mouth. The daughter finally sees through, and rejects, the mystifications of the parental contract, realizing that her mother's toxic declarations of love merely function as strategies for licensing endless emotional abuse. In this moment of triumphant vision and resistance, the daughter achieves her moral independence—though the mother's histrionic response, magnified by the character's alcoholic dementia and fueled by her giddy abandonment of all sense of social propriety, easily upstages the daughter's earnest, self-satisfied moralism.

In *Mildred Pierce*, by contrast, it is precisely the daughter's refusal of the moral upper hand in the argument, and of all family values, that makes her so perversely appealing. She voices a hatred of middle-class domesticity, of a feminine role defined by hard work, responsibility, and selfless devotion to family, opting instead for glamour, leisure, wealth, elegance, and freedom from compulsory social ties—the sort of freedom that only money can buy. In rejecting all claims of familial piety, and basking in a flagrant, unnatural ingratitude, she

flaunts her sense of superiority to conventional bourgeois canons of morality, normality, and naturalness.



Such a feeling of superiority to boring, normal people has long been a noted (celebrated or abominated) feature of gay male subjectivity. It reflects the elitist, aristocratic tendency in gay male culture, also evident in the gay male cult of beauty and aesthetics. The most striking and characteristic expression of that sense of superiority is the stubborn refusal to believe that you are in fact the offspring of the individuals who claim to be your parents. Four years before Freud observed and described the generic version of this “family romance”—the child’s fantasy that his real parents are not the ones who are actually raising him and that his true people come from a nobler or more glamorous world than that of his ostensible family—Willa Cather had already diagnosed a gay case of it in Paul.¹

Cather’s narrator tells us that once Paul had gotten to New York, and ensconced himself in the Waldorf, he very quickly “doubted the reality of his past.”

Had he ever known a place called Cordelia Street, a place where fagged looking business men boarded the early car? Mere rivets in a machine they seemed to Paul,—sickening men, with combings of children’s hair always hanging to their coats, and *the smell of cooking* in their clothes. Cordelia Street—Ah, that belonged to another time and country! Had he not always been thus, had he not sat here [in the dining-room of the Waldorf] night after night, from as far back as he could remember, looking pensively over just such shimmering textures, and slowly twirling the stem of a glass like this one between his thumb and middle finger? He rather thought he had. . . . He felt now that his surroundings explained him. . . . *These were his own people*, he told himself.²

Profoundly revolted by the drab lower-middle-class world into which he was born, Paul recoils especially, and repeatedly, from the “greasy

odour” of cooking (122, 125, 131), which signifies to him everything about the unrefined dreariness, gross physicality, and suffocating daily rituals of reproductive heterosexuality—everything about the aesthetic wasteland of commonplace family life—against which his soul rebels.

Paul would have found a soul mate forty years later in Mildred Pierce’s daughter Veda, who also longs to get away (as she emphasizes to her mother) from “your chickens and your pies and your kitchens and *everything that smells of grease*, . . . from this shack with its cheap furniture, and this town and its dollar days, and its women that wear uniforms and its men that wear overalls.” Veda does not hesitate to assume a posture of disdainful hauteur in addressing her mother: “You’ve never spoken of your people, where you came from,” she says, detaching herself rhetorically from her maternal lineage, as if Mildred’s “people” were not in fact also her own. And she does everything she can to magnify the class differences that separate Mildred from the world to which Veda herself aspires and, in her own imagination, rightfully belongs. “You think just because you made a little money you can get a new hairdo and some expensive clothes and turn yourself into a lady. But you can’t. Because you’ll never be anything but a common frump, whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing.” (Joan Crawford’s mother, Anna, did in fact take in washing at one point while Joan was growing up.)

Many gay men report having entertained just such a family romance when they were boys: the conviction that they were exceptional creatures completely unrelated to the stupid, thuggish, crass society around them. They felt as if they’d been born outside their natural element, as if they were secretly descended from royalty—little princes whom some malign fate had, for mysterious reasons, consigned at birth to be raised by a family of peasants and who were simply waiting for the day when their true identity would be revealed, when the spell would be lifted, and when they would finally be set free, free from the tedious routines of ordinary life among normal folk, and restored at last to their rightful place in the society of the

rich and famous, of the world's beautiful and sophisticated people.³ The longing for a life of aesthetic grace and harmony, of sensual luxury and pleasure, the drive to rise in the world and mingle with the upper classes, the aspiration to acquire, collect, and consume—to surround oneself with beautiful, rare, expensive objects or, in Paul's case, with “cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers”—all this has come to symbolize the essence of a certain kind of gay male subjectivity, ever since the time of Oscar Wilde.⁴



In his inexhaustible study of Wilde and gay male culture, Neil Bartlett devotes an entire chapter, called “Possessions,” to gay men's relation to their *things*.⁵ Like “the excessive sentimentality that was the necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object”—sentiments which the Broadway musical cultivated in its proto-gay fans, according to D. A. Miller—gay men's insistent desire for precious possessions springs, according to Bartlett, from a permanent sense of fundamental frustration at the *particular* unavailability *to us* of the objects we most want. “Material wealth and sensual pleasure have a very specific function for us,” Bartlett explains; “they compensate for other forms of poverty.”⁶ Bartlett carefully left those other forms of poverty unspecified—he clearly had in mind a broad spectrum of social and political deprivations—but he allowed for the possibility that there might be a very specific “hunger that gapes beneath” our quest for possessions (175).

The true source of that hunger, Bartlett implied, is a lack of erotic satisfaction of a very general and basic kind. Sexual deprivation is fundamental, and crucial, to the subjective experiences of gay men, not because we are all pathetic, sex-starved rejects who never succeed in finding acceptable partners, but because adult satisfaction cannot quite make up for a previous history of unfulfillment. (As George Haggerty says, speaking of the gayness of the pastoral elegy, “A love that is constituted in loss is a love that yields a longing that can never be fulfilled.”)⁷

Early on in our lives, at whatever point we become urgently aware of our desires, gay men discover that most of the human beings who attract us are not the least bit interested in having a sexual relationship with us, that they are not and cannot be attracted to us in return, and that some of them regard the mere fact of our desire for them as abhorrent. (To be sure, it is possible to generalize this phenomenon to people other than gay men, since everyone has at one time or another felt that many of the glamorous people they desired were beyond them, unavailable to them, and even possibly repelled by them; but at least heterosexuals do not experience their love-objects as being *categorically* off-limits to them, on account of their belonging to the wrong sex, which is what gay men experience.) Even as adults, we do not escape the awareness that, in the eyes of most men, we fail to qualify as possible candidates for either sex or love. So our desire for men, in many cases, is impossible from the start, *impossible as such*. It is therefore infinite, and necessarily confined in the first instance to *fantasizing* about them. We develop, early on, a habit of communing with imaginary lovers, and it is a habit we never quite abandon.

What may be in and of itself an easy desire to satisfy becomes, when it is denied and frustrated, an impossible dream. The protracted experience of erotic lack which all gay men who grow up in straight society necessarily and painfully undergo turns the ordinary fulfillment of ordinary homosexual desire into an unattainable fantasy—which it often remains even when, later in life, a small-town boy moves to a gay metropolis where the sexual fulfillment of his former erotic daydreams turns out at last to be child's play. For belated access to sexual objects, no matter how numerous or glamorous they may be, can do little to close the long-established gap between fantasy and reality in the demand for erotic gratification. (Which is why the myriad opportunities for sexual satisfaction and love that gay liberation offers us have led not to the withering away of the gay porn industry, but to its hypertrophic expansion.) Once the very prospect of “getting what you want” has been consigned to the realm of fantasy, erotic gratification ineluctably takes on hyperbolic proportions, exits

the realm of the attainable, and becomes indissolubly associated with impossible rapture.

No wonder homosexual desire routinely verges on an obsession with absolute, unearthly perfection, with flawless archetypes or Platonic essences (the perfectly beautiful man: Dorian Gray; the technically flawless image of a beautiful man: Robert Mapplethorpe's "The Perfect Moment"; the perfect operatic diva: the Lisbon Traviata). Since they devote so much solitary time and effort, early on in their lives, to studying the specific attributes of their ideal love-objects, determining what combination of features—or what social form—corresponds most exactly to the requirements of their desire, gay men tend, while still quite young, to arrive at a detailed and rigorous mental picture of what it is precisely that they want. And they are not likely to settle for anything less. Also, if most of the men you grew up wanting were bound to reject you anyway, through no fault of your own, and if your prohibited desire for them was therefore destined to express itself only in dreams, in hopeless fantasies of sexual fulfillment and romantic bliss, then you had no reason to let the world constrain your daydreams or limit the scope of your fantasies to the narrow field of the possible. And so, when the time eventually comes to leave that dreamscape, you may find it difficult to make compromises with humdrum reality.

The commitment to perfection, and the refusal to settle for anything (or anyone) less, generate the peculiar merging of eroticism and aestheticism that is distinctive to gay male culture. For an impossible but perfect object excites a very particular kind of desire. The ecstatic practice of erotic worship, combined with a despair of sexual satisfaction, produces a specific attitude toward objects of longing that is characteristic of gay male culture: an attitude of passionate but detached contemplation, at once critical and idealistic. By mingling the rapt transports of sexual idolatry with a distant, almost clinical appreciation of beauty, gay men achieve a kind of disinterestedness in their relation to erotic objects that brings their experience of sexual desire very close to that of pure aesthetic contemplation.

At least since Kant, it has been conventionally assumed that physical beauty and artistic beauty awaken very different kinds of response in normal (heterosexual) human subjects. The alleged difference between our responses to beautiful bodies and to beautiful works of art is supposed to ground a fundamental distinction between interested and disinterested attraction, between instrumental, selfish, egoistic, excited interestedness and non-instrumental, selfless, altruistic, contemplative disinterestedness.⁸ Aestheticism, moreover, is usually thought to express a quest for perfection, or a commitment to perfect beauty, that is largely irrelevant to the cruder, baser workings of sexual excitation. Gay male culture, by contrast, is notorious for its habit of fusing erotics and aesthetics.⁹



That may be why there is always something reactionary about the gay male cult of beauty. Gay male culture's distinctive brand of erotic aestheticism (or should that be aesthetic eroticism?), and its insistence on perfection in its erotico-aesthetic objects, tend to produce an absolute privileging of the beautiful. This takes a number of well-known forms: an elevation of style over content; a championing of the aesthetic at the expense of the political; and a consequent, stubborn indifference to the social meaning of glamour, to its often retrograde political content. Dubious as those tendencies may be, gay male aestheticism does not flinch from them. Instead, it demands to be recognized for what it is—namely, a radically uncompromising defense of beauty, a principled refusal to subordinate *beauty as a value* to any social or political consideration that claims, however plausibly, to be more serious or more worthy. Gay male culture does not pretend to be ambivalent about aesthetic perfection, nor can it claim in all seriousness or sincerity to be deeply critical of it.

The *locus classicus* for this opposition between the apolitical or even reactionary aesthetics of gay male culture and an earnest political engagement in struggles for social progress is Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Puig portrays two social outcasts: the first is

a gay man besotted with a female movie star, whose glamorous and now-dated films, full of adoration for the upper classes, were originally designed to promote Nazi propaganda; the second is a straight, austere, ideologically correct Marxist revolutionary, whose political commitments no less than his heterosexuality initially rule out any sympathy with either faggotry or aestheticism (especially when the aestheticism in question is of such a reactionary kind). The two characters, who have both been arrested by the authorities for their menace to the social order, find themselves locked up in the same prison cell. Their dialectical interaction culminates in a series of exchanges and a partial blurring of identities, demonstrating that aesthetics and politics, fantasy and fortitude, faggotry and machismo, gay male culture and straight male culture actually have a lot to offer each other—at least, in Puig's conception.

What makes Puig interesting to us is his observation that the bits of mainstream culture selected by gay male culture for its own queer purposes often do *not* turn out to be the most politically progressive, experimental, or avant-garde items, but—to the surprise of outsiders, who somehow expect gay men to favor the sorts of artworks that either promote progressive social change or put into effect disruptive, subversive programs of formal aesthetic innovation—prove in fact to be the most dated, old-fashioned, reactionary artifacts, including flamboyantly sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic ones. *Mildred Pierce* is a good example.



Adapted from James M. Cain's highly perverse 1941 novel of the same title, with its dark suggestions of a mother's latent, incestuous desire for her own daughter, *Mildred Pierce* was transformed into a comparatively moral tale by Hollywood producer Jerry Wald, screenwriter Ranald MacDougall, and director Michael Curtiz. Cain himself, despite several pressing invitations, refused to make the changes requested by Wald, and Catherine Turney, the screenwriter who produced the first and relatively faithful adaptations of the novel,

eventually asked that her name be removed from the film's credits. The resulting movie is an edifying, cautionary fable about the evils of divorce and the mayhem caused by independent women.¹⁰

The problems begin when Mildred's husband loses his job in the Depression and ceases to be able to support his family, ultimately forcing Mildred to take over the role of breadwinner and to become—by dint of hard, selfless work—a successful, commanding, and ultimately very wealthy businesswoman. Mildred's increasing autonomy and her husband's economic emasculation lead to the breakdown of their marriage and to Mildred's affair with a dissolute, ethnically ambiguous scion of an aristocratic but impoverished family, Monte Beragon (played by Zachary Scott, fresh from his memorably sinister debut as an evil spy in the 1944 film *The Mask of Demetrios*, based on an Eric Ambler novel). The first time Mildred sleeps with Monte, her younger daughter dies of pneumonia—typical Hollywood retribution for adultery on the part of a mother. By the end of the movie, Mildred has repented of her independent ways and, having paid the price, returns to her husband, who in the meantime has found decent and manly employment “in a defense plant.” As he escorts her from the court house, whose steps are being scrubbed by two self-abnegating women, the sun rises on their happy future. Whatever the movie's subversive pleasures, which are certainly many, no one could ever accuse it of being politically progressive.

As has often been remarked, *Mildred Pierce* is not only a classic Hollywood melodrama, a good example of a “woman's film,” and a masterpiece of Warner Brothers film noir (at least in its framing episodes). It is also a story highly suited to the end of the Second World War, when the demobilization of millions of American men required the redomestication of women and their reassignment to the home from the workplace, to which they had been called to fill jobs temporarily vacated by the men who were now returning to claim them. Warner Brothers actually delayed the release of the film until October 20, 1945, more than two months after the Japanese capitulation, in order to enhance the story's relevance to the historical moment.¹¹

The title character's rise, through hard work, self-sacrifice, and a loveless second marriage, to wealth, glamour, and high social position—along with her corresponding frustration, disappointment, corruption, and victimization—adds up to a highly conservative, moralistic tale, and the film's sexual politics are accordingly retrograde. Although *Mildred Pierce* titillates its audience with the transgressive spectacle of female strength, autonomy, feistiness, and power—even a certain female masculinity—it does so on the condition of Mildred's eventual surrender of her independence and her return to a state of domestic and sexual subordination. The film is also notable for Butterfly McQueen's uncredited portrayal of Mildred's Black servant, Lottie, in some ways the most admirable character in the whole movie, but also the vehicle of persistent, vicious racial stereotyping. In short, the movie's politics of class, race, ethnicity, sex, and gender are pretty awful.

Those political blemishes do not, however, affect the film's aesthetic success, especially when the film is viewed with the right distance and irony. For gay male culture, at least, the movie's true politics lie in its aesthetics: its style exceeds what its ostensible message conveys. Joan Crawford entirely dominates the visual field, and her every flicker of emotion—indelibly registered by her flawless acting, by the masterly lighting of her face with its superb complexion, and by the brilliant camera work and editing—is instantly and eloquently telegraphed to the spectator. In setting aside the explicit content of the film in favor of its melodramatic power and sumptuous film noir style, the camp enjoyment of it would seem to vindicate Susan Sonntag's claim about the apolitical character of camp, its preference for aesthetics over politics, its neutrality “with respect to content,” and its “way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.”¹²

It is this elevation of beauty to a supreme value (not only the beauty of Joan Crawford but also the beauty of a flawless melodramatic and cinematic style), and this comparative indifference to the political terms in which such aesthetic perfection is materialized, that have earned gay male culture its bad reputation—especially among

feminists—for reactionary politics, hostility to women, acceptance of oppressive social conditions, promotion of a mythic rather than a critical attitude toward received values, and collaboration with the forces of social domination.



But gay male culture is unfazed by its detractors and unashamed of its loves. It uncompromisingly defends the aesthetic autonomy of each and every cultural artifact it deems worthy of appropriation. It treats beauty as a fundamental organizing principle of the world. Accordingly, it insists on viewing each individual object within the object's own aesthetic frame, as an aesthetic ensemble, as the effect and expression of an integrated aesthetic system. It does not attempt to see through the style of the object to its content, to distinguish its successful aesthetic achievement from its odious political message or from its implication in a despicable social order. Rather, it discovers a different content, an alternate meaning—a counter-thematics—in an aesthetic object's very style.

Committed to style, and “neutral with respect to [overt, explicit] content,” gay male aestheticism takes each item it values—be it a formica-and-vinyl kitchen table set from the 1950s or a collection of Fiesta ware from the 1930s, a Madonna video or an Yma Sumac song, a mid-century American ranch house or a French chateau—as a coherent, internally consistent stylistic whole, as a manifestation of a historically and culturally specific system of taste whose incarnation in the object is so total that this very completeness produces a pleasurable recognition in itself and affords a satisfaction of its own.¹³ That willingness to subordinate aesthetic judgment of the individual object to an appreciation of the totality with which it embodies a single, integrated aesthetic or historical system is what led Sontag to conclude that “the way of Camp is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.”¹⁴

In fact, gay male aestheticism tends to blur the distinction between beauty and stylization, insofar as it locates meaning or content in

form itself, finding value in any object that exhibits perfect conformity to a specific aesthetic order, to a specific style. It rejoices in any and all examples of complete stylistic coherence. It therefore takes special delight in neglected artifacts from earlier periods that wholly embody various outdated, obsolete styles.¹⁵

Consider, for example, the following entry, dated to 1945, from the journal of the British writer Denton Welch, in which he records a happy discovery he has just made in a junk shop.

Then I walked down the last aisle and saw in the middle what looked at first like a not very remarkable early-to-mid-Victorian little couch—Récamier thickened and toughened and having developed turned stumpy legs instead of delicate out-sweeping Greek ones. But what really held my glance when I looked nearer was the covering of the couch, the flat loose cushion and the round tailored sausage one. They were all of tomato soup *red horsehair*, dirtied of course, but, remembering its life of eighty, ninety, perhaps nearly a hundred years, really in wonderful condition. And what a wonderful stuff too, this never before seen red horsehair, glistening like glass threads, rich and hard and heartless, built to wear people out, not be worn out by them. The cushions made so stiffly and truly, everything about the couch showing solid worthiness, as much as any Victorian piece I had seen; and its ugly, Gothic, sharp parrot smartness simply calling out to be used, sat upon and loved. Its appeal to me was so strong that excitement leaped up in me in a gulp.¹⁶

Welch bought it immediately. Did I mention he was gay?

This blurring of the distinction between beauty and stylization allows for the possibility of appreciating, even loving, objects that are acknowledged to be ugly, like Denton Welch's little Victorian couch. Which is what gives camp its democratic thrust, thereby attenuating the elitist or aristocratic tendencies of gay male aestheticism. "Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment," Sontag says; it is "a mode . . . of appreciation—not judgment."¹⁷ Setting aside any extrinsic criteria by which such an object might be judged, camp aestheticism upholds form—the stylistic co-

herence of a fully achieved style—as a value in itself. Without exactly confusing that value with beauty, it nonetheless grants it significant aesthetic worth, resisting any mode of assessment that would insist on applying to the object a supposedly more rigorous, serious, or substantive set of external standards, either moral or aesthetic.

The camp sensibility thereby justifies “the world as an aesthetic phenomenon” (something Nietzsche thought that only Greek tragedy, or Wagner, could do). *It treats Style as a Utopia in its own right*—however awful any particular style may be or however appalling the social meanings it may encode in any specific context.¹⁸ In this refusal to be distracted from an aesthetic apprehension by any alien or extrinsic order of values, even or especially by progressive political values, camp culture engages in its own kind of anti-social critique, its own uncompromising defense of fantasy and pleasure, and thus its own brand of political resistance (that is one of Puig’s messages in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, just as it is one of Sartre’s messages in *Saint Genet*).¹⁹



Good taste and bad taste both play important, if different, roles in gay male aestheticism. The cultivation of good taste is dialectically opposed to camp and its worship of bad taste, its love of aesthetic catastrophe—*dialectically* opposed, I say, because good taste and bad taste make necessary reference to each other, each implying the other and each of them constantly readjusting its own definition in relation to the other.

Taste itself, whether good or bad, is nonsensical without a scale and measure of value, without degrees of refinement and distinction.²⁰ A certain snobbery is built into aestheticism, with its panoply of standards, criteria, judgments, and perceptions, its efforts to discern the better from the worse, the fine from the gross, the original from the imitation, the rare from the vulgar. In short, aestheticism depends on a notion of hierarchy. However out of place such a notion may be in a democratic or egalitarian ethics, hierarchy does have

a rightful place—an inevitable place—in the realm of aesthetics. No human being may deserve the kind of dignity that comes at the price of someone else's shame, but that doesn't mean everyone is entitled to sing "Casta Diva" (the great soprano aria in the first act of Bellini's *Norma*) or that every performance of it is as good as every other—any more than it means that every person you pass on the street is equally good-looking. "All God's children," Fran Lebowitz reminds us, "are not beautiful. Most of God's children are, in fact, barely presentable."²¹

Just as camp expresses an impulse to identify with the outrageously disreputable and the gorgeously grotesque—an instinctive race to the bottom whose social effect is fundamentally egalitarian—so good taste is a way of trading up, of social climbing. In gay male culture, good taste is allied with aristocratic pretensions, including the worship of beauty and an identification with the glamorous world of the upper classes, while the cultivation of taste itself expresses a general sense of superiority to those who lack the discernment necessary to appreciate either good taste or bad. Gay men, Sontag notes, "constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste."²²

Neil Bartlett agrees, and he emphasizes the aristocratic dimensions of the gay male cult of taste. "The imagery of our rooms makes it clear that we have staked our survival on upward social mobility," he says (180). But that upward social mobility is not necessarily literal. As Bartlett quickly explains, upward social mobility is itself a metaphor. It may take the form of a longing for wealth and social privilege, but what it signifies is the aspiration to achieve a more gratifying way of life, a life of refinement, distinction, and pleasure; it does not aim at social superiority for its own sake.

If gay male aestheticism gives rise to an identification with the upper classes, that is because gay male culture values *pleasure* over *utility*. It takes as objects of aesthetic delectation what others have created for mere use—incidentally beautiful things originally produced and shaped for some specific, practical, ostensibly worthy purpose: beautiful bodies inadvertently formed by athletic competition or hard

physical labor, grand buildings erected in the course of national or industrial rivalries, elegant clothing designed to gratify the demands of upper-class ostentation. Gay aestheticism annexes these by-products of other people's serious, single-minded striving to its own ironic, disaffiliated quest for pleasure.²³

Gay male culture yearns above all for the freedom and power to gratify its taste for beauty or style. That is why gay male identification with the aristocracy does not entirely depend for its expression on spending-power (though disposable income helps). Glamour and luxury are all very nice, and no doubt highly welcome, but they are not required. Only people who don't take pleasure seriously make the mistake of believing it to be essentially expensive.

Taste, to be sure, implies a hierarchy of value. But a hierarchy of value does not entail social hierarchy or economic privilege. You don't need money to have taste, and you don't need a lot of money to gratify it (even if you do need some). Though an aristocracy of taste may represent an elite, it differs from traditional aristocracies insofar as it is constituted on the basis of neither social nor economic power. At least in principle, it is open to all.

"To be a connoisseur," Bartlett explains, "is to be a member of an elite—not necessarily an elite of the wealthy, though always close to it in inspiration at least. We may no longer pose as aristocrats; but the crucial point is that we still see ourselves as somehow above or apart from the world of production, licensed to play. There is a new 'aristocracy,' bigger and easier to enter than the old one (you can do it), one of sensibility, by which I mean one that understands how pleasure works and how it can be obtained" (181). So the kind of aristocracy to which some gay men aspire may turn out to involve a different kind of superiority altogether from what "aristocracy" normally implies, a superiority not incompatible with "the democratic *esprit* of Camp."²⁴

The luxury prized by gay male culture can be achieved without literal extravagance. It consists in the ability to obtain pleasure and to live out fantasy. One way to do all that may be to insinuate yourself

somehow into a world of glamour and exclusivity, but you need not acquire a fortune in order to accede to a more gratifying, more beautiful, more refined existence. You can do it in ways that are essentially or aspirationally middle class: singing along to recordings of Broadway musicals, arranging flowers, collecting things, clubbing, or *merely positioning the furniture just so*. (Whence the old joke: How can you tell if your cockroaches are gay? You come home and all your furniture is rearranged.) You can also attain a life of glamour by having sex, at least by enjoying untrammelled sexual pleasure with untold numbers of desirable people.

All these kinds of luxury make it possible for you to live in a better world, not necessarily a more expensive one. They represent potential points of entry into a way of being finally in tune with your vision of erotic and aesthetic perfection, instead of an existence that requires you to sacrifice your dreams to the service of reality—to the dreary, dutiful life of Cather's Cordelia Street in Pittsburgh (aptly named after King Lear's modest, unambitious, literal-minded daughter)—as straight society would prefer you to do.²⁵

In that sense, Paul's struggle in Cather's story or Veda's struggle in *Mildred Pierce* is the struggle of gay male culture as a whole.²⁶



Not only does Veda champion the cause of escape, by means of money (in her case), from the suffocating world of heterosexual family values; she also rebels against biological determinism itself. She treats her pregnancy as a revisable option, as if it were possible for her to choose whether or not to be pregnant at any given moment, whether or not to alter her reproductive situation simply by changing her mind: "It's a matter of opinion. At the moment, my opinion is I'm going to have a baby. I can always be mistaken."

So Veda's revolt against the family is a revolt not merely against its values, but against the very conditions and norms of heterosexual femininity. She stakes a claim to an explicitly perverse femininity, one defined by its exemption from filial duty, from honor, from reputa-

tion, from family, from material dependency, from heterosexual reproductivity, and finally from biology—or, at least, from the determination that overtakes women because of the biological functioning of their bodies and its social symbolism. This is an eminently queer resistance, a revolt against heteronormative sociality. Veda offers a potent symbol to gay men.

But so does the outraged mother. Who could fail to sympathize with her hurt, her stunned disbelief at the cruelty and ingratitude of her daughter? And who could fail to admire the power of her moral indignation, the righteousness with which she rejects the daughter who has despised and rejected her sincere and long-suffering love? In any case, she is the main character, the star, and the chief focus of the spectator's interest. Veda's repugnant but powerfully charismatic character produces, then, a sense of divided loyalties on the part of the gay male viewer, a complex emotional involvement in this scene of double rejection.

Those divided loyalties are not just psychological. To be sure, that split allegiance might revive or rekindle the childhood memory of a mother imagined as both uniquely indulgent and signally severe, touched by her closeness to her son yet morally or aesthetically disgusted by his queerness. It might reflect the gay son's internalization of both the mother's heteronormative morality and her loving suspension of it in his favor, her double attitude of rejection and acceptance. But it might also express his uncertain and ambivalent relation to the family form and to heteronormative culture itself: his simultaneous contempt for the heterosexual family, its values, symbolism, and emotional claustrophobia, on the one hand, and, on the other, his lingering investment in the honorable and dignified form of life that the family represents and in the bonds of love that it institutes.

Such vicissitudes do not explain or exhaust by themselves the gay appeal of the two scenes in those movies, however. Let us pursue some other social considerations.

MEN ACT, WOMEN APPEAR

D. A. Miller has a different explanation for the peculiar terror that maternal rejection holds for at least some gay men. He gives that terror a central place in his effort to account for the gay appeal of *Gypsy*, a Broadway musical whose plot—significantly enough—revolves once again around a mother-daughter conflict. In the case of *Gypsy*, Miller argues, the figure of the mother acquires a specific meaning. For *Gypsy* is a musical explicitly about the musical, set in the context of vaudeville, and Miller connects the mother with access to the stage, with the permission accorded the queer male child to perform. When the mother suddenly turns on her daughter at the climax of the second-act finale, Miller contends, *Gypsy* administers a particularly nasty shock to the gay male spectator.

Theatrical or musical performance in Western society is not a male birthright. It is far from an inevitable destiny for a man. Men in our society are not routinely summoned to the stage for the purposes of self-display or the pleasure of being gazed at by mixed audiences. “Though male and female alike may and indeed must appear on the musical stage,” Miller points out, “they are not equally welcome there: the female performer will always enjoy the advantage of also being thought to *represent* this stage, as its sign, its celebrant, its essence, and its glory; while the male tends to be suffered on condition that, by the inferiority or subjection of his own talents, he assist the

enhancement of hers.”¹ For a man to occupy the stage and to claim it for himself is to cast doubt on his masculine credentials, as Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly quickly discovered.² Far from consolidating masculine gender identity, the act of appearing on stage entails a certain amount of gender trouble for male performers—trouble which in turn gives rise to a number of complex strategies for containing it and managing it.

What is true for the Broadway stage holds true for the performing arts in general and for performance itself. (Though we should not ignore local variations: John Clum reminds us that “British musicals have historically focused on men, from Ivor Novello and Noël Coward to Jean Valjean and the Phantom. American musicals focus on women, from Ethel Merman to Bernadette Peters and Betty Buckley.”)³ As a rule, any activity that can be construed as “performing” will turn out to be risky business for a man. This is partly because to offer oneself as an object of display in our society is to step into the focus of a putatively male gaze and thereby to take the chance of being feminized. It is also because male performance runs up against a fundamental principle that for centuries has governed the gendered division of representational labor in Western culture. According to that law, that structure of meaning, *doing* is gendered as masculine and *performing* is gendered as feminine. As John Berger summed it up in a celebrated formula, “*men act and women appear.*”⁴

Men do get to perform in public, of course, and sometimes they can perform without deferring to women or casting doubt on their masculine credentials. But they do so only under very special circumstances that produce a specifically masculine coding of their activity—such as when they perform as athletes, or as action heroes, or as politicians. Competitive sports, to pick only the first example, can enjoy a different gender status from that of theatrical performance, and acquire a different social meaning as a result, precisely because the men who are watched playing sports are supposed to be *doing* something, not merely *appearing*. That is especially true for team sports, where the players are watched not for themselves, not as objects of

interest in their own right—as they are in gymnastics or diving, where athletic competition could more easily be accused of providing a diaphanous pretext for conspicuous self-display, and where the masculinity of the participants is therefore more readily impugned. Rather, when the members of a sports team play a match, they are watched as if incidentally, as the authors of an *event*, as the doers of a deed, with the game itself being the point of interest. It is the game that furnishes male spectators with the necessary alibi and cover for the pleasures of gazing at the players, just as it provides the players, in turn, with a proper justification for exhibiting themselves.⁵

Sports, especially (but not only) team sports, are understood to constitute *action*. That is what makes them socially appropriate for men, as well as affirmative and consolidating of masculine gender identity, according to the terms of Berger's analysis. It is also what makes them socially awkward for women—that is, normatively feminine women (lesbians don't feel the same constraints)—though such awkwardness may be diminishing in the United States, especially since congressional passage in 1972 of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act and the corresponding increase in female students' participation in high-school and college athletics.⁶ In the case of men, since competitive team sports are thought to constitute action, male players in a sports match do not appear to be putting on a show for an audience. Instead, their tumultuous activity is imagined to attract an audience, which naturally gathers round them, drawn to the intrinsically gripping spectacle of men in combat. Male competition is usually an edifying sight, and it can be counted on to elicit a respectful gaze from onlookers, whereas the spectacle of female competition, of women in combat . . . well, in the eyes of male spectators at least, that has an unfortunate way of shading off into a display of something vaguely obscene, abject, or disreputable, something that comes uncomfortably close to female mud wrestling.

In a sports match, in any case, we consider that an actual contest is taking place. It is happening before our eyes: an action is occurring, and we are watching a real event, just as we watch other significant

events that take place around us. A game, in other words, is *not* a performance—at least, it is not socially coded as such. When Vaslav Nijinsky imitated the mere *look* of tennis, as if it were a performance or a dance show instead of an athletic competition, and used the distinctive movements of tennis players as the basis for his notorious 1913 ballet *Jeux*, critics were outraged: they complained indignantly that he seemed to have no understanding of the actual rules of the game or the point of playing it.⁷ It is no accident, then, that sports matches—with one or two rare exceptions—are never reenacted, restaged, or reperformed exactly as they originally transpired. They must be seen to occur only once, because their very definition demands that they appear to be *unscripted*: in order to qualify as an “event,” they must consist in a single, spontaneous action that concludes once and for all when it is over and that cannot be repeated. Their masculine gender-coding both requires and results from the event’s unique, historically specific status. That is what imparts to action its singular prestige.

Of course, in our postmodern society, male sports stars get to cultivate a flamboyant image which they embellish with performative antics of various sorts. That tendency, which began perhaps with the boxer Muhammad Ali, has come to be an expected, or at least a tolerated, feature of the mass-mediated sports world, just as it is now a feature of straight masculinity. We see it in the little dances that football players do in end zones as well as in the jewelry, tattoos, and hairstyles of professional basketball players like Dennis Rodman (though Rodman claimed he never “fit into the mold of the NBA man”).⁸ And that doesn’t even begin to account for the meteoric career of David Beckham, who has devoted himself to *appearing* at least as much as he has to *doing*.⁹ Professional sports are becoming more and more like theater, a vast and endless melodrama continually played out on cable channels like ESPN and in the sports pages of newspapers and magazines. Sporting events themselves, however, still retain a gender-coding distinct from that of staged performance.

By contrast with sports stars, those entertainers whose job it is not to win a contest but to perform a scenario on a stage—whether in se-

rious theater, the Broadway musical, the opera, or the ballet—are feminized as a consequence. Even though such performers often do exceptionally strenuous things on stage, they are considered not to *do* but to *appear*. And for a simple reason: *their action is predetermined and dictated by the stipulations of a preexisting script.*¹⁰ They aren't making their own decisions; they aren't acting on their own authority; they aren't putting into play a chosen strategy for dealing with a rapidly changing set of circumstances, in accordance with certain rules and their best, lightning-quick assessment of their total situation. No, they have been told how to behave, and their performance acknowledges their submission to the dictates of others, as well as to a specific series of formalized demands that they have undertaken to carry out. Instead of having a deed to do, *they have a role to play.*

That, significantly, entails no gender trouble for divas or ballerinas or actresses. But, given the standard opposition in heteronormative culture between roles and essences—which is isomorphic with other corresponding oppositions between artifice and nature, appearing and being, inauthenticity and authenticity, performance and identity, femininity and masculinity—it does pose a considerable problem for the gender identity of male singers or dancers or actors. Because such figures do not accomplish an action but perform an already defined and scripted role, they lack, despite all their virtuosity (and musculature, at least in the case of dancers), the masculine dignity of sports stars or politicians of either gender, who do not know at the start of the game what exactly they will be doing with their bodies or how they will conduct themselves in the course of the action that is to follow.



It is in this context of gender panic surrounding “the forbidden fantasy of male theatrical exhibition,” and the consequently dubious status of the male performer, that the mother, according to D. A. Miller, reveals her true significance—as both the source and validation of her

son's desire to perform, as well as the site of a particularly precious social permission (75). The mother's approval exempts her son from the terroristic surveillance and enforcement of masculine sex-roles, while his identification with her gives him access to the space of performance itself.

Yet why should he brave such stigma at all if he hadn't been enlisted under the power—more ancient and tenacious—of a *solicitation*? For if he now finds himself putting up with a theatre whose clientele throws fruit at him, it is because his desire to perform was first exercised elsewhere, through a so much more heartening modeling of theatrical identities and relations that, in effect, he still hasn't left this earlier stage, where, just as he had taken his first steps, or uttered his first words there, he would sing and dance for a woman who called him to performance, and acclaimed him with applause even before he was through, prompting him if he faltered with some song or dance of her own, almost as though she were coaching him to be her understudy in a role that either generosity, or timidity, or some other thing kept her from playing herself. In short, contending against the established musical-theatrical regime that feminizes access to the performing space, a Mother Stage has universalized the desire to play there. (80–81)

This punning statement is at once a reading of *Gypsy*, an allegory of gay male development (all that talk of “stages”), and an exercise in cultural theory. The mother figures here as stage, audience, coach, and star: the ground of the boy's identity and the portal through which he gains access to himself as a subject. She is a figure of the musical (86) and the person in whose name the musical genre is elaborated (83). Just as her encouragement accompanied her son's first words or first steps, so her indulgence provides a lasting warrant for his performance—which he executes at once *for her, with her, and as her* (86). It is in her shadow, under her auspices, and through an identification with her that the queer boy who happens to be her son is encouraged/prohibited to accede to his own social and subjective

agency—that is, to perform—and is thereby enabled to secure, precariously and improbably, his own identity, his own uncertain and provisory place in a hostile social world.

In the context of *Gypsy*, Miller is able to argue that the mother's rejection of the daughter, and the mother's attempt to reclaim the stage for herself at the end of the musical, produce a particularly disempowering and devastating shock when viewed from the perspective of a boy whose own access to performance had originally been authorized by the figure of his mother—a mother who had once led him to believe that, through her, he might have a place. The mother's final turn against her offspring reanimates the dread that her love had always excited, the dread “of being exiled from her presence” (112). After all, it was his mother's permission that not only had managed to suspend, if only for a time, the prohibitive feminine gendering of the theatrical stage, but also had allowed the boy to pretend to the sort of social identity and subjective fullness that he could achieve only by imaginatively performing it. In the end, Miller concludes, *Gypsy* (especially its cataclysmic concluding number, “Rose's Turn”) allows no possibility of either “reconciliation” or “choice . . . between the adored mother who keeps a place for us and the resented monster who keeps it from us” (120).



It is tempting to make a corresponding argument about the gay appeal of the climactic confrontation between mother and daughter in *Mildred Pierce*. At the least, it is tempting to speculate that the camp value of that melodramatic episode may lie in its invitation to gay men to return harmlessly to the scene of a similar trauma (real or fantasized): the trauma of being exiled from the mother's presence and from the limelight of her indulgence, permission, and social validation. It is by appropriating *Mildred Pierce*'s hyperbolic reenactment of the scene of maternal rejection, and *Mommie Dearest*'s even more histrionic version of it, that gay male culture can, on this interpretation, restage in an exaggerated, ludic, and reparative mode the horror

of the mother's savage withdrawal of the warrant she once gave her queer child to perform, the warrant that licensed his very existence as a subject.

And some such socio-symbolic dynamic may be operative in the gay male response to *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest*. It may well explain the specificity of the emotional impact of those two scenes on a gay male audience. But we should note that what makes such a hypothesis compelling in the case of *Gypsy* is its strict connection with Miller's close reading of the musical itself, a reading that generates the hypothesis in the first place. Miller does not depend on vague psychological generalities of the sort I have been trafficking in throughout the preceding paragraph. His reading does not demand to be applied to other musicals, let alone to other cultural forms, and it loses its point when it is generalized. Miller is not articulating a general truth: he is describing the specific meaning of a specific social form. At this juncture in the development of queer cultural analysis, *each vehicle of gay male identification—each line, each scene, each movie or musical, each diva—needs to be studied in all its particularity*, so as to disclose the meaning of the unique formal structure that constitutes it.

In the present case, it is enough to observe that *Mildred Pierce* is indeed about performance, specifically about the performance of maternal abjection. But it is not about the stage, nor does it represent the mother as a figure who provides her child with a precious point of entry to the performance of a socially valorized identity. (On the contrary: Mildred marries Monte in order to offer Veda a chance to escape the degrading necessity of performing musical numbers before a male audience on a cabaret stage.) No doubt the scene of violent confrontation between mother and daughter in *Mildred Pierce* offers the gay spectator a camp opportunity to work through the traumatic possibility of maternal rejection and, hence, social deauthorization. Nonetheless, Miller's reading does not apply directly to *Mildred Pierce* with the same degree of plausibility or rigor as it does to *Gypsy*. Miller's usefulness to us is of a more general nature.

The virtue of Miller's analysis is to locate the meaning of maternal

rejection in the social codes of performance and the sexual politics of spectacle. It thereby provides a model for how to situate the drama of mother-daughter conflict, and the spectacle of a generational struggle between women, in an analysis of the symbolic and subjective dimensions of the structures of social meaning, in an understanding of the social and political semantics of cultural form that does not depend on clichés of pop psychology or psychoanalysis. The same thing applies to Proust's portrayal of the child's attempt both to be loved by the mother and to control her. These approaches allow us to connect gay male subjectivity with a larger set of social dynamics and cultural meanings.

No doubt some gay men have found in the scene in *Mildred Pierce* a means of reworking the spectacle of maternal rage so as to defuse the hurtful trace-memories of maternal rejection, a rejection with highly specific emotional resonances for queer children. But there are other ways of using the structural elements of the scene to produce an analysis of its gay appeal.



The spectacle that magnetizes the audience's attention in both scenes from *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest* is the spectacle of women "losing it," of women who pass beyond the breaking point and go out of control. That spectacle of raw emotion, of free-flowing, unobstructed passion finally bursting through the decorum of social life, is one long associated with the female subject. From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to *Madame Bovary*, women are the traditional vehicle in European culture for the expression of erotic subjectivity, and of emotional excess. At least until the time of Rousseau and Goethe, when men began to take the business of erotic subjectivity over from women, and to write about male sexual sensibilities in their own persons or in the persons of male characters, women were the preferred medium for the representation of passionate emotion. Female characters were useful to male authors. They allowed such authors to pen scenes of passion and to voice hyperbolic emotion without having to

speak in their own persons. In this way, women became established sites for the extreme expression of human feeling.

Another reason emotional excess has been traditionally gendered as feminine is that it correlates with relative powerlessness. People in authority don't have to yell and scream to get what they want. They simply make their wishes known. Newcomers to power may exhibit a tendency to throw temper tantrums—executives may mistreat their subordinates, wealthy housewives may torment their servants—but histrionics are generally supposed to be incompatible with the dignity of command. And the more authority you have, the less likely you are to “lose it.”

Joan Crawford, in *Mommie Dearest*, despite her tyrannizing of Christina and her many outbursts of hysterical abuse, cannot manage to wrest from her adoptive daughter the respect to which she considers herself entitled—and it is precisely for this reason that she has to bewail the absence of it and make impotently violent efforts to reclaim it. That is partly what motivates the histrionics. It is Joan Crawford's very powerlessness that intensifies her rage: she cannot do—she can only vent. So “losing it” signifies the complete opposite of social effectiveness. It reveals the outlines of a *politics of emotion* that gay men share with women and other subordinated persons whose desires are deauthorized and who cannot get the respect they seek: a politics of hysteria or emotional surplus.¹¹ Such hysteria is inflated further by the delegitimation of all public manifestation of homosexual feeling. The life of gay sentiment, socially disqualified from the start, can find expression only in what looks like histrionics, rage, maudlin self-pity, hyperbolic passion, and excess.

But it might also be possible to argue the opposite: that the spectacle of women “losing it” conveys not powerlessness but the frightening power of the downtrodden, when they finally snap under the burden of intolerable oppression. The two scenes from *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest* display, according to this perspective, the uncanny terror of a womanliness that breaks through the norms of polite decorum and finally lets itself go.

Mildred Pierce's underwriting of what we might now call moments of feminist rage helps to explain the particular appeal of Joan Crawford to her legions of female fans: she's the good girl, tough but brave and loyal, hard-working and decent, destined to rise in the world, but faced with terrible odds, who—when pushed to the breaking point—is fully entitled to strike out and let the world have it, especially the people she loves who have let her down. Notorious not only for her combination of glamour and abjection, but also for her demented fury, both in a number of her film roles and in select stories about her personal life, Joan Crawford could symbolize resistance, feistiness, strength, determination, and invincible will—a (feminist) spirit encapsulated in her infamous rebuke to the board of directors of Pepsi-Cola, who, after her husband's death, had tried to sideline her in an unsuccessful effort to prevent her from succeeding him as chairman of the board: "Don't fuck with me, fellas!" As that very line indicates (recall Lypsinka's performance of it), Joan Crawford made a career out of asserting herself despite, and in the midst of, her evident vulnerability.

Divas may be cartoon women, but they are not without a certain power and authority of their own. After all, divas are superstars. They are not only caricatures of femininity and epitomes of what our society regards as unserious—not only extravagant, grotesque, and larger than life. They are also *fierce*. Femininity in them gathers force, intensity, authority, and prestige. Femininity may lack social seriousness, but it is not bereft of passion or fury or dominance. For all its unseriousness, it retains an element of danger. Without trying to claim male power or privilege and, thus, without seeming to take on masculine gender characteristics (unlike, in this respect, certain female politicians or lawyers or executives or other women in positions of authority), divas nonetheless manage to achieve a position of social mastery. Instead of contesting or subverting conventional femininity, they acquire power through an exaggerated, excessive, hyperbolic, over-the-top performance of it (that is precisely what makes some feminists suspicious of them).

Abjection, moreover, can be just as powerful as glamour. Those who are relegated to the ranks of the unserious have no reason to behave themselves. Unconstrained as they are by propriety, they can become completely unrestrained. *They have nothing to lose by "losing it."* They can afford to let themselves go, to be extravagant, to assert themselves through their undignified and indecent flamboyance. Divas are people for whom glamour represents a triumph, perhaps the only possible triumph—and for whom Style is a true Utopia. Aestheticism becomes a weapon in their hands. By wielding it, divas manage to be successful against the odds.

Divas disclose a form of power that gay men can claim as their own. In *Mildred Pierce*, Joan Crawford embodies precisely that kind of fierceness. Confronting her disdainful daughter with a sudden flash of fury in that notorious, climactic scene, she gives eloquent and glamorous expression to the ferocity already simmering within people who have long been marginalized and abused—a ferocity easily ignited under conditions of extreme stress. Call it the power of hysteria, or call it the insurrection of the abject; call it even feminist rage: perhaps these are all different names for the same thing. In any case, what we are dealing with in the scenes from both *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest* is not the terroristic power of male intimidation and domination, but the power of the victim who isn't going to take it any more, and who returns in triumph, "wounded and dominant," to confront her persecutors with the full force of her pain.¹²

If only the teased and bullied queer child, when cornered on the playground, or if only the abused lover, when betrayed and mistreated by his boyfriend, could manage to summon and to channel that righteous, triumphant fury, the fierceness and glamour of Joan Crawford, he might find within himself the courage, the strength, and the conviction to bash back.

Such moments have in fact been possible. At least one of the stories about the Stonewall riots has it that what inspired the crowd outside the bar to resist, what set off its fury and caused the riots, was the sight of a drag queen who was being hustled into a police van and

who, in a sudden spasm of outrage, hit an officer with her purse.¹³ The entire history of gay liberation, contestation, and resistance may owe a direct debt to *Mildred Pierce*, then—or, if not exactly to *Mildred Pierce*, at least to the social form and emotional experience of which it is both a classic instance and a definitive mass-cultural expression: the drama of enraged female powerlessness suddenly and dazzlingly transformed into momentary, headlong, careless, furious, resistless power.



There are other possible interpretations of this moment when social barriers fall before the onrush of unstoppable emotion. Something about the exhilaration of an affect that triumphs over social inhibition suggests the euphoria inchoate in any heroic refusal to live a lie. The emotional keynote in these scenes, according to such a view, would be not excess but honesty. If we read the two scenes straight as moments of truth, we may find in them an echo-effect of the experience (actual or imagined) of coming out of the closet. On this account, the appeal of these scenes to gay men derives from gay men's personal recognition of the giddy, intense boldness of that vertiginous resolve when you finally decide to say what you've been bottling up inside for so long. On this (typically post-Stonewall) reading, the crucial threshold is crossed when Veda says to Mildred, with mingled menace, provocation, aggression, insinuation, and seductiveness, "Are you sure you want to know? [Mildred: "Yes."] Then I'll tell you." Veda's subsequent avowal is met with an equal candor on Mildred's part, in her wonderfully camp reply (suitable for repetition and reperformance on any number of occasions): "Veda, I think I'm really seeing you for the first time in my life, and you're cheap and horrible."



All of the interpretations rehearsed in both this chapter and the previous one touch on important aspects of the scene from *Mildred Pierce*. We will return to elements of them. But some of them depend too

obviously on a thematic or psychological or allegorical reading, which treats the mother-daughter conflict as a simple encoding of gay male experience (maternal rejection, disempowerment, defiance, coming out). Much gay male experience, of course, is encoded in that scene: it is surely the case that some gay men thrill to this cinematic moment because they find represented in it emotions that are familiar to them from their own lives, situations of which they already have abundant personal experience and considerable direct knowledge. Which may explain why gay male culture has seized on the scene, and on the movie as a whole.

But more needs to be said before we can fully understand how Joan Crawford has come to serve as proxy identity for some gay men. Too many of the interpretations I have just rehearsed share a common tendency to explain gay male culture's choice of its material over-literally, explaining it away instead of explaining it, and forgetting the important lesson that we have already learned: what gay men love about their non-gay cultural icons is those icons' very figurality. All those literalist interpretations imply, instead, that the gay men who respond to *Mildred Pierce* can do so only by translating the terms of that movie entirely into their own reality—by *gaying* Joan Crawford, and by reading the mother-daughter melodrama as a literal representation of gay male life—rather than by understanding it as a figure, or metaphor, and as a point of entry into a queer world. Such literalism makes this cinematic moment into a mere reflection of gay *identity* instead of a powerful vehicle of gay *identification* and an expression of gay desire. Just as, in the case of the Broadway musical, it is not by putting gay men or representations of gay male life on the stage that you realize gay desire, so in this case it is not by interpreting *Mildred Pierce* or Joan Crawford as a stand-in for a gay man that you are likely to unlock the secret of their gay appeal.

This literalizing tendency recurs in explanations that highlight Joan Crawford's masculinity—why, just look at those shoulder pads!—or that treat her and Faye Dunaway in *Mommie Dearest* as drag queens, as if those considerations alone explained gay male culture's fascination

with her.¹⁴ No one, of course, could miss the butch theatrics of Joan Crawford's performance in *Johnny Guitar*, or deny that *Mommie Dearest* is premised on the uncanny pleasures of female impersonation (if only Faye Dunaway's impersonation of Joan Crawford). But the problem with these literal interpretations is that by appearing to be so knowing, so certain about what is at stake for gay male culture in the iconic figure of Joan Crawford (whether that be butch display or hyperfeminine performance), such interpretations hasten to close down the interpretive issues before us, pretending to a more complete understanding of gay male culture's relation to femininity than they can deliver. Instead of identifying the specific elements that actually elicit the subjective involvement of gay male spectators, they offer a truism masquerading as the truth of gay identification. In this way, they presume the answer they should be looking for, and they effectively block further inquiry into the logic behind the gay male response—as if a passing glance at those shoulder pads were enough to settle the whole matter once and for all.

Also, the two interpretations tend to cancel each other out. It is hard to see how Joan Crawford can be both a butch woman and a drag queen at the same time, both lacking in femininity and hyperperforming femininity. Or, rather—and this is perhaps the point of each interpretation—it is hard to see how both claims could be true unless the point of each of them is that Joan Crawford isn't really a woman at all, that she represents gay male identity and is, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, a gay man in drag.

But that conclusion is inaccurate. It denies Crawford's famous and formidable feminine glamour, which admittedly depends on a strategic mingling of masculine and feminine features, and it resists acknowledging what we have learned to call "female masculinity," the many sorts of masculinity that women, *as women*, can perform.¹⁵ It is unfair to Crawford, insofar as it refuses to recognize or attend to her carefully cultivated—and shifting—style of female embodiment, as well as her complex negotiation of feminine identity. It is unflattering, in different ways, both to women and to gay men, because it ig-

nores what makes them different from each other and it fails to credit them with their subjective specificities, which after all are what lay the basis for the possibility of cross-identification. And so it misunderstands how a proxy identity produced by such cross-identification actually works—that is, how exactly Joan Crawford functions as a proxy identity for some gay men.



In any case, it is critically important not to reduce gay identification to gay identity. For such a reduction would remove the very problem it had set out to solve, erasing what it proposes to explain—namely, the meaning of gay male culture's feminine identifications. If Joan Crawford, or other feminine figures with whom gay men have identified, were not really women, if they were somehow disguised versions of gay men all along, then one could not properly speak of gay men's relations to them as *identifications*. Gay male culture's fixation on those figures would simply represent a reflection of gay male *identity* itself. There would be no process of decoding and recoding to study, and gay men's cultural practices would tell us nothing in particular about gay male subjectivity beyond some common and obvious psychological commonplaces. Instead of inquiring into the logic underlying gay male culture's refashioning of heterosexual culture, we would be observing gay culture's identity-consolidating recognition of gay meanings already present in heterosexual culture. That is not to interpret the phenomenon, but to abolish it—by collapsing identification into identity, by reducing desire to identity. It is to deny the very existence of gay culture—to abolish male homosexuality as a specifically cultural practice.

If *Mildred Pierce* and the Broadway musical were simply encoded representations of gay identity, we would expect that the open, explicitly gay, out-and-proud, identity-based culture of the post-Stonewall period would have put them out of business long ago, since nowadays gay men have access to the real thing, to uncensored and direct representations of themselves: they no longer have to settle for

encrypted or figural versions, and they don't have to go to all the trouble of reappropriating them. Remember what Andrew Sullivan gleefully proclaimed when he announced "the end of gay culture": gay men nowadays no longer have "to find hidden meaning in mainstream films—somehow identifying with the aging, campy female lead in a way the rest of the culture missed."¹⁶ And Sullivan is perfectly right: gay men *don't have to do this* any more. But they still do it. They do it anyway. For lots of gay men, Joan Crawford, the Golden Girls, Lady Gaga, and many other camp icons continue to exercise a certain power and appeal, though mainstream gay commentators like Sullivan, who would prefer that they didn't, assert that they don't. That seemingly confident assertion, however, expresses not a fact but a wish—and one that is not likely to be fulfilled anytime soon.

It is not even clear that the term "identification," borrowed from ego psychology for the sake of mere convenience, gets at what is really going on in gay male culture's investments in figures like Joan Crawford. Identification was classically defined by Freud as a desire to be, rather than a desire to have, but it is highly uncertain whether gay men (or other adepts of gay culture who thrill to *Mildred Pierce*) literally want to *be* Joan Crawford—however much they may enjoy the sensation of projecting themselves into her persona or imagining themselves in her role. In fact, it is very likely that most of Joan Crawford's queer fans do not seriously wish to be her and would certainly not choose to be her, if they could. The term "identification" seems to be yet another example of a crude, imprecise placeholder for a more accurate description or analysis or category that we currently lack. "Identification" is a way of saying that gay male culture is, somehow, complexly engaged with the figure of Joan Crawford—that some gay men have been mesmerized by that figure, struck by its figural possibilities, emotionally involved with it, or transported by the relations of proximity or correspondence or coincidence that they have been able to establish with it. "Identification," "dis-identification," and "cross-identification" all represent efforts to articulate the general, vague conviction that the engagement of gay

male culture with Joan Crawford's image or persona accomplishes something important, something meaningful, something particularly valuable for those who participate in that culture.

What we may be dealing with, in the end, is a specific kind of engagement that somehow mobilizes complex relations of similarity and difference—but without constituting subjects or objects in the usual ways. Instead, that mobilization produces fields of practice and feeling that map out possibilities for contact or interrelation among cultural forms and their audiences, consumers, or publics, and that get transmitted from one generation to another. We simply have no good languages for that phenomenon—only a variety of critical vernaculars (such as “identification”), all of them misleading or harmful or inexact. The most we can hope to do, in this situation, is to remain open to the indeterminate character of those fields of practice and feeling, along with the metaphorical or figural nature of the social processes themselves.

THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF GENRE

Let us return to the two scenes from *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest*. Now that we are able to situate their gay appeal in the larger context of the sexual politics of cultural form, we can begin to discern a central element in the gay response to those scenes that we have been neglecting. The key to understanding the logic behind gay culture's appropriation of the two scenes, it turns out, can be found in a single, simple, and basic—if paradoxical—fact: the entire drama of mother-daughter conflict is one from which, by definition, men are absent.¹

The quickest and easiest way to grasp the full significance of that absence is to consider how different the effect of the two scenes, their meaning, and their reception would be if they featured not a mother and a daughter, but a father and a son.

Once you ask yourself that question, you don't need to reflect on it for very long. The differences are decisive, and their consequences apparent.

A story about a father who throws his son out of the house or disowns him, or about a father who plots against his son or plans his death; an incident in which a son strikes his father; a story about a son who tries to kill his father: the mere mention of such scenarios is sufficient to evoke the familiar masterplots of European literature and culture—to say nothing of Freudian psychoanalysis. We are immedi-

ately transported to the world of the Bible, to the story of Joseph and his brothers, or the tale of the prodigal son. We are reminded of the epic generational quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in Homer's *Iliad*, or the theater of dynastic/domestic turmoil that reaches all the way from the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles to the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller.

Such generational struggles between father and son are very serious business. Indeed, they are the stuff of high tragedy.

A generational conflict between women, by contrast, even at its most serious or passionate, cannot rise above the level of melodrama.

That is not, of course, a statement of my personal feelings about the matter. I am not endorsing this cultural attitude, or the social meaning of gender that it expresses; I'm simply reporting it. It is a cultural fact that in Western society a generational conflict between women cannot help appearing, at least in the eyes of a socially authorized (i.e., male) spectator, as vaguely disreputable—tending to the excessive, the hysterical, the hyperbolic, or the grotesque—and, in any case, less than fully serious.

Can you think of a single example of a generational conflict between women in Western literature that can claim the same tragic grandeur as the male generational struggles of the *Iliad* or *Oedipus Rex*? Conflicts between mothers and sons are genuine contenders for that lofty status (consider *Hamlet* or the *Oresteia*, just for starters), but struggles between women belonging to different generations are simply not the stuff of tragedy. Sophocles's *Electra* comes closest, but ultimately what gives that drama its seriousness is its proximate, ancillary relation to the dynastic preoccupations of male culture: paternal inheritance, royal succession, the transmission of property from father to son, and the continuation of the male line. Electra steps into a patriarchal function (and thus into a tragic dignity), because the male heroes are absent from the scene for most of the play and no one but Electra is willing to take the place of the male heir. Electra alone vol-

unteers to fill that essential role and to oppose the ascendancy of her mother. Sophocles is careful, nonetheless, to stop the action cold, just as Electra, Joan Crawford-like, reaches for the axe. It is at that critical juncture that male heroes suddenly appear on the scene, take over from Electra, and complete the dramatic action, making sure it remains fully serious and dignified. Sophocles thereby preserves the sublime beauty of his tragedy from the melodramatic bathos of *Mommie Dearest*.

The reaction of a heterosexual male friend of mine to Jules Dassin's 1978 film *A Dream of Passion*—a brilliant interrogation of the possible contemporary uses of Euripides's *Medea* for feminist politics—exemplifies and enacts the cultural logic at work here. *A Dream of Passion* features Dassin's famous wife, Melina Mercouri, playing an iconic Greek actress, one rather like herself, who returns to Greece from political exile, after the fall of the military junta in 1973, to perform the role of Medea. Her male director, who in the plot of the movie is also her former husband, judging that her interpretation of the role is too political, too feminist, and not sufficiently passionate, arranges for her to meet a young American woman (played by Ellen Burstyn), who happens to be serving a life sentence in Athens for the crime of killing her children: knowing nothing of classical literature, or feminism, she seems to have unwittingly reincarnated the personage of Medea when her Greek husband, like Jason in the plot of the original story, abandoned his foreign spouse on his native soil for a Greek wife. The encounter between the two women changes the actress's understanding of herself, of her identity as a woman, of the history and politics of her relations with men; and ultimately it alters her interpretation of the dramatic role, though whether it does so for better or for worse is difficult to say. The result is a contemporary feminist (or perhaps a counter-feminist) version of Euripides's celebrated tragedy.

The movie is a determined attempt to revive a tragic mode of feeling, to reanimate the true spirit of tragedy in a modern context by drawing on an ancient source, and to figure out whether such a thing

as feminist tragedy is possible. I found the film deeply moving, and I took it seriously, so I was startled—and deflated—when my friend, an accomplished dramatist himself, said to me gently but reprovably as the lights came up, “David, it *was* a trifle overwrought.”

My friend was not entirely wrong about the movie. Nonetheless, his urbane and effortless put-down indicates the kinds of barriers that any drama of passionate female feeling, of tension and conflict between older and younger women, has to surmount before being admitted by culturally privileged men to the protected, exclusive preserve of tragic seriousness (within which *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *All My Sons* manage to come off, by dint of some miraculous feat of cultural magic, and in utter defiance of all the evidence to the contrary, as *not* overwrought—not even “a trifle”).



Mommie Dearest offers a particularly clear and instructive demonstration of the relations between gender and genre. It enables us to discern the sexual politics that electrify the protective cordon surrounding the privileged domain of tragedy. For *Mommie Dearest*’s solemn portrayal of emotional and physical violence is a stellar example of failed seriousness—the very quality that Susan Sontag correctly identified as a defining feature of camp.² But why does the movie’s effort to represent a situation that is both tragic and horrifying fall through, or fall short of the requirements for true seriousness, and become laughable?

There are plenty of reasons you could cite: the two-dimensional, kabuki-like character portrayals; the overacting; the extended scenes of outrageous emotional excess; the earnestness and sententiousness of the story—“great thumping plot points,” as one of our Amazon reviewers aptly put it, to which “subtlety and sensitivity take a back seat.” The visual editing also contributes an important element, especially the alienating deployment of raised and distant camera angles at the end of the scene (see, for example, Figure 15), which encour-

ages the spectator's emotional detachment from the characters and turns the confrontation between the two women into pure spectacle—a spectacle staged specifically for distant and bemused (male) consumption.

Particularly humiliating to the characters, and therefore flattering to the spectator, especially the male spectator, is the insistent glimpse of Tina's childish white underwear. Such an undignified, downright demeaning exposure of the character's pathetic vulnerability would be utterly unthinkable in *Mildred Pierce*; it would be as out of keeping with the suave style of the movie as those removed and alienating camera angles. The glimpse of Tina's underwear is at once pitiful, ridiculous, distancing, and titillating. Without exactly being pornographic, it combines the two characteristics of pornography that cultural feminists deplore—in fact, it may do so better than some works of actual pornography—namely, the prurient and the degrading.

But the centrality of the conflict between mother and daughter in the plot of the movie does a lot to compound the story's overall lack of dignity. In fact, by magnifying the histrionics of *Mildred Pierce* to a grotesque degree, *Mommie Dearest* brings out the implicit unseriousness of the earlier film, despite its relative earnestness, tastefulness, and verisimilitude. By pushing to an extreme the elements of overheated feeling, emotional excess, and passionate intensity already present in *Mildred Pierce*, *Mommie Dearest* teaches us to view the earlier movie's more realistic and (relatively) sober representation of the conflict between mother and daughter as already imbued with a deliriously over-the-top quality, already verging on the hysterical, already given over to a reductive, patronizing vision—at once glamorous and abject—of women and femininity: already disqualified, in short, as a candidate for serious consideration, for the honorific status of tragedy.

And once *Mildred Pierce*, too, begins to be viewed as excessive—as “overwrought”—which is to say, once it ceases to be taken straight and comes to be regarded instead with a modicum of detachment, condescension, and irony (as it was not by its original, working-class

female audience), it forfeits its claim to tragic dignity, just as *Mommie Dearest* does, and sinks helplessly to the degraded status of melodrama, that despised and abject subgenre.



Gay men, for all their cultural differences from straight men, are still men, and their relation to the melodramatic scene of maternal conflict is therefore bound to be different in at least one crucial respect from the emotional involvement of those female spectators who were the prime targets of classic Joan Crawford movies and who were, in any case, her biggest fans. However rapturously or deliriously gay male spectators may identify with the characters in the movie, their identification is mediated by their gender difference. It has to be more oblique than the identification of women, who could see themselves in Crawford on the basis of a shared social positioning, of common experiences, struggles, and aspirations—on the basis, that is, of some degree of identity.

Gay men can certainly identify with Mildred Pierce, but, being men, they cannot do it straightforwardly or unironically. Their identification, however headlong and intoxicated, requires a certain amount of imaginative work. It is *necessarily* accompanied by a significant degree of dis-identification and distance, and it is inevitably filtered by irony. But irony doesn't spell rejection, and "dis-identification" here is precisely *not* the opposite of "identification": it is not a refusal or a repudiation of identification. What we are dealing with, once again, is a complex play of identity and difference, an oscillating ironic doubleness—the very kind of ironic doubleness that is essential to camp sensibility. This simultaneous coincidence of passionate investment and alienated bemusement, so typical of gay male culture, is what structures the gay male response to the scene.

I do not mean to imply, of course, that women cannot also have an ironic or distanced perspective on *Mildred Pierce*. I do not suppose for a moment that their relation to the film is destined to be and to remain one of unqualified earnestness, of uncritical, literal identifica-

tion and mirroring, as if they were incapable of bringing to the film a camp sensibility of their own.³ My point is simply that their relation to the film is not necessarily, inevitably ironic; furthermore, their unironic identification is mightily encouraged by the film. It is only with a certain lapse of time and a corresponding change of taste or fashion that it becomes easier and nearly irresistible for many women not to take the movie straight, as gay men could never do. And, as time goes on, some women may even allow themselves to be schooled in the dynamics of spectatorial irony and in the play of identification/dis-identification by gay male viewing practices, which lately have become so pervasive and so widely appealing. Nonetheless, for female spectators an ironic response to the movie is not predestined or inescapable. Even today, those feminist film critics who are women continue to debate, in all earnestness, how seriously to take the film—in particular, how seriously to take the film's feminist implications—a question that gay male critics largely ignore, and that appears not to interest them.



The gay male spectator, positioned eccentrically with respect to the canonical form of the nuclear family, is also more likely than either straight women or straight men to nourish an ironic perspective on the drama of familial conflict itself. Within the miniature world of the family, however, there is nothing ironic about performances of either love or hate. Family dramas are compulsively overacted, inflated out of all proportion to the apparent stakes in them, and thus ineluctably histrionic. What gets expressed in family conflicts tends almost inevitably to exceed what is actually felt. In fact, the only way that what is felt *can* be expressed seems to be through an insistently hyperbolic acting-out of it.

Do you feel that your daughter's, or your lover's, behavior to you implies a certain lack of deference to your sensibilities? Don't just say so. Scream at them. Ask them, in aggrieved, self-pitying, and grandiose tones, "Why can't you give me the respect that I'm entitled to?"

This apparently necessary and unavoidable overacting is also what endows the emotional excesses of personal interactions within the family with their intrinsic falseness. Are you taken aback by your daughter's, or your lover's, coldness to you? Don't just remonstrate with them. Make them feel how utterly shocked and disappointed you are in them, how nothing in your entire existence has prepared you for their lamentable, culpable ingratitude. Say, with haughty disdain, "[Veda,] I think I'm really seeing you for the first time in my life." That is certainly a grand, crushing pronouncement. It indicates the boundless extent of your hurt and disgust. But as a statement of fact, it is, obviously, less than completely honest. Considered in itself, it's perfectly untrue.

Finally, it is the very falseness of the sentiments expressed in family conflicts that, when combined with their extravagant expression, motivates their violence. For so much excessive and hollow emotion requires justification, and no rational explanation is available to justify its hyperbolic extremes. Since no adequate justification can be found, you will have to assert it by force. Violence is required. Slap your mother. Slap your daughter. Slap your lover.

The mingled violence, sentimentality, falseness, and histrionics of the emotions that are at the heart of family conflicts make the family into a permanent site of melodrama. For melodrama, as a degraded subgenre, is characterized by precisely such a combination of elements: a pitch of emotional intensity that appears to be excessive or extravagant; overacting; hence, falseness (if spectators judge a performance to be "melodramatic," what they mean is that they find it hokey and "untrue to reality"); and a plot adorned with violent climaxes.

It makes no difference whether the family in question is your family of origin, your family of choice, or your newly composed gay or lesbian family.

Being, as it is, a permanent site of melodrama, the family virtually demands that we bring an ironic perspective to bear on it. And in fact an ironic relation, which is to say the relation to drama of a spectator

who is at once involved with it and disengaged from it—in this case, the specific relation to female melodrama of a gay male spectator—may be the best, perhaps the only possible defense against the suffocating emotional claustrophobia of family life. For what irony allows, in keeping with the pragmatics of camp, is the possibility of viewing the histrionics of family life as both horrifying and hilarious at the same time, without assimilating either dimension of those histrionics to the other. It offers an alienated outlook on intense emotion that—unlike the withering judgment of my straight friend on *A Dream of Passion*—is neither skeptical nor reductive.

Mildred Pierce and *Mommie Dearest*, when they are viewed from that alienated (though still emotionally engaged) perspective, teach gay men—and anyone else who subscribes to gay male culture—how to survive the woes of the family unit. For they teach them the practical uses of irony. Or perhaps the converse is true: the pleasure that gay male culture takes in appropriating those films reflects the ironic attitude gay men had long cultivated in order to distance and thereby to insulate themselves from the hurtful histrionics of family life—without, however, denying the deadly earnestness of those histrionics, their power to inflict real injury and pain. In any case, irony provides an effective and handy weapon against an inescapable social form whose ideological functioning requires, in order to prevail, both an uncritical belief in it and the violent assertion of its authenticity.



Gay male culture's hard-won ironic vision of the falseness and performative character of family sentiments also registers something more general and more profound about emotional expression. It reflects the very structure of *the social life of feeling*. In particular, it testifies to the inevitable gap between what is *felt* and what in any specific context is capable of being *expressed*.

A certain effort of will is usually required in order to render the expression of a feeling adequate to the nature of the feeling itself—as

the melodrama of everyday family life demonstrates. And such an effort may be strenuously necessary for gay men, who have no ready-made social forms available to them for expressing their feelings, and whose every expression of an emotion therefore has to orient itself in relation to a preexisting, heteronormative social form, or genre, of which it can be only an imitation or a parody. No wonder gay men have a reputation for being given to melodrama in their styles of emotional expression. But even for heterosexuals, even beyond the melodramatic world of the family, the task of conveying outwardly what is felt inwardly may have something awkward or histrionic or embarrassing about it. There is almost inevitably an element of excess, or inauthenticity, or even travesty in the expression of any grand passion. One might even say that what makes a passion grand, what inflates the emotions that constitute it, is this very consciousness of the impossibility of their transparent expression—and the consequent need to find a way of bodying them forth that will answer to the representational requirements of their grandeur.

Such a gap between feeling and its expression, when *not* acknowledged ironically, generates the tragic sublimity that attaches to the master narratives of male generational conflict in European culture. In Homer's *Iliad*, for example, when Agamemnon insults Achilles by taking away his war prize, it is Achilles's denial of any possibility of translating his own feeling of personal hurt and public injury into adequate social expression that leads to his tragic decision to reject Agamemnon's subsequent offer of compensation—and, along with it, the validity of all symbolic social forms.

The tragic necessity of accepting, instead of refusing, the inevitable gap between feeling and its expression provides the point of the rebuke that Ajax addresses to Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*. It is here that Achilles announces his intention to refuse any and all material compensation for the social degradation and emotional damage he has suffered from Agamemnon. Complaining that Achilles is "pitiless," Ajax advances a radical argument that acknowledges the incom-

measurable distance in social life between what we feel and what we can do about it. That incommensurability, he implies, is at once a consequence of human mortality and a generative source of the symbolic social forms whose reparative functioning affords the sole means of bridging (but not closing) the gulf between human subjectivity and human sociality:

And yet a man takes from his brother's slayer
the blood price, or the price for a child who was killed, and the
guilty
one, when he has largely repaid, stays still in the country,
and the injured man's heart is curbed, and his pride, and his
anger
when he has taken the price; but the gods put in your breast a
spirit
not to be placated.

(Homer, *Iliad* 9.632–637; trans. Lattimore)

Ajax's little disquisition on the institution of the blood price emphasizes that human sociality depends on the viability of transactions that do not *express* the feelings of social actors, but that merely *represent*, *symbolize*, or otherwise *figure* them.

For if the family of a murdered man accepts a payment of money from the murderer and surrenders, in exchange for that sum, all hope and intention of revenge, that is not because the bereaved kinsmen are emotionally satisfied by the deal, or because the money compensates them for their loss, let alone because it restores the murdered relative to life. On the contrary, it is precisely because *nothing* will compensate them for their loss, because nothing in the world corresponds to what the grieving and angry family wants, because nothing they can do (including revenge) will serve to translate their feelings into an adequate form of personal or public expression, that they can agree—however grudgingly—to make do with a purely symbolic restitution (in the form of money). For such a symbolic restitution is the

only kind of restitution that they can ever expect to obtain for what is, after all, an irreparable and irremediable loss.

That is also what Achilles eventually discovers for himself, once he kills Hector in a vain attempt to expiate his own fatal mistakes. It is only then that he comes to realize the emotional futility of that heroic deed—its inability to compensate him for the loss of Patroclus or to assuage his own sense of responsibility for the death of his beloved companion.⁴

According to the *Iliad*, human sociality depends on the viability of purely symbolic transactions. It requires surrendering all hope of ever finding in the world an adequate objective correlative of what we feel and a satisfactory means of expressing it.⁵ Unless social mediations are understood from the start to be necessarily (and merely) *symbolic*, not *expressive*, they will be found to be grossly insufficient. In which case we are likely to reject them, as Achilles does. And so they will lose all efficacy and cease to function: they will no longer be able to do the job of knitting people together in a web of social exchange, both now and in the future. Then all human communication and sociality will break down and the fabric of human relationality will unravel—as it does for a while in the bleak latter portion of the *Iliad*.

Achilles reconciles himself to the incommensurable gap between feeling and its expression only in his final meeting with Priam, who sets him an example of *how to live by it*—how to occupy that very gap. Renouncing any attempt to express outwardly what he really feels about Achilles, Priam, in his selfless determination to ransom from Achilles the corpse of his son, Hector, kisses the hands of the man who has killed his children.

That celebrated and pathetic gesture does not translate Priam's grief and anger into a meaningful public form. Far from expressing what Priam feels, it expresses the utter impossibility of his ever expressing it.

And so it attests to the need for public, social gestures that do not express emotion but stand in for it—that represent it without aspiring to express it—and that convey it by means of a set of generic, agreed-

upon symbols and substitutions, thereby securing the smooth operation of conventional social relations.



In this context, the gap between feeling and expression is tragic, because it is the manifestation of a basic existential catastrophe—a fatal, irreparable, inescapable void in human meaning. The understandable human impulse to close it, to find a way of *literally* expressing what we truly feel, is not only foredoomed but destructive: it threatens the symbolic mediations that hold the entire social world together. Not only will our stubborn impulse to close that gap not succeed, but it will damage our social existence even further, by discrediting the symbolic forms through which we represent what we feel and by means of which we maintain our social relations with one another.

To insist on expressing fully what we feel will result in endless, pointless violence. It will also endanger the only channel by which we can actually communicate. For language itself is a realm of symbols to which we resort when, at the end of infancy, we discover that we have no direct means of expressing our longings, and no hope of obtaining what we want on our own. Only by substituting words (that is, symbols) for what they designate can we achieve a limited commerce with the world outside ourselves.

So the passionate human drive to find a proper form for the outward expression of our feelings—a form that would be adequate to those feelings and fully commensurate with their magnitude or intensity—is ultimately misdirected, destructive, and doomed to failure. We have to learn to resist it. Tragic wisdom consists in renouncing it. Not because giving it up will make us happy, but because refusing to compromise our desire for the real thing will accomplish nothing and will make us even unhappier and more miserable: it will lead to the loss of the few things of value in the world that we actually possess, and it will cause us to destroy the very beings whom we most cherish.

That, at least, is the vision of classical tragedy, as it typically emerges from heroic clashes between men of different generations.

To treat the inauthenticity inherent in any social expression of feeling as anything *less* than tragic, to refuse to see in it anything less sublime than a chafing at the limits of mortality, is to fail to endow it with its full human significance and gravity and to refuse to recognize it for what tragedy claims it is: namely, a fatal sign of the profound and painful breach that the male quarrel with heaven, or with the father, opens in the very order of human meaning—the symptom of *an existential crisis that puts sociality itself at risk*. Unless the inauthenticity intrinsic to the social expression of feeling is understood to be tragic and not comic—serious instead of ridiculous or deflating—tragedy cannot get the respect it is culturally entitled to. Nor can it claim the prestige that accrues to it as the one aesthetic form that makes such an agonizing truth at once available to us and temporarily, spiritually bearable.

To fail to take seriously the inauthenticity inherent in the social expression of feelings is to refuse to take tragedy at its word. And it is to deprive masculinity, correspondingly, of its heroic grandeur and self-importance. For if that inauthenticity turns out *not* to be a tragic expression of mortal limitations that are built into the very structure of human existence—limitations that only heroic masculine striving, in its furious attempt to transcend them, can reveal to us and force us to confront—and if, instead, inauthenticity proves to be merely comical—an embarrassing, disqualifying, even hilarious effect of the everyday exposure of being-as-playing-a-role, and consequently of cultural meanings as acts of social theater—then tragedy is dethroned from its position of preeminence, its wisdom is devalued and its pathos cut down to size. And the same is true for the heroic brand of masculinity that underwrites tragedy: once its dignity is shown up as exaggerated and unnecessary, its status is irredeemably degraded, and it is reduced to a grandiose pose, an empty bluff, a flamboyant act, a song and dance.

The ultimate effect is to turn Homer's *Iliad* into a Broadway musical—something that no one has yet attempted.⁶ It is to queer tragedy. Or, more exactly, to turn tragedy into melodrama.



For what tragedy cannot survive is the merest hint that it might, just possibly, be “a trifle overwrought.” It cannot recover from the perception, or suspicion, that its intense bursts of emotional expression may have been inflated beyond the strict requirements of the extreme situations it depicts, of the mortal agonies which provided the motive and the cue for all that passion. Social and emotional inauthenticity may be at the core of tragedy's vision of the world, but it is fatal to tragedy as a form. Should tragic suffering ever be perceived as a mere performance or impersonation of suffering, should archetypal tragic destinies come off as histrionic roles, then tragedy will necessarily incur a loss of authentication, of social credit, and will forfeit its authority as a vehicle of existential truth. If the audience ever suspects that tragedy's dramatic extravagances are not wholly justified, that they are even the teeniest bit excessive, that the high pitch of emotion which distinguishes tragic feeling, which elevates it to the heights of sublimity, is less than fully motivated—in short, that passion is not being *felt* so much as it is being faked or *performed*—then tragedy ceases to produce a properly tragic effect and lapses into melodrama.

Melodrama, for its part, is all about the staging of extreme feeling, and it places a premium on performance. Melodrama is tragedy's bourgeois inheritor. It was created to please and entertain the sorts of people—chiefly the middle classes, and especially women—who did not enjoy the benefits of an elite classical education, who could not read Greek or Latin, and who therefore had little access (before the heyday of cheap and plentiful classical translations) to the refined aesthetic experience of ancient tragedy, just as they did not possess the cultivated sensibilities necessary either to appreciate the classical European drama that claimed to be its modern successor or to savor the stiff formality of the verse in which it was composed.

For the members of the bourgeoisie, who did not see their own lives, their own world, and their own values reflected in classical tragedy, ancient or modern, a new and more popular genre had to be invented: a genre of middle-class family drama, spoken in prose, closer in its subject matter to their daily experience and better attuned in its sentimental register to their emotional needs—but, despite all those concessions, not reducible to comedy. For if middle-class family drama, or melodrama, *had* been reducible to comedy, if it had treated bourgeois family misfortunes as trivial or laughable, it would simply have been demeaning and cheapening bourgeois life. And so it would not have fit the purposes for which it was designed.

That—at the risk of a gross oversimplification—is the genealogy of melodrama. Melodrama transplanted the heroics, the strife, and the pathos of classical tragedy to the comparatively humdrum world of bourgeois existence. Classical tragedy had often taken place within a family—a royal family, to be sure, but still a family—and melodrama could preserve its focus on the family and its setting within the household, thereby endowing the social and emotional situations of bourgeois domestic life with a new sense of grandeur, urgency, and intensity. Melodrama gave the middle classes an experience of high drama that they could call their own, that they could understand in their own terms and in their own language. Melodrama took their social, financial, and matrimonial preoccupations as a point of departure for the staging of emotions as extreme as those of classical tragedy. It was tragedy for the middle classes.

But that democratization came at a certain social cost. For women are obviously less serious than men, and the middle classes are less dignified than the elite. The kind of tragedy to which melodrama gave new form and life was therefore a degraded, second-class brand of tragedy, suitable for depicting the lives of those who were ineligible for the authentic tragic stage because, as housewives or as bankers or as clergymen, they didn't exactly qualify as classical heroes. In its very striving to elevate the bourgeoisie, melodrama risked debasing the tragic genre itself. It could not, despite all its extravagant ef-

forts, make bourgeois existence come off as fully serious—except, of course, from the deluded perspective of the bourgeoisie itself.

For the concerns of the middle classes, being the concerns of ordinary people, can never achieve the dignity required for total seriousness. They are certainly laughable when compared to the troubles of Iphigenia or Phèdre or Hamlet (though Shakespearean tragedy is always closer in its themes and domestic preoccupations to the concerns of the bourgeoisie, which makes it easier to adapt to the needs of a modern popular audience).⁷ Eloping with the wrong man may indeed turn out to be fatal for Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, but the consequences are not exactly cosmic: they are not quite so world-shattering as those that flow from Paris's seduction of Helen—viz., “the broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead.” When viewed from the elevated position of the social elite, middle-class tragedy is *mere* melodrama.



If “melodrama” now becomes a pejorative term, that is because the evident sympathy that melodrama brings to the fate of ordinary people appears, at least from a privileged perspective, to be misplaced and unjustified, to be a form of pandering, to be motivated exclusively by an unworthy, groundless, partisan, *sentimental* attachment to otherwise unexceptional characters. In fact, the “sentimentality” with which melodrama is often taxed, and which is considered one of its hallmarks, is ultimately nothing more than the tendency to lavish tenderness, dignity, and esteem on the sorts of low-ranking people who do not deserve (in the eyes of the elite) such a large dose of serious consideration, and who get it from melodrama only because melodrama reflects its audience's close identification with such folks and the intensity of that audience's emotional involvement in their lives.

The high pitch of emotional intensity that melodrama brings to the vicissitudes of ordinary people, which would be appropriate for the elite subjects of tragedy but becomes ludicrous when it is worked

up in order to invest undeserving lives with urgent meaning, cannot fail to bring a smile to the face of the socially entitled. *Aristocrats laugh at situations that are horrifying or tragic to the bourgeoisie*. One must have a heart of stone, as Oscar Wilde said, to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.

Now we can see how gay male culture's notoriously snooty attitude, its sporadic identification with the aristocracy, and its consequent practice of laughing at situations that the middle classes find horrifying or tragic, serve a clear and important strategic function. By such means, gay male culture achieves a certain social and critical leverage against the sort of heterosexual sentimentality whose claims to seriousness depend on the importance of being earnest. To see through such claims, to reveal that seriousness as a pose, is to exercise the sort of lofty condescension to which only a superior social position—or, failing that, an aristocracy of taste—gives you rightful access.

If gay men seem to have staked their survival on upward social mobility, as Neil Bartlett suggested—or if gay male culture often expresses an identification with the upper classes, or with glamour, beauty, and elite cultural practices or forms (such as grand opera) that might seem to exclude the masses—that is not because gay culture reflects the interests of a lofty social caste, of men who enjoy the privileges of racial or class superiority and who come from the upper classes themselves. Rather the opposite. Gay male culture's identification with aristocratic values or attitudes is a strategy of resistance to specific forms of disempowerment that stem from social inferiority. It is a means by which you can claim the elevated position proper to a social elite, and the critical posture toward normal folk that such a position allows, without necessarily belonging to the upper classes yourself.

Aristocratic identification, after all, has long provided a vehicle for members of the bourgeoisie, or for anyone who lacks elite status and authority, to contest the social power of serious people—that is, people whose social position requires others to treat them seriously, and

whose earnestness is a way of enforcing that requirement. Aristocratic identification asserts a kind of aesthetic or imaginary superiority over such people.

Aristocracy thereby provides the disempowered with a proxy identity: it represents a symbol, a figure, a pose (or counter-pose) whose function is to exempt those who adopt it from the abjection to which they would otherwise be liable. It is a way for the middle classes to aggrandize themselves, rather like Veda in *Mildred Pierce*, by despising everything that is middle-class (Veda is never more middle-class than when she is looking down on her father's mistress for being "distinctly middle-class"). The hatred, the contempt, the scathing derision with which the more socially ambitious members of the middle class regard middle-class culture, and thereby affirm their own superiority and exceptionalism, are unknown outside the middle class. No one has ever attacked the values of the bourgeoisie with as much ferocity as the bourgeoisie itself has done (just think of Flaubert, or indeed the entire genre of the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel).



By its very definition, then, melodrama is failed tragedy. It may be earnest, but it is not serious. And yet melodrama stubbornly refuses to admit it. Although when measured against the aristocratic standard of classical tragedy, melodrama cannot help falling short of the dignity that tragedy enjoys, it does not recognize its failure. That's what makes melodrama—when it is viewed from a condescending perspective, as if from a position of social privilege or superiority—come off as camp. At least, melodrama would seem a perfect fit for Sontag's definition of camp as "a seriousness that fails." ("Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp," Sontag hastens to add. "Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve.")⁸

To appreciate and to savor melodrama as camp is to save it from total abjection. Camp, as we have seen, is not criticism but critique. It does not take melodrama literally or unironically, but it does not criti-

cize it either. To treat melodrama as camp is therefore to reverse, though hardly to erase, the superior, condescending attitude toward it. If we refer to the results of our earlier exploration of the pragmatics of camp, we will realize that a full appreciation of melodrama as camp implies not only a devaluation of melodrama, but also a recognition of one's own sentimental implication in melodrama. It necessarily involves a willing, socially inclusive participation in the unworthy pleasures of melodramatic performance—pleasures that arise from both its gripping emotional intensities and its self-canceling histrionics, from its seriousness as well as its failure. Melodrama is camp only when the term "melodrama" is not used exclusively as a criticism, only when its pejorative force is spread around and shared—when, in other words, the tawdry label of "melodramatic," abject and glamorous at once, is embraced and applied to oneself.⁹

Otherwise, when the term "melodrama" is conventionally used as a scapegoating attribution, it functions as a put-down. When the genre is cited pejoratively and made to function as a disqualification, as the name of a debased aesthetic category, melodrama no longer registers as camp. Instead it operates according to the social logic of the "kitsch" designation—as a means of disparagement. That is why "melodrama," understood as a degraded, unworthy literary form, is typically invoked to characterize, and to devalue, the sentimental lives of *other people*. To call someone or something "melodramatic" is to refuse to accord to *their* suffering the dignity proper to tragedy, which socially privileged people, or those who aspire to occupy a position of social privilege, tend to want to reserve for themselves.

Suffering that cannot claim to be *tragic* must come off as *pathetic*. This is the term that describes the undignified alternative to tragic suffering. And if, in our perversity, or our love of melodrama, we insist on taking seriously what should be regarded as merely pathetic, if we insist on treating untragic suffering not as pathetic but as dignified, we convict ourselves of sentimentality. Which is to say, we commit a fault of taste. We thereby invite those who would dignify themselves at our expense to accuse us of finding pleasure in kitsch.

If melodrama incurs the label of “kitsch,” that is because it *willingly* traffics in sentimentality. It refuses to dismiss as unserious the pathetic kinds of suffering—exaggerated, fantastic, passionate, or naive, to adopt Sontag’s vocabulary—that cannot rise to the level of tragedy. And because the pathetic suffering in which it glories is destined from the start to register in the eyes of a privileged or disengaged spectator as “overwrought,” as excessive or histrionic, *melodrama has nothing to fear from the perception that the emotions it stages are not totally authentic, that they are not being felt so much as they are being performed.*

Unlike tragedy, melodrama does not have to justify its extravagances. It does not have to discipline itself in order to guard against the calamitous possibility that its characters may express more than they really feel. It does not need to limit itself to staging emotions that are never excessive, that are strictly and completely motivated, that do not betray the faintest hint of sentimentality. Melodrama can claim the privilege ordinarily reserved for divas: it can be as fiercely histrionic as it likes. It can make an overt appeal to the emotions of its audiences, and its actors can pull out all the stops in order to produce the desired sentimental effect. Melodrama can therefore afford to privilege performance, to place a premium on the staging of intense emotion. Unlike tragedy, it can make the dramatic performance of passion a value, and a source of pleasure, in itself.



That, of course, is what we find displayed so prominently in *Mildred Pierce* (to say nothing of *Mommie Dearest*). It was her performance, after all, that earned Joan Crawford the Oscar. And it is her performance, as Ethan Mordden noted, that has been both the envy and the despair of gay men. Joan Crawford’s performance in *Mildred Pierce* is apparently a performance that anyone with a taste for melodrama—that is to say, anyone who cannot claim, who does not desire, or who cannot aspire to the grandeur and prestige of tragic sublimity—cannot resist imitating, or *reperforming*.

Certainly Crawford's matchless impersonation of maternal martyrdom and abjection has not dissuaded less talented performers from "doing" her. Nor has it diminished our pleasure in these second-rate renditions, as *Mommie Dearest* (and its gay cult) shows. If it proves nothing else, *Mommie Dearest* at least testifies to the defining role of the performative element in producing the distinctive pleasure of melodrama.

Not only does the scene of generational conflict in *Mommie Dearest* push to an extreme of histrionic extravagance and delirious excess *Mildred Pierce's* spectacle of the mother-out-of-control, offering us the camp pleasure of an over-the-top performance performed for performance's sake. It also shows up Joan Crawford's portrayal of Mildred Pierce *as a performance*, in the sense that it reveals that Crawford herself, far from being martyred by her helpless, self-sacrificing devotion to her daughter, was sublimely faking it in *Mildred Pierce*.¹⁰ Once the cameras stopped rolling, it was Crawford—not her daughter—who was really calling the shots.

For Joan Crawford, it turns out, long-suffering motherhood was not about abject selflessness, as *Mildred Pierce* implies. On the contrary, it was . . . the role of a lifetime.

In this way, *Mommie Dearest* imparts retrospectively to *Mildred Pierce* an element of inauthenticity already implicit in the dramatic staging, in the acting-out, in the social expression and public performance of any passionate emotion.

TRAGEDY INTO MELODRAMA

Emotional inauthenticity may be fatal to tragedy, but it is not damaging to melodrama, and it is not ruinous to the self-image or the culture of gay men. Gay men, after all, are debarred from the high seriousness of tragedy.¹ We have no place in its existential anguish—although we do have to deal with the fallout from the cultural supremacy of the genre, which means that we have inevitably to forge a (dissident) relation to its pragmatics, including the social and emotional conventions, the hierarchies of value, and the structures of feeling that the tragic genre both mobilizes and reinforces. It is that entire cultural system of gender, power, and genre, the politics of emotion produced and maintained by it, and the distinctions of rank, class, and status grounded in it, that I have tried to describe in the preceding chapter.

Gay male culture, as typified by the appropriation of female melodramas such as *Mildred Pierce*, can be understood as an instinctive response to that system and as a strategy for resisting the values enshrined in it.² *That is the meaning of melodrama as a gay style.* Gay male culture opts—well, it doesn't really have a lot of choice, but it makes the best of a bad situation—to position its adherents in a social and emotional location that a complex set of interlocking cultural codes and aesthetic practices marks out as the place of melodrama. And then it tries to turn that position to its advantage.

For gay men have relatively little to fear, in the first place, from the disqualifications that attach to melodrama. Our dignity, such as it

is, cannot aspire to be wrapped in grandeur and pathos, to be surrounded by the official pageantry of masculine heroics. And it doesn't depend on all that cultural stage machinery. It is only by *not* taking ourselves seriously, even in the midst of tragedy and horror, that we can most effectively assert our claims to a suffering that, though it may never rise to the level of tragic sublimity, need not therefore sink to the depths of the merely pathetic.

That is why gay male culture eschews tragedy and deliberately embraces melodrama as a pragmatic genre. In a typically democratizing camp gesture, it applies the label "melodramatic" to itself and to everyone else. As the Fire Island Italian widows demonstrated, for gay male culture the serious is nothing more (but also nothing less) than a performance of seriousness, an impersonation of it. It is only by exulting in our inauthenticity, as the widows did, by representing our feelings in the guise of a melodramatic camp performance, that we can endow them with a modicum of truth.³

For those who pretend to the dignity of seriousness, of course, any acknowledgment of the performativity of seriousness represents *a failure of authentication* and therefore *a loss of authorization*, hence a lack of seriousness itself. But for gay men—at least, when we are not trying to lay claim to a straight male dignity—such revelations cannot inflict much further damage. And so they count not as failures but simply as further illustrations, elaborations, and confirmations of being-as-playing-a-role. Gay male culture positively glories in inauthenticity because inauthenticity has the potential to level differential scales and degrees of seriousness, to dismantle social hierarchies based on them, and to promote a more egalitarian social order—at least, one more favorable to stigmatized or marginalized groups. That is why melodrama, and not tragedy, is the aesthetic form most congenial to gay male culture.



The uphill path gay men must climb to attain acceptance and equality is steepest where it passes through the terrain of erotic feeling and romantic love. For in a homophobic society, any expression of a senti-

ment inspired by gay sexual desire or love will register as inappropriate, extravagant, obscene, grotesque, excessive, histrionic—and, thus, as performative rather than authentic. For gay men, then, the task of translating feeling into social expression faces a set of more than usually rigorous challenges when the feeling in question is erotic. Such a feeling inevitably risks coming off as willful, enacted, shoved in people's faces, inauthentic, or (in a word) staged. For all of those reasons, but especially because of its shameless performativity, the expression of gay male erotic feeling is necessarily consigned to the realm of melodrama.

But it is not merely the case that gay male feeling is *forced* to assume a posture of emotional inauthenticity because it is relegated to the abject generic realm of the melodramatic. Gay men also have reason to be alienated from the deadly narcissism of masculine self-importance, from its histrionics unredeemed by irony. (If the motives for such alienation were not already abundantly evident and self-explanatory, the large and highly lethal dose of unironized masculine histrionics that the world has had to absorb since September 11, 2001, would more than justify that alienated gay perspective.) Gay men have equal reason to see through the involuntary melodrama of family life, with its compulsory overacting, its emotional violence. In short, gay men know—at least, we certainly ought to know—the costs of high seriousness, the tyranny of social roles that cannot afford to acknowledge their own performativity.

Those personal costs are highest in the case of romantic love. For much of the emotional destructiveness in love-relationships derives precisely from the lover's failure to see his feelings or his behavior as optional, as shaped (at least in part) by a contingent social role, as the effect of performing a cultural script and inhabiting a romantic identity. The *human cost of love* results from mistaking the social institution of love for the natural, spontaneous, helpless expression of a powerful emotion. By blocking the lover's perception that his behavior in love is in fact a performance—rather than the involuntary result of some omnipotent impulse—romanticism turns love into an ines-

capable destiny. *Plus fort que moi* (“Stronger than I am,” or “I can’t help it”): that is romantic love’s motto. Its effect is to deprive the lover of any sense of being in control of his emotions or his actions, and thereby to exempt him from any responsibility for his feelings.

Gay men may be particularly susceptible to the myth of romance, and therefore particularly in need of the ironic perspective on love that gay male culture supplies. Like gay identity, romantic love—especially when it presents itself as the truth of our deepest feelings, as a kind of emotional bedrock—provides an alibi and a cover for the shameful details of gay sexuality. It offers us a way to represent our desires in public without displaying too much queerness, and it repackages gay eroticism in an honorable, dignified, socially accredited form. Instead of saying, “Please sit down—there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you,” we get to say, “Mom, Dad, I’d like you to meet Lance.” Romance redeems homosexuality. It transcends the sickness of perversion and dissipates the pathological taint of gayness in the glory of the happy couple.

But there are other reasons gay men may be especially susceptible to romance. Romance allows us to escape any awareness of the social oddness and incongruity of homosexuality; it returns us to the innocent spontaneity of the natural. It allows us to feel profoundly right. When we’re in love, we aren’t perverts—we’re just doing what comes naturally. We are yielding to the laws of our nature, expressing our real selves, testifying to the profound truth of our feelings, achieving and manifesting our authenticity. Natural instinct is deeper, stronger, and truer than any social arrangement or moral prejudice; it trumps any judgment on gay love that reason can make. It defeats all criticism. Romantic love grants us an imaginary exemption from social hostility, it allows us to celebrate ourselves and our feelings without viewing them through the lens of other people’s disapproval. It makes us newly indifferent to how we are regarded. And it gives us access to a source of personal meaning with which to make sense of our lives.

That is exactly what’s so dangerous about romantic love. It incites us to make the personal into the real. Since we lack any social incen-

tive to fall in love, and since we also lack any standard, outward, public form *of our own* by which to define and represent our conjugal relations, we have to personalize existing social forms in order to make them ours. We borrow heterosexual models of relationality and adapt them to our purposes, while looking to the realm of the personal and the private in order to endow them with special, distinctive significance—to generate the meanings and the rituals that give shape, consistency, and validity to our feelings.⁴ The more personal or private such modes of valorization and legitimation are, the less distance we have on them, the less ironic is our perspective on them, and the more mythic those social forms and rituals become.



Such self-authorized, self-generated, self-validated forms and rituals may be particularly tyrannical toward those who produce them. They have nothing of the conventional or the artificial about them that generally attaches to accepted or enforced social roles, and that allows the social actor some distance from them, hence some leverage in relation to them.⁵ When you generate a role yourself, you don't have an easily detached perspective on it. It becomes *your* role. Which is to say, it becomes *who you are*.

And once it becomes who you are, you're stuck with it. You can't get out of it—at least, not very easily. How, after all, can you get rid of your authentic self?

When you have stripped a social form of its formulaic, symbolic, conventional, widely accepted meaning, and endowed it with a deeply or purely personal, private significance, you have effectively rendered it authentic. (That's another way of saying it becomes who you are.) Which also means that you have deprived yourself of a ready-made procedure for escaping from it—for dismantling, designifying, desacralizing, and jettisoning it. You become the prisoner of your own authenticity. Contemporary gay identity—serious, official, oppressive, inescapable—offers a dire lesson in the consequences of too much authenticity. No wonder so many gay people can't bear it.

Think of the difference, say, between a heterosexual wedding and a gay commitment ceremony. Married people nowadays can always get divorced. Divorce is one of the many privileges of marriage, one of the many benefits that accrue to those who are permitted to marry. But how do you end what, when you first entered into it, you had chosen to call—in a private ritual of affirmation that you staged in front of all your friends and solemnly commanded them to witness—“a life partnership”? And after it is over, what do you call your next lover? Do you say, “I’d like you to meet my *second* life partner”? How many lives do you think you have?



Conventional romantic love already has a defiant, antinomian character, as Michael Warner has pointed out. The social function of romantic love is to be anti-social, to represent a private, spontaneous, anarchic rebellion against the order of society. Love is the one socially conventional emotion that is conventionally defined as being opposed to social conventions. Falling in love is thus the most conformist method of being an individual. Conversely, falling in love is the most original and spontaneous way to conform, perhaps the only way of conforming to social demands that will never make you look like a conformist. It is the one way that you can behave like everyone else and still claim, at the same time, that you did it your way.⁶

Gay romantic love may feel even more like something socially rebellious rather than like something socially scripted, and gay people may therefore tend to ascribe to their love affairs a dangerous and excessive degree of emotional truth, of personal authenticity.⁷ Which risks imparting to those relationships an intensity and an inelasticity that can be suffocating, while you are in them, and that later makes them very difficult to escape. Similarly, the social opprobrium attached to such relationships may make gay people feel particular pressure to champion their *naturalness*, which is to say their involuntariness. And that may make gay love relations seem even more inescapable.

Gay male culture has therefore had to devise a number of remedies against the romantic ills to which it is vulnerable. That, after all, is what camp is for. Camp is designed to puncture the romantic appeal of beauty, to mock the seriousness with which you might be tempted to endow your own emotions, especially your feelings of love and desire, and to deconstruct the kind of authenticity with which you might be tempted to invest them. Camp, as we have seen, is a practice internal to a dialectic in gay male culture that revolves around a series of oppositions between romance and disillusion, seriousness and unseriousness, authenticity and inauthenticity—between the unironic intensity of gay men's desire for masculine beauty and the ironic deflation of that intensity.

Camp belongs to one side of that polarity. It is the antidote to romanticism. It breaks into the self-contained world of passionate desire and interrupts its unironic single-mindedness—its systematic exclusion of competing values, its obliviousness to its larger social context, its obsessive focus on the desired object, and its refusal of alternate perspectives. Camp is a reminder of the artificiality of emotion, of authenticity as a performance. At the same time, camp is not the whole story. For it represents a challenge to the power of a feeling for which it knows itself to be no match. It does not seek or hope to conquer love, or to end our breathless, religious veneration of beauty. It merely strives to render their effects less toxic—by making the value and prestige of romantic love less axiomatic.

Gay male culture's reappropriation and recirculation of the figure of Joan Crawford in general, and its fascination with that one scene in *Mildred Pierce* in particular, may make specific sense when they are seen in this light. A thorough appreciation of the costs of taking love seriously, of the tyranny of unironized or tragic romantic roles, may be what informs and explains gay male culture's intoxication with Joan Crawford's melodramatic performance of maternal abjection and defiance. It may also be what fortifies the gay tendency to identify with her demented character. The enraged mother who, pushed

to an extremity of feeling by her ungrateful child, “loses it” serves to dramatize—to melodramatize—the breaking-point in any love-relation that had appeared, until that point, to be inescapable, unconditional, involuntary.

The maternal bond is at once the most involuntary *and* the most conventional of social relations. When that bond snaps under the pressure of supreme stress, the effect is to open a space of contingency and freedom within any emotional and social relation—such as erotic passion—whose very strength *as* a bond, and whose very identity as a passion, had seemed to take it forever out of the realm of the optional.

In this context, the scene of mother-daughter conflict administers a salutary dose of reality; it underwrites a sharper understanding of the politics of romanticism. For it punctures romanticism’s cult of the involuntary, its promotion of compulsory romantic ties, its idealization of emotional unfreedom. When Mildred Pierce tells her daughter, “Get out before I kill you,” she indicates that, contrary to what romanticism would have us believe, love is not our destiny. There is in fact a way out.

Gay male culture’s investment in the scene of mother-daughter conflict may well have to do, in other words, with the unfavorable social and discursive conditions under which gay men accede to the possibility of emotional expression, and of erotic expression most of all. It may have to do, specifically, both with the powerful, sinister lure of romanticism to gay men and with the cure for romanticism that the gay celebration of inauthenticity affords. It does not refer literally to the maternal itself, but alludes to the emotional situation which the maternal figures—namely, the abject situation of one who believes she has no choice but to love unconditionally . . . until she is pushed to the brink.

Indeed, if one function of camp is to return to the scene of trauma and to replay that trauma on a ludicrously amplified scale, so as to neutralize its pain without denying it, then the particular trauma that

the camp enjoyment of the melodramatic scene of mother-daughter conflict in *Mildred Pierce* replays is not the trauma of maternal rejection, but the trauma of unconditional, unalterable, endless love.



What started out looking like a particular obsession on the part of gay men with the figure of the mother turns out to have more to do with gay men's fraught relation to the dangerously seductive, oppressive, inescapable, helpless, would-be tragic role of the romantic lover. To say this is not to turn *Mildred Pierce* into a gay man or to reduce gay men's identification with her to mere identity—to a mirroring, a self-recognition, a consolidation of the gay ego. It is to understand her, rather, as offering a *proxy identity* to gay men. Joan Crawford as *Mildred Pierce* figures and makes available to gay men an emotional situation that they can explore, so as to gain a perspective on aspects of their own predicament. She enables them to try on, to try out, to compare, and to criticize certain ways of being and feeling.

For the mother is both a literal and a figurative character. In her, those two orders of meaning are not separate or independent. The mother is at once a person and a function. She is simultaneously real and symbolic. She is always both herself and a representation, a mother and an emblem or expression of motherhood, a symbol of the maternal—a figure, that is, for a particular social and emotional situation.

As such, the mother has long functioned as a camp alter ego for gay men. Witness the old habit among gay men of referring to themselves in the first person not as “I” but as “Your mother.” Thus, “Your mother is very tired today—you will have to be nice to her.” Or, “Your mother can't help herself—she loves you too much.” W. H. Auden managed to demolish forever the most celebrated line of poetry Stephen Spender wrote by means of precisely such a camp subversion. “I think continually of those who were truly great” becomes impossible to take seriously, once the line's first-person pronoun is robbed of its grandeur and pathos by being turned into a domestic diva. “Your

mother thinks continually of those who were truly great” exposes once and for all Spender’s poetic “I” as a posture, as a melodramatic performance.⁸



Melodrama, we know, is a category that normally applies to the suffering of *other people*. It disqualifies other people’s suffering as being unworthy of our full sympathy, and it demeans their emotional lives as lacking in high seriousness. If the term “melodramatic” is disparaging of other people’s feelings, if it subverts the authenticity of their feelings and denies those people the standing necessary for social accreditation and, thus, for serious consideration, that is because it refuses to accord their sufferings the aristocratic and masculine dignity of tragedy. Instead, the label “melodramatic” identifies their sufferings as merely pathetic. And once qualified by that label, their sufferings become as unserious—and, ultimately, as potentially laughable—as the women and the middle-class folks whose sufferings the debased genre of melodrama, in its misplaced sentimentality, takes seriously. But when gay men speak of themselves in the first person as “Your mother,” or when they represent their grief through the deliberate theatrics and histrionics of a drag performance—through an ironic impersonation of Italian widows, say—they embrace that very *déclassement* and situate *their own feelings* in the category of melodrama.

The application of the “melodrama” label, then, does not always produce an effect of social exclusion and symbolic violence. It does not always participate in the kitsch logic of denigration. It is not always a put-down of *other people*. When the label is applied to yourself, it can also exemplify the camp practice of inclusiveness—a communal practice that consists in refusing to exempt yourself from the universal deflation of other people’s pretensions to authenticity and seriousness, yet without forgoing all claims to be treated decently yourself.

Many years ago I asked a friend of mine in Boston, who had been living with the same boyfriend for a very long time, if it had ever oc-

curred to them to want to get married. “Oh, no,” he said with a laugh, “we’d have terrible fights over who got to wear the wedding dress.” That witticism, if it had been directed against someone other than oneself, or against someone other than the person one loved, would have registered as *merely* demeaning in its implicit demotion of a man from the noble rank of male dignity to the lower rank of female triviality. And it would be doubly demeaning in the context of gay male love: since male homosexuality sees in masculinity an essential erotic value, to portray oneself or one’s partner as characterized by a feminine identification, and to expose that feminine identification to public mockery, would be to depreciate oneself or one’s boyfriend as a sexual object and as a vehicle of sexual fantasy.

Hence, Proust thought that the only way gay men could ever get beyond desiring straight men, and could succeed in desiring one another, would be to fool each other, to impersonate the real men they had so catastrophically failed to be themselves, and to maintain the charade for the longest time possible (though they could never succeed at keeping up the pretense for very long).⁹

That was in the Bad Old Days, of course, before gay liberation, when the gay world was still polarized by the division between queens and trade. But even (or especially) after Stonewall, the foredoomed tactic of butching up in order to be desirable did not exactly die out. Leo Bersani conveys powerfully the sense of gay chagrin at the ineluctable failure of gay masculinity by citing “the classic put-down: the butch number swaggering into a bar in a leather get-up opens his mouth and sounds like a pansy, takes you home where the first thing you notice is the complete works of Jane Austen, gets you into bed, and—well, you know the rest.”¹⁰

Or in the unlikely event that, even after getting you into bed, he still managed to keep up butch appearances, all your remaining illusions would be shattered—according to the lead character in Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* (1978)—when you eventually excused yourself to use his bathroom and discovered his supply of personal cosmetics.

I meet some person . . . male-type . . . at a bar or the baths, and he seems really . . . what I want. A nice mustache, Levi's, a starched khaki army shirt . . . strong . . . Somebody you could take back to Orlando and they'd never know the difference. Then you go home with him to his house on Upper Market, and you try like hell not to go to the bathroom, because the bathroom is the giveaway, the fantasy-killer. . . . It's the bathroom cabinet. . . . Face creams and shampoos for *days*. And on the top of the toilet tank they've all always got one of those goddamn little gold pedestals full of colored soap balls!¹¹

Who knew colored soap balls could be so fatal to true love?

It is in this context that my friend's remark about his boyfriend and himself both coveting the wedding dress reveals its true significance. To utter it is to know oneself and one's love-object as unworthy of the serious consideration that is masculine dignity's due. It is to disclaim all pretense to masculine authenticity, and the erotic credit that accrues to it, and to refuse in camp fashion to dignify oneself at the expense of someone else's shame. At the same time, it insists that such inauthenticity is not incompatible with gay love. It refuses to make gay love contingent on the successful impersonation of masculinity, either one's own or one's boyfriend's, and it refuses the current tendency in gay male culture to keep upping the standards of acceptable gay masculinity, requiring gay desirability to depend on increasingly desperate performances of stolid, brutal, unironic virility. On the contrary, it demonstrates that inauthenticity is not fatal to love, that seriousness does not have to prevail over irony in order for love to thrive and to endure.

To see through one's own erotic illusions without withdrawing from one's love-object its worthiness to be loved, to disclaim one's entitlement to respect while continuing to assert it, to love and be loved without endowing one's love with dignity: this is the possibility that traditional gay male culture holds out to its adherents. The supreme wisdom consists in living one's love life *knowingly* as melodrama—understanding full well (if not necessarily explicitly) that melodrama signifies both a degraded genre of literary discourse and a debased

pragmatic genre of emotional expression: a despised, feminized, laughable, trivial *style* of expressing one's feelings.¹²

No wonder my friends in Boston could build a lasting life together, while the gay baths and backrooms and sex clubs and online cruising sites thrive on the business of gay romantics, who prefer their own illusions, their fantasies of love, to actual people—people who, after all, cannot sustain those illusions, not at least for very long. That last remark is hardly intended as a put-down of those of us who frequent the baths and backrooms and sex clubs, by the way; it's just a reminder of what those unique gay male institutions are for. Which is not to help us live happily ever after, but to enable us to crowd as many anti-social thrills as possible into the moment and to provide us with a structured communal space in which to heighten, express, and discharge our romantic fantasies—without doing ourselves or our partners any lasting emotional harm.



To live one's love life as melodrama, to do so knowingly and deliberately, is not of course to refuse to take it seriously—as any gay Joan Crawford fan, and certainly any opera queen, can tell you. But it is to accept the inauthenticity at the core of romantic love, to understand romantic love as a social institution, an ideology, a role, a performance, and a social genre, while still, self-consciously and undecisively, succumbing to it.

In short, it is to do what is otherwise culturally impossible—impossible for normal folks, that is: to combine passion with irony.¹³

Gay male culture has in fact elaborated a distinctive, dissident perspective on romantic love, a camp perspective, which straight people often regard as cynical, precisely because its irony—which emphasizes the performativity of romantic roles—seems to them to undermine the seriousness and sincerity of love, and thereby to demean it. But to demean love is also to desubliminate it, to break the romantic monopoly on it, to make it more widely available, to put it to a variety of social uses, and to end the antagonism between love and soci-

ety, between love and friendship, between the happy couple and the community. Gay male culture's vision of love is not a cynical one. Rather, just as a camp perspective on family conflicts provides for an attitude toward intense emotion that is alienated without being either skeptical or reductive, so the effect of living one's love life knowingly as melodrama is to cultivate an outlook on love that is *disabused*, but *not disenchanted*.

Far from being fatal to love, a camp sensibility is the result and expression of love's self-knowledge. It indicates that the fusion of gay desire and gay sisterhood, of the beauty and the camp, though never easy, is possible, and can happen.

There is, in sum, an erotics of melodrama. At their wisest, gay men's love relationships exemplify and embody it. And one of gay male culture's jobs is to enshrine that erotics, to preserve it, to communicate it, and to transmit it.



But if melodrama has an erotics, it also has a politics. If you wanted any additional confirmation of that, look no further than the stories about the drag queen who started the Stonewall rebellion by hitting that police officer with her handbag, as if to say—like Faye Dunaway playing Joan Crawford playing an outraged, martyred mother—“Why can't you give me the respect that I'm entitled to?”

Or consider the following story about the funeral of Vito Russo, gay militant, leading member of ACT UP New York, and author of *The Celluloid Closet* (a study of the portrayal of gay men in Hollywood movies). The first speaker at the funeral, in December 1990, was David Dinkins, then mayor of New York; he quoted, without apparent irony, a remark that Vito Russo had made to him a few days before, when Dinkins had visited the dying man's bedside: “In 1776, Edmund Burke of the British Parliament said about the slavery clause, ‘A politician owes the people not only his industry but his judgment, and if he sacrifices his judgment to their opinions, he betrays them.’” Although Dinkins may not have realized it at the time, Russo was hardly prais-

ing him. He was upbraiding Dinkins for betraying his gay constituents by appointing a homophobic health commissioner, by canceling New York's pilot needle-exchange program, and by failing to defend homeless people with HIV or to combat the rising tide of anti-gay violence. When the mayor left, the following speaker at Russo's funeral pointed out that Russo's dying reproach to Dinkins did not derive from Russo's encyclopedic knowledge of eighteenth-century political oratory. It was cribbed from a movie—specifically, the movie version of a Broadway musical about the American Revolution, *1776*.¹⁴

Douglas Crimp, who recounts this incident and provides the background I have just summarized, does so in the course of making a passionate and powerful plea for basing a progressive politics not on identity but on identification. Such an emphasis, he argues, will be able to avoid producing the sorts of misunderstandings and tensions that led to political conflicts among the various groups affected by HIV/AIDS in the United States in the early 1990s. Crimp's model for an identificatory, coalition-based queer politics—a politics that can reach across the divides of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other social differences—is summed up in the title of his essay: "Right On, Girlfriend!" That melodramatic exhortation does not express a serious vision of solidarity between gay men and their lesbian and feminist allies so much as it evokes a form of camp solidarity among gay men themselves, a form of solidarity that can acknowledge—and can mobilize the political energies of—gay men's feminine identifications, including the feminine identifications of movie queens and Judy Garland fans like Vito Russo. "Right on, girlfriend!" is exactly how Vito Russo's friends might have responded to him when, with virtually his dying breath, he somehow summoned the strength to rebuke Mayor Dinkins.

It is precisely because such identifications depend on the queerness of the gay men who make them, *not* on the actual gender or sexual identity of the women with whom those gay men identify—and it is precisely because such queer *identifications* do *not* therefore presume a relation of *identity* with the lesbians and feminists with whom some

gay men may wish to forge coalitions—that such queer identifications can become the starting-point for renegotiating political collaborations among differently situated groups, and can thereby conduce, according to Crimp, to “a broadening of alliances rather than an exacerbation of antagonisms.”¹⁵ In this way, it may be possible to move beyond the mere presumption or “fantasy of coalition . . . [which] sidesteps the processes and practices that would make such coalition possible.”¹⁶



That is the point I would like to make about the political uses of Joan Crawford, and of women’s melodrama more generally, by gay men. The work of all gay male cultural politics can be summed up in a single, simple formula: *to turn tragedy into melodrama*. The historical function of gay male culture has been—and its ongoing political task remains—to forge an ironic perspective on scenes of compulsory, socially validated and enforced performance, to decommission supposedly authentic social identities and return them to their status as willfully or witlessly iterated roles.

Hegel once said, in a parenthetical remark, that womankind (*die Weiblichkeit*) is the eternal irony of the community (*die ewige Ironie des Gemeinwesens*).¹⁷ Coming from him, that was not exactly a compliment. But he was making an important political point.

Hegel was talking not about melodrama but about tragedy—about Sophocles’s *Antigone*. He was highlighting Antigone’s ironic relation to the world of masculine power, a relation typical of women who, Hegel said, pervert the universal purpose of government to private purpose through intrigue. It was just such an ironic relation to masculine authority, Hegel implied, that informed Antigone’s resistance to the law and enabled her to justify, *without needing to invoke any general principle*, her defiance of the state.

Judy Garland is not Antigone. But if, on the night of Judy Garland’s funeral on Friday, June 27, 1969, Hegel had been among the queens who gathered outside the Stonewall Inn during the police raid on it,

he might have whistled a different tune—assuming, that is, he could whistle at all. At least, he might have realized that the politics of irony is not limited to women, or to biological women, and that it is best embodied not in tragedy but in the dissident audience relations of melodrama, specifically in the audience relations of gay men to female melodrama, and thus in gay male culture's queer, inclusive, loving identification with it.¹⁸

In any case, if it is an ironic position that gay men share with women, and if it is our ironic identification with women that enables us to extract lessons in political defiance from Joan Crawford's glamorous performance of maternal martyrdom and abjection, then perhaps those feminine identifications of ours are identifications that, far from attempting to closet, we should be eager to claim for our own—to understand, to appreciate, and to cherish.

PART FIVE



Bitch Baskets

GAY FEMININITY

The explanation for the specific forms that the cultural practice of male homosexuality has taken in recent Anglo-American societies would seem to be obvious. A quick review of some basic facts might suffice to settle the whole question. For a man to sing in a high-pitched falsetto voice is to sound like a woman. Flower-arranging, interior decorating, and hairdressing are feminine professions. *Mildred Pierce* is a “woman’s picture,” and Joan Crawford’s largest and most devoted fan base was composed of working-class women (“She was always a bigger hit with women than with men,” David Denby observes).¹ Aesthetics and style are traditionally feminine concerns, just as politics, business, and sports are traditionally masculine ones. And if gay male automobile drivers have shown a preference for the VW Golf and the Ford Probe, as has been claimed, that is because—as a particularly talented straight male student of mine once put it, appealing to one of those popular formulas in which our culture’s sex and gender norms find their most highly condensed and trenchant, if repellent, expression—that is because those cars are “bitch baskets.”

So why make such a mystery about the logic behind gay male culture? And why spend an entire book working up gingerly and laboriously to the simple and stunningly obvious conclusion that should have been evident right from the start? Isn’t the explanation for the characteristic practices favored by gay male culture blindingly clear?

If gay men have gravitated to drag, Hollywood melodramas, grand opera, camp, or fashion and design, it's surely because they are all feminine forms, or at least because they are traditionally coded as such.

In short, it looks like those Victorian doctors were right all along. What defines gay male subjectivity is its reversal of sex roles, its cross-gendering, its inverted, transgendered psychology. Despite their male bodies, gay men have the souls, the nature, the tastes, the attitudes, the feelings, the subjectivity of women. Period.



That gay men have “qualities or characteristics generally possessed by girls and women” is also the conclusion drawn by Will Fellows from his own study of gay men’s cultural practices.² In particular, he finds that “gay men are a prominent and highly talented presence,” even an “apparently disproportionate presence,” in many “female-dominated fields that revolve around creating, restoring, and preserving beauty, order, and continuity” (x)—specifically, those activities whose purpose is to conserve material cultures from the past. Such activities include historic preservation, antiquarianism, architectural restoration, interior design, fashion and style. Fellows devotes a lengthy, eloquent, richly documented book, *A Passion to Preserve* (2004), to “gay men as keepers of culture.”

Like me, Fellows wants to explore the various ways in which gay men differ from straight men, ways that—like the love of Broadway musicals—go well beyond sexual behavior and often manifest themselves in early childhood, years before sexual orientation finds expression in the specific form of sexual activity. In the course of doing research for an earlier book, *Farm Boys*, about gay men from rural backgrounds,³ Fellows noted that “gender-role nonconformity was prominent” in many of the life stories he collected, especially in the early chapters of them.⁴

As boys, most of the men I spoke with had been especially drawn to doing things that lay outside the range of activities approved for males.

Instead of working in the fields or repairing farm machinery, they preferred doing things in and around the house, and were often very good at them: gardening, cooking, food-canning, flower-arranging, decorating, sewing and other needlework. At first, I was bothered by this strong gender-atypical trend. . . . There must be plenty of gay men out there who were regular, gender-typical farm boys, I thought. . . . Then, as it eventually occurred to me that what I was seeing was perhaps characteristic of gay childhood, this trend toward gender-atypicality began to intrigue me. . . . All of this led me to wonder: If we differ from straight men only in terms of sexual orientation, not in any other essential ways, why was I discovering this preponderance of gay men who had been manifestly queer since childhood, usually years before their sex lives got going? (ix-x)

This train of thought leads Fellows to the conclusion that “gayness comprises much more than sexual partners and practices” (262). He approvingly quotes a remark that John Clum makes at the start of his own book about musical theater and gay male culture—“For me, being gay has as much to do with an investment in certain kinds of culture as it has with my sexual proclivities” (x)—apparently endorsing the faintly dismissive, lightly depreciative attitude toward sex implied by Clum’s use of the quaint term “proclivities” to refer to homosexual object-choice.⁵ For Fellows, “gay” is not synonymous with, and should certainly not be reduced to, “homosexual” (13).⁶

Interested as he is in “some of the distinctive dimensions of gay male lives beyond sexuality per se” (x), in the “non-sexual dimensions of gay men’s natures” (243), Fellows consistently downplays sexuality, regarding it as one of the *least* “essential ways” that gay men differ from straight men—or, rather, he considers it merely a sign of a more profound difference, which has to do with the distinctiveness of “gay sensibility,” understood as “an essential facet of human nature” (262). Although he initially defines “gay” as encompassing “both gender identity and sexual orientation,” and as referring to “a male who is [both] gender atypical (psychologically and perhaps physically androgynous or effeminate) and decidedly homosexual in orientation if not in practice” (13), and although his final verdict defines gay men as

“being uncommonly constituted in both gender identity and sexuality” (263), he concludes that his “inquiry into gay men’s natures is *really about gender orientation*, not about sexual orientation per se” (262; my italics).

In foregrounding issues of gender orientation, specifically “gender-role nonconformity” and “gender atypicality,” as clues to “gay men’s natures” (at least the natures of those gay men who are “preservation-oriented”; 243), and in scanting issues of sexuality, Fellows does not hesitate to appeal for authoritative support to earlier theories of homosexuality, dating back to the Victorian period, that defined gay men as having a woman’s soul in a man’s body, as belonging to a third sex or an intermediate sex. In particular, he repeatedly invokes the celebrated socialist philosopher and early gay activist Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), who in 1908 published a book called *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*. According to Fellows, Carpenter “understood gay men as ‘intermediate men’ —‘men with much of the psychologic character of women’” (14).⁷ Fellows also quotes Freud’s disciple and rival Carl Jung, specifically Jung’s 1954 essay “Psychological Aspects of the Mother Complex,” to the effect that a gay man “may have good taste and an aesthetic sense which are fostered by the presence of a feminine streak. He may be supremely gifted as a teacher because of his almost feminine insight and tact” (243).⁸

Although furiously opposed by the political culture of the post-Stonewall gay movement, this venerable tradition of defining homosexuality in terms of gender inversion or sex-role reversal, rather than in terms of sexuality, is hardly extinct. As Fellows notes, it was upheld by Harry Hay, the founder of the modern gay movement in the United States and a chief source of inspiration for the Radical Faeries.⁹ And it continues to flourish within several important schools of contemporary gay male spirituality, which see gay men as modern shamans, as the descendants of traditional healers, prophets, and wizards who in many societies draw their insight, power, and religious authority from a perceived combination of the two spirits of male and female (254, 262, 244–246, 281n17). The notion that lesbians and

gay men nowadays should be understood as belonging to a third or fourth sex or gender is undergoing something of a revival in many fields of recent queer and transgender scholarship.¹⁰



One can easily imagine the shock and outrage of the Stonewall generation at this return of the repressed in the field of gay male self-definition. “Could it be that all those horrible pundits have been right, and homosexuals are indeed the ‘third sex’?” Edmund White asked incredulously, as early as 1969.¹¹ Many gay men today may have similar reactions.

Indeed, we have witnessed a number of them. A sense of outrage was already palpable in the protest against my class by John from Annapolis: no, he had insisted, gay men are not fashion-savvy or design-savvy, as some would have us believe, nor do they have a penchant for dressing like women. We have seen examples of similar defensiveness and disavowal in David Daniels and Anthony Tommasini, not to mention D. A. Miller’s scandalized love-object, who hastily dried the tears sent coursing down his cheeks by “Some Enchanted Evening.” And we are used to hearing the constant, insistent assertion—repeated endlessly for decades now, and in the teeth of all the evidence to the contrary—that gay male effeminacy is a thing of the past, that polarized sex roles are antiquated, homophobic notions, that “the queen is dead,” that there is no difference between gay people and straight people, that there is no such thing as gay male culture beyond a series of hostile stereotypes. Gay men who want to style themselves as virile, non-queer, post-gay, or simply as ordinary, regular guys whose sexual preference does not mark them as different from normal folk, recoil instinctively from any aspect of male homosexuality that might seem to express or signify effeminacy. That is why they tend to disclaim any participation in gay culture or even any knowledge of its existence, despite their active involvement at times in the life of gay communities.

What exactly are all these people afraid of? That the carefully erected façade of gay masculinity, hard won through individual and

collective effort, will come tumbling down like a house of cards to disclose the outlines of that abominated Other, the fairy or queen? That the long-awaited historical and personal achievement of dignified—that is to say, virile—gay identity will have been for nothing and that gay men will once again be overtaken by shades of pathology, by demeaning stereotypes, and by inescapable gender-deviant queerness? That every gay man is at risk of embodying the abject, despised figure he secretly both fears and believes himself to be?

No one wants to be a cliché, of course, but gay male effeminacy is not just a stereotype: it is a damaging one with a long history. The association of gay men with femininity is a cause for particular anxiety because it represents a throwback, a symbol of age-old homophobic prejudice. It resuscitates a host of ancient bogeymen that have been used in the past to harm us—to turn us into figures of fun, objects of abuse, creatures of satire, victims of hatred, moral condemnation, and violence—and it reminds us uncomfortably of those hoary medical understandings of sexual deviance that Edmund White shuddered to recall, according to which same-sex desire was a symptom of sex-role reversal and homosexual men were congenital inverters embodying the sexual nature of women. For all that we may deplore the flagrant misogyny behind the degrading force of those stereotypes, their power to humiliate us is no less effective, no less real. The enlightened ideology of the post-Stonewall gay movement has exhorted us to reject, refute, and transcend such demeaning clichés—to prove them wrong, to become virtually normal ourselves, and to accede on that basis to an erotic community of equals.

Masculinity represents not only a central cultural value—associated with seriousness and worth, as opposed to feminine triviality—but also a key erotic value for gay men. Gay men's sexual dignity depends on it, as well as our erotic prestige and desirability. So it is pretty clear why no gay man—at least, no gay man who has not been transformed by the practice of camp and by its radical perspective on gender and social hierarchy—would be particularly eager to associate himself with the highly feminized pursuits of traditional gay male culture. To participate openly and avowedly in cultural practices that

seem to express a transgendered subjectivity, or that are marked as feminine—whether because queer sensibility itself is aligned with the feminine side of the traditional division between queens and trade, or simply because the worship of divas or other female icons would seem to reflect a profound identification with women on the part of gay men—is socially, and erotically, risky for gay men, no matter how proud or self-accepting they may be.

Witness the scene in Norman René's 1990 film *Longtime Companion*, where the usually virile Fuzzy is caught by his boyfriend in the act of deliriously lip-synching a jazzy female vocal number from *Dreamgirls*. Fuzzy had the volume turned up so high that he didn't hear his boyfriend opening the door to their apartment until it was too late. The look of mortification that flits across Fuzzy's face when he realizes what has happened eloquently registers the magnitude of his gaffe and the depth of his embarrassment—though as soon as his face is out of his lover's field of vision, he follows up that mortified look with an insouciant shrug of resignation and a defiant smirk of guilty pleasure. Fuzzy has had a close call, and the joke is not likely to be lost on either the gay or the straight members of the audience. Any gay man who forsakes the ranks of the privileged gender and the desired gender style, who lowers himself to the undignified, abject status of the effeminate, the fairy, the poof, the bitch, the sissy, the flaming queen, incurs the easy ridicule and cheap contempt of both the straight world and the gay world—and even, for all he knows (or fears), the disdain of his own lover.¹²

If homophobia sometimes functions less to oppress homosexuals than to police the behavior of heterosexuals and to strong-arm them into keeping one another strictly in line with the requirements of proper sex and gender norms, for fear of appearing to be queer, it may be that one of the social functions of transphobia is to police the behavior of lesbians and gay men and to terrorize them into conforming to the gender style deemed appropriate to their respective sexes.

And there are certainly plenty of other bad reasons, in addition to transphobia, for gay men nowadays to reject Fellows's argument out

of hand: sexism, misogyny, effeminophobia, and/or a willingness to pander to them; machismo, snobbery, shame, denial; knee-jerk anti-essentialism and various other sorts of post-Stonewall gay liberation dogmatism. Gay scholars and critics are no less exempt from those tendencies than other gay men. As a child of the Stonewall era myself, I want instinctively to find political or social explanations for the way gay men are, not biological or psychological or congenital causes, and I also want to assert the centrality in male homosexuality of same-sex eroticism, not just queer or transgendered sensibility.



Fellows poses a useful challenge to the standard post-Stonewall view. If I have decided to begin this chapter by discussing his account of gay men's cultural practices and outlining my disagreements with it, that is because I admire his work and I take his challenge seriously. The notion that "gayness comprises much more than sexual partners and practices," that "some of the distinctive dimensions of gay male lives [extend] beyond sexuality per se," that what makes gay men different from straight people lies in the "non-sexual dimensions of gay men's natures," and that male homosexuality can therefore be understood as a specifically cultural practice, not just a sexual one, represents a key insight. It is the basis on which I have built this entire book. And there is no denying that many of the cultural practices associated with male homosexuality comprise activities that are coded by our society as feminine. Each of those two points is important; instead of being evaded, they merit serious and sustained reflection. Gay men should not flinch from them. The challenge for queer studies is to account for them through social analysis, instead of ascribing them to the natural order of things.

For cultural practices are not likely to be rooted in nature, and any attempt to locate their origins in gay men's natures will only put them off-limits to further critical inquiry, by implying that there is nothing to explain beyond the natural facts of the matter, beyond the way things just naturally are. That tendency is being ominously reinforced these days by the current vogue for locating sexuality and gender

identity in genetics, genomics, the workings of the brain, neural pathways, and cognitive development—a tendency often hotly contested by psychologists and psychiatrists, who see in cognitive science a threat to their professional authority as well as to their share of a lucrative market.¹³ My own approach to gay male culture is designed to counter both of those approaches: its methodological purpose is to argue against biological as well as psychological reductionism.

For Fellows, gay male cultural practices are natural expressions of sexual intermediacy and reveal the natural essence of gay men. He speaks of the “essential ways” in which gay men differ from straight men, of “gay men’s natures,” of “gay sensibility” as “an essential facet of human nature.” In his final wrapping-up, he deliberately refuses to hedge the matter, rejecting mealy-mouthed qualifications and speaking grandly, sweepingly, inclusively, and in universalizing terms of “our two-spiritedness” and “our intermediate natures” (259). Gay men, in his view, do indeed partake of a natural condition: we share the common property of belonging to a third or intermediate sex, halfway between male and female (but tending to the latter).

That explicitly essentialist or essentializing vision of gay men’s natures brings with it the usual, well-known drawbacks, the problems that typically plague all essentialist models of social identity. So let me rehearse a couple of them. Without wishing to be dogmatic about it, I think it is fair to say that the effect of Fellows’s approach is to *overgeneralize* the phenomenon he so richly and empirically describes, while also *homogenizing* it into a single “rather consistent pattern,” albeit an admittedly “intricate” and “complex” one (25). Furthermore, by treating that pattern, whose most prominent feature is “gender atypicality,” as representative of “preservation-minded gay men” (25), and ultimately of gay men in general, Fellows ends up imposing it on us as a truth about ourselves that we are obligated to recognize—or else find ourselves accused of being in denial (it is because of such strong-arming tactics that opponents of essentialist models of homosexual difference often highlight the implicitly coercive, disciplining, or “legislative” operation of essentialist theories).¹⁴

Beyond all those problems, which are typical of any attempt to

represent social identities in essentialist terms, there is another weakness of an interpretive or critical sort in this argument. The *particular* essentialist model of gay male identity that Fellows promotes, his vision of gay men as natural antiquarians, architectural restorers, lovers of old houses, and “keepers of culture,” has trouble accounting for those gay men—and we know there are some of them out there, even fairly significant numbers of them—who are passionate and committed modernists, who instinctively hate ornament, Victorian fussiness, and period detail, who long for clean lines and abstract forms, spaces of Zen purity and Japanese abstraction, and who would never be caught dead within a hundred yards of a doily. Some of those guys could be in the grips of a reaction formation, of course—victims of internalized homophobia or gender panic, desperately repressing and denying their deep, instinctual desires for chintz or plush or gilt—but that’s probably not true of every one of them.

Fellows’s model also fails to account for aesthetically unaligned gay men who really don’t care about history, old houses, design or style, preserving the past, or living in the perfect interior, and whose taste is embarrassingly subject to frequent, egregious lapses. “All the gay men I know are terrible slobs, including you,” John Weir’s mother told the novelist and critic over the telephone, when she called him up to discuss *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the exploits of the Fab Five: “Do you think you could get them to clean up your apartment?”¹⁵ Even the Fab Five were hardly immune to gross errors of judgment, while the merest peek into any shop or clothing catalogue catering to gay men is enough to shatter forever the notion that gay men necessarily, essentially have good taste. Of course, gay men may find themselves pressured by gay culture to get with the program and to acquire good taste . . . sooner or later.



When it comes to gender orientation, to gay men’s allegedly female characteristics, or (as Fellows emphasizes, somewhat more cautiously) gay men’s combination of masculine and feminine attributes, there is substantial disagreement about the matter on the part of the

subjects themselves. Gay men do not all see themselves as sexual intermediates. Some of them even take strong exception to the view that they have “qualities or characteristics generally possessed by girls and women.” Fellows’s antithesis can be found in Jack Malebranche, author of *Androphilia—A Manifesto: Rejecting the Gay Identity, Reclaiming Masculinity* (2007), who denies gay men’s essential, innate femininity and has little use for the female-dominated fields in which gay men, according to Fellows, excel.¹⁶

Malebranche willingly admits that gayness is about more than sexuality. That, in his opinion, is exactly what is wrong with it.

The word gay has never described mere homosexuality. Gay is a sub-culture, a slur, a set of gestures, a slang, a look, a posture, a parade, a rainbow flag, a film genre, a taste in music, a hairstyle, a marketing demographic, a bumper sticker, a political agenda and philosophical viewpoint. Gay is a pre-packaged, superficial persona—a lifestyle. It’s a sexual identity that has almost nothing to do with sexuality. . . . The gay sensibility is a near-oblivious embrace of a castrating slur, the non-stop celebration of an age-old, emasculating stigma applied to men who engaged in homosexual acts. Gays and radical queers imagine that they challenge the status quo, but in appropriating the stigma of effeminacy, they merely conform to and confirm long-established expectations.¹⁷

Malebranche (that, of course, is not his real name) seems to have his finger on the pulse of the times.¹⁸ His book has received accolades from online reviewers, and his fellow travelers are legion.

Or so we can gather from the following statement. “Masculinity is a trait to be honored, respected & treated with dignity. Such a view is[,] sadly, a far cry from the moral turpitude that has swallowed the gay male-community & now stands as its spokesperson.” No, that is not a homophobic jeremiad from the Christian Right: it is an online promotion for the “g0y” identity, “A New Identity in Male Sexuality.” And no, “g0y” is not Yiddish for “Gentile”: it’s “gay,” or “guy,” with a zero in place of the middle letter.

“G0y” refers to masculine guys who like other masculine guys,

who value masculinity and cherish intimacy with other men, who reject effeminacy, and who consider anal intercourse “completely degrading & repulsive to masculinity.”¹⁹ Here is how their homepage puts it:

So, you're a normal guy who happens to like other guys—probably lots. But you don't relate to “GAY” for lots of reasons. You may even find the term to be offensive to your sense of masculinity or personal ethics; at least the way the term is often used in public & often by the press! “Guys should never play a ‘female role’ sexually.” Right? “Anal-Sex is degrading, dirty & disrespectful.” Right again? “Manhood is about respect.” Agreed? Well, you're not alone! Actually, +63% of ALL MEN deal with some degree of same sex attraction. Yup! . . . But, unlike the press & “gay media” who call all things like this as “gay”—we're part of a big movement of guys—men who reject the notions that “Men who love men are automatically part of ‘gay’ anything!” Find out why!²⁰

It would be as easy as it would be pointless to make fun of these folks—by observing, for example, that their hearty masculine disregard for the niceties of punctuation is queerly at odds with their suspiciously unrestrained, rather emotional, downright feminine overuse of the exclamation mark. But there's no real ethical or intellectual advantage to be gained by pulling masculine rank, acting superior, or aggrandizing ourselves at their expense—that's just a little bonus, a bitchy pleasure, which is hard to resist. Luckily, it's quite unnecessary. After all, these guys, or g0ys, freely acknowledge that their signature movie, the work of art emblematic of their whole movement, is *Brokeback Mountain*.²¹ So why bother being needlessly cruel? No doubt Fellows would be just as pleased to leave such folks out of his imagined community of gay men as they would be relieved to escape from it.

The problem for Fellows and his essentialist, third-sex model of gayness is that the men who claim to recognize themselves in this masculinist definition of homosexuality hardly represent some tiny

fringe group. “Gay rodeos are extremely popular events all over America,” John Clum observes, adding, “I wish I heard more irony from the folks who attend them.”²² Irony, however, is the last thing you can expect from the *Brokeback Mountain* crowd. What remains so awkward for Fellows, in any case, is that the virile, gender-normative style taken up and promoted by advocates of the “g0y identity” clearly strikes a chord with a considerable number of guys who, like it or not, fall into the category of gay, even according to Fellows’s own definition of it, but who disavow any and all gender-atypicality. When I last accessed the g0y website, on June 23, 2011, it had had nearly 700,000 hits.



This little skirmish over essentialism and its critical liabilities was undoubtedly predictable, if not a bit stale, and in any case the issues are well known and familiar by now. Still, the main reason for dispatching the whole topic as quickly and economically as possible is that it doesn’t address the most important and interesting questions raised by the femininity of gay male cultural practices—namely, *what is femininity*, and *whose femininity are we talking about anyway*? Third-sex theories do not, unfortunately, provide adequate answers to those questions. Instead, they tend to evade them by naturalizing the social. That is, they accept at face value the standard social definitions of gender and go on to treat them, unaltered, as transparent reflections of natural facts. They take various practices that are conventionally marked as feminine or masculine—but that may have nothing to do with maleness or femaleness—and affirm their gender codings, with the result that anyone of the other sex who takes up those practices appears to reveal by that “gender-atypical” choice a natural, underlying condition of sexual intermediacy. In this way, third-sex theories collapse the distinction between sex and gender, and rewrite the social as the natural.

The gender dispensation under which most of us live is a radically polarized one, and it tends to enforce a dichotomous model of male

and female as “opposite” sexes. Social practices that are not coded as conventionally masculine—such as flower-arranging or dancing—are quickly and unreflectively coded by our societies and by ourselves as feminine (although the details may vary from one society to another: for example, baking is coded as feminine in the United States and as masculine in France). But not everything that fails to qualify as properly masculine, according to the stringent social criteria designed to safeguard the purity of that rare and precious essence, is necessarily feminine. The ecstatic worship of divas from the world of opera or popular music may not be terribly butch, but that doesn’t mean it is feminine—in the sense that women as a group consume Maria Callas or Judy Garland tracks at the same pace that Rufus Wainwright does, or flock to the opera as they do to makeup counters, or collect Cher or Madonna videos for fear of being thought unwomanly.

When a man’s passionate interest in historic preservation or period restoration is taken to mean that he has the “psychologic character of women” (to borrow Edward Carpenter’s phrase), the social language of gender is hastily translated into the natural reality of sex. I completely agree with Fellows that there is often some truth in stereotypes—“However trite they may seem,” Fellows says, “gay stereotypes are useful in examining gay men’s natures” (246)—but in converting such stereotypes into archetypes (x, 247), and into the truths of our nature, Fellows places too much faith in clichés, in social fantasies about masculinity and femininity that seem obvious and right to us only because they conform to widespread, generally accepted notions about sex and gender, notions that start to look thoroughly incoherent as soon as we examine them up close.

The reason it’s a good idea to resist falling into conventional ways of thinking about gender, ways that the gender ideology of our society constantly promotes, is that otherwise we will be inclined to accept, without considering them properly, a lot of bogus ideas about women and men that we would find utterly implausible if they didn’t happen to agree with the polarized concepts of gender that gender-stereotyping reinforces by representing them as mere common sense.

In particular, we would rush, without thinking too carefully about it, to consider any habit or practice or attitude or interest that our culture defines as unmasculine, or as out of keeping with conventional norms of masculinity, as “feminine,” whether or not it had anything to do with the habits or practices or attitudes or interests of any women we actually know. Such a credulous belief in the truthfulness of conventional notions is entirely understandable, especially when it is grounded in such deeply rooted and seemingly unarguable ideologies as those pertaining to sex and gender, but it is also misplaced and entirely unnecessary.

For example, Fellows assembles a number of personal narratives that testify powerfully to the extent of gay men’s passion for aesthetic perfection, for ideal beauty—a phenomenon that we have already observed. In particular, he calls attention to the obsessiveness with which some gay men value, enjoy, and fixate on what many other people regard as trivial, minor, or virtually imperceptible fine points of architectural or interior design.

Preservation-minded gays have a penchant for meticulous attention to design detail. . . . While on a house tour in Savannah, a Georgia preservationist remarked with a hint of scorn, “It seems like new buildings that are built to look like old buildings never have *quite* the right pitch to the roof. *Those little details.*” Chicago preservationist and Louis Sullivan devotee Richard Nickel remarked, “People say rightly of me that I’m too fussy, but if you’re not analytic over everything, then soon enough you’re a slob and anything goes.” Believing that “all existence is rehearsal for a final performance of perfection,” Georgia’s Jim Sullivan was clearly of the same fastidious breed. (31)

I would be prepared, with Fellows, to accept such aesthetic fastidiousness as characteristic of gay male culture. The maniacal obsession with getting that shade of paint, the angle of that roof, the texture of that surface exactly right is one that may well be a salient, distinctive gay male *cultural* trait. We have noted the importance gay male culture places on *style*—its characteristic tendency to accord value to any

coherent expression of a historically specific system of taste, and the pleasure it takes in recognizing how that system completely determines the formal composition of a particular object. Outmoded but totally consistent and methodical styles, abandoned by fashion and socially devalued, typically spark camp appreciation. In the same way, old buildings that no one else cares about, but that exhibit the features of a complete stylistic system, may evoke passionate enthusiasm—the very kind of enthusiasm, in fact, that gay male culture typically bestows on all outmoded aesthetic forms that one can love without having to take seriously, like Baroque opera or the “woman’s pictures” that constitute a large component of Hollywood melodrama.

I would happily concede that a passionate emotional investment in specific elements of style, a meticulous concern for the niceties of architectural or interior design, for fine points of aesthetic detail, is not usually considered a particularly masculine characteristic. But is it feminine? Are women generally thought to be that fanatical, as a sex, about precise matters of aesthetic form? Some fashionable ladies are, of course, highly fastidious about their appearance, and about matters of style in general. But do women generally have a reputation for feeling as if something catastrophic has happened, as if the world has come undone, as if humanity has failed to live up to its full and glorious potential, whenever a single minor but unnecessary aesthetic fault has been committed?

No, not if we believe Chaz, or Chastity, a sometimes transgendered hairdresser in Hickory, North Carolina, who was interviewed in 2004 by E. Patrick Johnson for a book on Black gay men of the American South. When asked how members of the local community reacted to seeing Chastity (Chaz’s female alter ego) in church or the mall or a doctor’s office, Chaz indicated that they knew she was not exactly what she seemed: “No natural woman . . . pays that particular amount of attention to detail.”²³

The same logic applies to some of the other gay male cultural practices mentioned here. Though the Broadway musical may be

congenial to straight women in ways it is not to straight men, though it may create less gender trouble for its heterosexual female audience than for its heterosexual male audience,²⁴ there does not seem to be a straight female equivalent to the intensely solitary, wildly ecstatic, excessively sentimental childhood experience of the musical that D. A. Miller describes.²⁵ The Fire Island Italian widows put on drag, but they do not resemble women, nor do they intend to do so. Some female figures that are gay male icons are quite repellent to straight women (starting with Joan Crawford and Bette Davis in Robert Aldrich's 1962 movie, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*). Many gay male cultural practices are therefore not masculine or feminine or "two-spirited," nor do they exactly demonstrate a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics or a condition halfway between male and female. Rather, they imply something else, something unique, or at least a particular formation of gender and sexuality that is specific to some gay men and that has yet to be fully defined.



So how can we describe gay male culture's particular, non-standard formation of gender and sexuality? What is the cultural logic behind it? What kind of social and emotional work do gay men's so-called "feminine" identifications do? What, in fact, is the gay male relation to femininity?

In order to begin to answer that question, we need to understand gay male "femininity," or what passes for "femininity" in gay male culture, as *its own phenomenon, or range of phenomena*—as something quite distinct from the various kinds of femininity exhibited or performed by women. Which is precisely why some writers prefer terms like "gender-role non-conformity" and "gender atypicality" to describe gay male practices of gender: those terms indicate, by their very neutrality, a certain suspension of judgment about what the exact meaning of gay male gender dissidence really is, a refusal to define any and all departures from canonical masculinity automatically, unreflectively, and uncritically as "feminine." So much the better. But

then the trick is to *keep* those terms in suspense, to prevent “gender-role non-conformity” and “gender atypicality” from getting equated straightforwardly and simplistically with “femininity.”

It is useful in this context to recall our earlier conclusion that “femininity” in gay male culture is, typically, a *proxy identity*: it is an identity that stands in or substitutes for a form of existence that gay men cannot claim—or, at least, that they cannot claim so easily—in their own persons. Which is why they borrow it from others, in this case from women (or, in other cases, from aristocrats). “Femininity” is a means by which gay men can assert a particular, non-standard, anti-social way of being, feeling, and behaving. It represents, more particularly, an ethos at odds with specific forms or manifestations of traditional heterosexual masculinity. As a proxy identity, “femininity” is a clear expression of gay male gender dissidence, a rejection of standard, canonical, established forms of heterosexual masculinity. But that doesn’t mean that gay “femininity” necessarily signifies an actual identification with *women*. However much it may *refer* to women, which it obviously does, it is not always or essentially *about* women. It is its own form of gender atypicality, and it has to do specifically with gay men themselves.

One of the methods by which gay male culture elaborates and consolidates its distinctive attitude of social and cultural resistance is to claim, appropriate, and translate into gay male terms certain values or ideals that are profoundly alien to traditional heterosexual masculine culture. Some of those values or ideals are associated with women and are marked as feminine. For example, gay male culture valorizes performance and role-playing; it cherishes melodrama; it exhibits a fascination with a particular style or way of being defined by a distinctive blend of glamour and abjection. All of those cultural forms or genres are more closely aligned in our world with femininity than with masculinity. And in a social and symbolic system where gender differences are systematically polarized, dichotomized, and turned into binary oppositions, any gesture that implies a refusal of conventional masculinity is certain to be read as feminine.

So it is understandable that gay male cultural practices—which promote and disseminate non-standard ways of being and feeling for men, which recode bits of mainstream heterosexual culture with dissident or atypical gender meanings, and which instruct others in that socially deviant and oppositional ethos—it is indeed understandable that such practices might make it look like gay men have qualities or characteristics generally possessed by girls and women. And that’s also what gay male culture may *feel like* to many of the gay men, and to many of the straight people as well, who participate in that culture. (So Fellows is not exactly wrong to interpret gay male cultural practices as feminine.) But that need not indicate that gay men belong to a third or intermediate sex, that they have a different biology or psychology from straight men, or that they are possessed of a separate, essential, archetypal nature.



One of my reasons for selecting the figure of Joan Crawford in the first place and for choosing to study the mesmerizing spectacle she offers of mingled glamour and abjection, both in *Mildred Pierce* and in its descendants, is that her gay appeal forces us to confront two notorious aspects of gay male subjectivity that make gay men nowadays particularly squeamish—and therefore particularly loath to explore them: namely, identification with women and attachment to the mother.²⁶

Those two themes are both central and taboo in contemporary gay male culture. They are very far from being extinct—as anyone can testify who has been to a drag show or seen Pedro Almodóvar’s 1999 film *All about My Mother*, which condenses an entire tradition of cultural reflection on the part of gay men about their relations to femininity and to the figure of the mother.²⁷ But no self-respecting gay man wants to address those topics nowadays, except in the form of a joke or a put-down. Once upon a time, gay men had a reputation for being able to talk about nothing but their mothers. Now they refuse to go near the subject.

And no wonder: “feminine” identification and mother-fixation recall the hoariest clichés of pop-psychoanalytic homophobia. If what the cultural practice of male homosexuality ultimately reveals about the nature of gay male subjectivity is how closely it turns out to resemble that stock of popular and pseudo-scientific caricatures, it’s hardly surprising that so many gay men would want to have nothing to do with gay culture. That is why it is so important to deal with those unfortunate and embarrassing issues in an open and positive way. They haven’t disappeared, after all; they’re just not spoken about. And yet it is perfectly possible to free them from their phobic associations and give them a gay-affirmative interpretation.

In the previous two chapters, accordingly, I described the significant erotic and political stakes in gay male culture’s “feminine” identifications and maternal investments, at least as the cult of Joan Crawford and her avatars illuminates them. And I set out a number of reasons why gay men ought not to be afraid of them—why, instead of closeting them, we should not hesitate to embrace them. I was also determined to take the battle deep into enemy territory—onto terrain long occupied by psychoanalytic thinking and homophobic commonplaces about gay male interiority. I wanted to show that it is possible to rescue from the grip of pathology even such demonized aspects of gay male subjectivity as mother-fixation and so-called “femininity.” And I wanted to indicate how an analysis of gay male cultural practices could produce a non-normalizing, non-psychological or non-psychoanalytic account of gay male subjectivity.

Now it is time to extend this exploration of gay male femininity further (I’ll stop putting those annoying quotation marks around *femininity*, but I will continue to understand by *femininity*, as the term applies to gay men, not the qualities and characteristics of women but the non-standard formation of gender and sexuality that is distinctive to gay male culture). We need to look more closely at how that proxy identity, femininity, functions in gay male culture—to deepen our understanding of *what gay male femininity is* and *what it is*

for. Instead of running from the specter of gay male gender deviance, being ashamed of it, greeting it with stubborn and stolid silence or denial, and consigning it to homosexuality's newly built closet, we need to continue—in a spirit of unprejudiced and panic-free inquiry—to inquire into the meaning of gay male femininity, without fearing that any investigation of it will necessarily return us to homophobic clichés about our abnormal psychology.

Most of all, we shouldn't be so sure before we start that we already know what gay femininity is, how it functions, or what it means.

GENDER AND GENRE

Two fundamental premises will guide the inquiry that follows. First, the phenomena under consideration should be analyzed with reference to social factors, not biological ones. Second, gender orientation and sexual orientation should not be radically separated from each other or systematically distinguished in any account of male homosexuality. Both of those premises reflect personal and intellectual preferences of mine, not scientific axioms, but let me attempt to justify them—or, at least, to explain why I prefer to think about gay male cultural practices in this way—since my approach has in fact broad methodological implications.

Modern Americans have fallen into the bad habit of locating the source of all non-standard behavior in either nature or the individual. Which side of that dichotomy they come down on may depend on their politics or their religion, but they all seem to agree that those are in any case the only two options. Homosexuality, criminality, addiction, even the preference for certain consumer products (in the case of identical twins separated at birth) are currently considered either the result of inborn traits, no doubt located in our genes or genomes—the current shorthand for “nature” (it used to be hormones, and blood before that)—or the expression of an idiosyncratic quirk, a personal choice, a sin, a defect, or some other individual characteristic. What is missing from all this speculation is the notion of *the social*

as a mode of being which is constitutive of both individual and collective experience. The social refers to a form of existence that arises from the shared life of human communities and does not result directly from either natural determinations or individual variations.

As a cultural practice and an identity, being gay is a social experience in the same way that being American, or middle class, or Chicano is a social experience. It's neither a natural condition nor an individual peculiarity, but a collective phenomenon, a consequence of social belonging. But that doesn't mean it's a choice. I could even say it's the way you're born—in the sense that if you're born and raised in America, you inevitably become an American, of one sort or another, whether you want to become an American or not. And your subjective life, your instincts and intuitions, will necessarily be shaped by your being an American, by your connectedness to American culture. But this doesn't mean there's a gene that causes you to have an American subjectivity, or a gland in your brain that makes you American.

Nonetheless, being American, like being gay or being straight, is deeply personal, deeply defining of you as an individual, deeply shaping of your sensibility, your way of seeing the world, your responses to other people. Even if you are African American or Asian American, being American still gives you a subjectivity that is distinct from the subjectivity of those who aren't American.

In the same way, gay male culture and gay male subjectivity are constituted socially. In that very limited respect, being gay is like being American. By insisting that homosexuality is a social form of being, I do not mean to imply that homosexuality is something learned, or that people acquire a homosexual orientation because they are taught to be gay by others—"recruited," as it were, into the "gay lifestyle." I am not talking here about what causes either homosexuality or heterosexuality, any more than I am talking about the European discovery and colonization of America—the process that eventually produced an American national identity. I'm speaking about the way males who *already are homosexual*, like people who are already born

and raised in America, come to acquire a particular social identity, with a distinctive consciousness, a set of cultural practices, and a resulting subjectivity. The process by which people become American is pretty well known, even if the details merit further study. The process by which people become gay is less well known, which is why it's worth investigating.

Becoming gay is mysterious, because—unlike becoming American—it does not happen through primary socialization. Parents and schools don't teach kids how to be gay in the same way they teach kids how to be American. (Though they sometimes do teach kids how to be straight in ways that backfire so badly you could almost say they really *do* teach kids how to be gay.) Most other social groups—whether minority groups like African Americans or majority groups like unhyphenated Americans—are initiated into their cultures at home and at school, as well as through TV and the movies. But they tend to misrecognize or deny the kinds of cultural practices that they engage in and the effects that those cultural practices produce.¹ Heterosexuals don't usually tell themselves that, by watching a film like *Titanic*, they are undertaking an initiation into the culture of heterosexuality, into a very specific ideology of romantic love as a source of salvation, and into a literally catastrophic model of feminine gender identity as a calamitous condition requiring rescue (“he saved me, in every way that a person can be saved”). But that is in fact what they are doing.²

It is precisely because the social reproduction of gay male culture does *not* get carried out by mainstream social institutions—whose very functioning as vehicles of cultural initiation remains invisible and unremarked because it is so obvious—that gay male acculturation remains a mysterious affair, especially when it seems to be largely complete, or at least well under way, by some point in early childhood. That is why it will be necessary to devote a lot of attention to it, as I plan to do in a moment. Nor does the social reproduction of gay male culture get carried out by gay male social institutions either—not initially, at least: it takes place in a heteronormative (family) context.

That is why it inevitably involves the appropriation and queering of *mainstream* cultural objects. After all, mainstream cultural objects (like the Broadway musical) are the *only* cultural objects that heteronormative social institutions readily make available to a proto-gay child. What is not at all clear is how cultural resistance, or queer counter-acculturation, happens *within* a heteronormative context. Our social model of gay male subjectivity will have to provide some account of that.

In any case, it will be important not to begin from a falsely stark opposition between an insufficiently robust model of the social, understood as a mere surface effect of haphazard interactions among people (instead of as a systematic ensemble that is thoroughly constitutive of their subjectivity), and an overly positivistic model of the natural, understood as the deep, formative structure that determines our being. It will also be crucial not to be distracted by psychology, pop- or other, from this fundamentally social process of subject-formation, not only because psychology tends to medicalize and pathologize social dissidence, especially sexual dissidence, but also because our concern here is not with individual mental life but with collective structures of feeling.



Social life reaches down very deep into the subjectivity of the individual. It shapes what appear to us to be our profound, abiding intuitions about the world and about ourselves. We have already surveyed some instances of basic intuitions or subjective truths that, though deeply felt, reflect not our biological natures or our psychological vicissitudes but the social order of our world and the values associated with it. For example, people in our society perceive generational struggles between men as tragic, at least potentially, whereas they feel that generational struggles between women do not qualify for equally serious, or completely serious, consideration. Conflicts between women are excessive, histrionic, overwrought—in any case, they are less than fully dignified. Authority is masculine, since it is-

sues in command; hysteria is feminine, since it expresses powerlessness. Masculinity is more dignified than femininity, just as the upper classes are more dignified than the lower ones (even if the latter sometimes qualify as more virtuous than the former). Dignified suffering is tragic; undignified suffering is pathetic. Laughter is not an appropriate response to tragedy and horror, but to take pathetic suffering seriously is to fall prey to sentimentality, to succumb to the vulgar appeal of melodrama, to make an emotional investment in kitsch, all of which is a fault when judged according to standards of good taste.

Femininity is trivial, unserious (the same judgment applies to anyone whom we consider less worthy than ourselves), no doubt because it is highly performative. Role-playing is at odds with the manifestation of an essential identity—of one's true being—and so performance necessarily implies inauthenticity, and a lack of real seriousness. Any mode of being or feeling that can be disqualified as unserious—such as the performative or the melodramatic—is not truly masculine and displays instead an affinity with the feminine. The distinction between style and content, or style and substance, is a crucial one for separating appearance from reality: style counts as feminine and substance as masculine, since masculinity is fundamentally concerned with the true content of things, whereas femininity is concerned with frivolous matters such as appearance. Men act; women appear.

It is all very well to denounce such repugnant notions as idiotic, as being nothing more than outlandish social prejudices—outdated, quaint, threadbare, cartoonish. Indeed, when they are stated baldly in the form of propositions, as I have just done, no one in their right mind would assent to them. But because they mostly do not present themselves to us as propositions, but as perceptions of the world or gut feelings or deeply personal and original insights, they continue to command a certain allegiance at an intuitive level on the part of many people. That is why cultural commentators like Camille Paglia and Harvey Mansfield, who traffic in such prejudices or who mobilize them in order to endow their views with a specious plausibility, never

fail to find a receptive audience—an audience more than willing to jettison its supposedly “politically correct” beliefs (which it had evidently never embraced very eagerly or sincerely to begin with) in favor of what gets lightly but effectively passed off as sheer natural reality and as obvious common sense.

What this indicates is just how much of what we take to be reality is socially constituted without ceasing to appear to us as real. Social constructions are not false, in other words, and it is mistaken to regard social analysis as implying that our fundamental intuitions about the world are erroneous or groundless. On the contrary, they are very well grounded—it’s just that they are grounded in our social existence, not in the nature of things. To search for the social grounds of subjectivity is therefore not to invalidate people’s deepest feelings and intuitions or to reduce them to the status of mere illusions or delusions.³ It is, quite simply, to explain them.



My second premise is that working models of gay male subjectivity should not attempt to cordon off gender orientation from sexuality. Because gay male cultural practices often manifest themselves in childhood, long before the start of sexual activity, and because they seem largely unrelated to sexual activity of any kind, it is tempting to see them as representing a phenomenon entirely independent from erotic life. Furthermore, because many of those practices take the form of certain pursuits that are associated with girls and women, they can be interpreted as expressing a deep, underlying, congenital, originary, non-standard (feminine) gender orientation instead of a (gay) sexual orientation. That general outlook does have a certain appeal. And it may be an entirely appropriate way to understand some transgender individuals as well as transgender culture. In the case of gay men, however, the trick is not only to distinguish gay male cultural practices from gay male sexual practices, but, having done so, to figure out how they are related. What is the logical or emotional connection between a liking for Judy Garland and a liking for sex with

men? Is it possible to identify any conceivable relation between the gay male desire for sexual contact with men and a taste for grand opera, or the Broadway musical, or period design?

Historically, there has been a tendency to conceptualize the sexual practices and gender identities of gay men separately from each other, to give one priority and to treat the other—if at all—only as a mere consequence of the first. The result has been either to promote sexuality at the expense of gender or to privilege gender over sexuality. The post-Stonewall gay movement tried to do the former; third-sex theories generally do the latter.

Since homosexuality had for so long been treated as a psychological abnormality or pathology consisting in sex-role reversal or gender inversion, a prominent strain in post-Stonewall gay male political thought and culture attempted to sever homosexuality from gender and to present it as a purely sexual orientation, having to do entirely with sexual object-choice and thereby proving to be fully consistent with normative masculinity. It also discouraged traditional forms of queeniness in men, considering them both unsexy and retrograde—unfortunate survivals from a bygone era of sexual oppression and internalized homophobia. What made a man gay was not his non-standard gender style or his feminine subjectivity, but the directionality of his sexual desire, his erotic attraction to men, his social membership in a gay male world of equals, the quantity and virility of his sexual partners. That is what gay liberation meant, at least in part: the liberation of sexuality from gender, the freedom to be masculine, and the multiplication of sexual opportunities that the new butch styles of homosexuality afforded—precisely by enabling gay men to eroticize other gay men *as* gay men.

Nowadays, in the light of the queer and transgender movements, that post-Stonewall model of gay male virility, though it still has plenty of fans (as we just witnessed in the preceding chapter), is starting to seem “quaint.”⁴ The Stonewall rebellion no longer looks like the beginning of the world-historical defeat of homophobic gender stereotyping, the definitive release of gay people from centuries of

bondage to degrading gender identities, but rather like the hollow and short-lived triumph of the misguided fantasy of a gender-free homosexuality. In particular, the post-Stonewall victory of gay identity over the dykes and queens of an earlier era now appears less like the dawn of liberation than like just another strategy of domination—the final chapter in the long history of transgender oppression from which, only now, are we starting thankfully to emerge.

But it is also possible that the pendulum may have swung too far in the opposite direction. Although it is surely true, as Fellows says, that “gayness comprises much more than sexual partners and practices,” we need not necessarily conclude that gay culture derives largely from feminine gender orientation and from the otherwise “non-sexual dimensions of gay men’s natures,” as he also insists. And since, in our homophobic and sex-phobic society, gay sex is always easy to denounce and very hard to defend, it seems unworthy to purchase respectability for gay male culture by saving it from a discreditable implication in gay male sexuality, as Larry Kramer (twice quoted by Fellows) labors to do: “Surely gay culture is more than cocks,” Kramer says. “The only way we’ll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn’t just sexual” (as if a culture that *was* just sexual would be completely shameful—or, at least, as if it would be something no decent human being would take pride in).⁵

The real problem, however, is not that gay culture is likely to be reduced to nothing more than cocks. The challenge for critics and interpreters is the opposite: it is to figure out what most of gay male culture—historic preservation, to take only the handiest example, or the cult of Joan Crawford—could possibly have to do with cocks. It’s less a question of saving gay male culture from being reduced to sex than of preserving some conceptual and emotional connection between gay male cultural practices and the same-sex sexual practices that make homosexuality a *sexual* orientation.

Fellows manages to capture quite brilliantly the sexlessness of much gay male culture, the breathless absorption in a world of fascinating and precious objects, the maniacal preoccupation with sconces

and silver and cut glass and woodwork and all those aesthetic satisfactions that seem to have nothing to do with sexual pleasure. And, indeed, much of gay male culture delights in activities that—unlike gay sex, which is socially condemned as abnormal and unnatural—inspire widespread admiration on the part of straight society, insofar as they involve making the world beautiful. It is understandable that what some gay men would prize and cherish in those activities is precisely their merciful exemption from sexuality and, thus, from punitive judgment, whether other people's or gay men's own. Instead of a physical, animal act that can be experienced as undignified, filthy, shameful, and perverse (at least, if you're doing it right), architectural restoration or musical performance or art-collecting is not only socially respectable, public-spirited, and praiseworthy; it also, just like modernist abstraction in this one respect, affords a redemptive opportunity to transcend the body and its functions—to escape from the tainted identity of being a (homo)sexual subject and from all the stigma that attaches to it. Just think of Liberace (who was also a house restorer on the side): only by constructing for himself an elaborately artificial identity as a classy and glamorous artist, as a purveyor of high musical culture, could he neutralize the contempt he otherwise would have incurred for being such a queen.⁶

No doubt a certain part of the appeal of queer cultural practices to gay men lies precisely in their remove from overt sexuality: they make available to gay men *forms of queer expression other than the strictly sexual*. Furthermore, cultural practices offer gay men outlets for their passions that belong to a supposedly higher order than sexual activity and that may even partake of the ascetic, the spiritual, or the selfless. Fellows captures beautifully the kind of unironic, religious devotion characteristic of certain gay male cultural practices—a devotion that is neither explicitly campy nor implicitly sexual, that makes no reference to gayness, and that has rather to do with a total, serious, *spiritual* absorption in the aesthetic object, which is venerated both as an absolute value in itself and as an escape from one's own self, including one's sexual subjectivity. In complete, selfless immersion in

eighteenth-century row houses or musical theater or Joan Crawford memorabilia—all those “clippings, cigarette cards, rare vintage photos, letters, film reels, and scrapbooks” in Neil Maciejewski’s collection (as described in *The Out Traveler*)—some gay men may find possibilities for an experience of intense rapture that sexuality itself, for whatever reason, does not or cannot offer them.

As a child of the Stonewall era, I want to resist the unsexing of gay male culture, even if one result of my bias will be that I fail to do justice to the passionate, sexless, *unironic*, worshipful intensity that accompanies some gay men’s near-religious devotion to objects of non-sexual beauty and that imparts to such devotion an aura of selflessness, asceticism, and spirituality.⁷ The literal, earnest, non-camp, and de-eroticizing effort to lose the self in the aesthetic object and to transcend one’s own gayness in the process is clearly an important dimension of some gay men’s cultural practices. (Other gay men may feel that such experiences of rapturous absorption in non-sexual objects actually makes them *more* queer.) In any case, this sort of sexless aestheticism is not something I have emphasized, since it seems to me to imply a certain repudiation of gayness, a refusal of homosexual specificity, a flight from both gay identity and gay sexuality.⁸ I prefer to examine those gay cultural practices that make willing reference to homosexuality, just as I also prefer to explore those gay male expressions of passionate devotion to a cultural object and those experiences of delirious bedazzlement with it that betray some ironic self-awareness and that fail to take themselves completely straight. Throughout the whole course of this book, I have kept my observations about gay male culture tied to various themes in gay male eroticism and to the conditions under which gay men accede to the subjective experiences of desire and love. That is what I will also try to do now.



Let us consider a very simple and obvious fact. In a heterosexual and heteronormative society—that is, in the sort of society in which most

readers of this book happen to live—to desire a man is to take up a feminine position. Not necessarily a feminine identity, but a position in the field of discourses and practices that is socially marked as feminine. That is because women are the only people who are thought to be naturally, normally susceptible of feeling sexual attraction to men. Hence, for anyone who inhabits a world of heteronorms, to experience sexual desire for a man is to occupy a subject position that is considered proper to women, in the sense of rightly belonging to women—and, thus, a subject position that is culturally identified and inflected as feminine.

Although sexual desire itself may be independent of gender orientation, and is certainly distinguishable from it, sexual desire in a heteronormative social world is bound to be closely associated with gender orientation, because each is coded with reference to the other. That is, the experience of feeling sexual desire for members of one particular sex signifies, both to other people and to the person (gay or straight) who experiences it, a relation of similitude, resemblance, identity, or some other kind of structural correspondence with the customary gender role of those who belong to the other sex. To be attracted to one sex is to feel like you belong to the other. That may be less true for the (rare) kind of male same-sex desire that takes an exclusively phallic, aggressive, and sexually dominant form; if, however, all the objects of such a desire remain male, even that traditionally masculine style of homosexual desire is not likely to escape some association with female subjectivity or a feminine gender role. And the less male homosexual desire expresses itself in such aggressive, phallic ways, the more closely bound to a feminine gender role it will seem to be.

What this means is that gender and sexuality are strictly related. Sexual desire for a sexually specific kind of object is both the expression of a *sexual subjectivity* and the marker of a *gender identity*. A man who feels homosexual desire is necessarily placed in the sexual subject position and in the social role of a woman, certainly according to other people's perceptions of him and also—at least at some level or

to some extent—according to his own perception of himself. At the same time, most such men retain the social status and the sense of subjective empowerment that belong to fully entitled males. To be recognized and treated as male is inevitably to be socially and subjectively constituted as male. The result of that gender-constitutive process appears in many aspects of masculine subject formation that are taken for granted and are therefore instinctive: they range from a sense of entitlement to one's feelings and opinions to a sense of owning public space or at least of being at home in it, to enjoying the right to speak and the ability to impose oneself and one's views on a group, to claiming an erotic autonomy and a sexual subjectivity of one's own.

Gay men, then, are both like and unlike straight men, just as they are both like and unlike straight women. They are like straight men in that they are men and most of them are accorded, at least initially, the dignity and sense of subjective empowerment that generally attach to men in a system of male dominance. They are not like straight men insofar as they desire men and do not desire women; also, unlike straight men, they find themselves assimilated to a feminine gender role by virtue of the directionality of their erotic desire, even if that desire expresses itself in a sexually aggressive way.

Gay men are unlike straight women insofar as they are men, but they are like them in occupying a desiring relation to the male sex and in being considered unmasculine partly on that basis.

A male subject of same-sex desire is therefore gendered in complex and often contradictory ways. That complexity is nothing more than the consequence—ineluctable, though not, of course, total or all-determining—of the social semiotics of gender and sexuality in a heteronormative world. The unique, transverse social situation of men who desire men produces a gendering of gay male subjectivity that is specific and irreducible to the gendering of any other subject position.

So gay male subjectivity is assimilable neither to the subjectivity of heterosexual women, as some third-sex theories would imply, nor to

the subjectivity of straight men, as some advocates of gay virility might prefer. It needs to be understood independently, on its own terms.⁹

Given all those considerations, it would be unwise to try to conceptualize gay male femininity, or those gay male cultural practices that might appear to manifest it, in isolation from same-sex sexual desire, which is correlative with it. Gay femininity is very much a homosexual phenomenon, insofar as same-sex desire cannot be dissociated from its conditions of formation; it is not just an expression of sexual intermediacy or effeminacy, with no erotic component. Although a queer child may not translate his erotic feelings into sexual activity before he grows up and comes out, which can sometimes take many years, that does not mean he does not experience erotic attraction while still a child—including erotic attraction of a homosexual kind. It is not clear which comes first, same-sex desire or gender dissonance, and neither should be presumed to be the source or origin of the other.

It would be equally unwise to cordon off gay male cultural practices from all implication in gender inversion, gender deviance, or gender atypicality—the way some critics, who approach them from a post-Stonewall understanding of male homosexuality as a purely sexual and masculine identity, attempt to do.¹⁰ Most gay male cultural practices, after all, from diva-worship to interior decorating, turn out to be strongly inflected by feminine meanings, and there is no point in obfuscating that fact.



It might seem misguided, in any approach to gay male subjectivity, to ignore psychic factors and to place so much emphasis on social semiotics, on the codes of sex and gender, treating them as determinative of the vicissitudes of gay male subject-formation. It might seem as if I were limiting my conceptual model to superficial phenomena, to labels or signs or categories or ideologies, avoiding the deep, internal

processes by which the individual subject is formed and oriented. But social meanings, like gender and nationality, are not superficial: they are constitutive of human subjectivity. And I'm not trying to offer a genetic account of sexuality, or to explain what causes individuals to be gay or straight—*either* sexually *or* culturally; rather, I'm inquiring into the origins of the cultural practices adopted by those who, for whatever reason, turn out to be gay or straight in either sense.

Moreover, I don't take social codes to be *ideas*, to which individuals may or may not assent; I don't regard them as thoughts about sex and gender which individual people are free to accept or reject—although, like many feelings, they do contain a certain propositional content. Rather, I consider semiotic codes to be constitutive of the meanings out of which individual subjectivity is born. They define the social and symbolic context within which subjectivity takes shape and are therefore basic to the social formation of gendered and sexual identities.

Under heteronormative conditions, it is only natural for a male subject to experience his desiring relation to men, quite unreflectively, as feminine and to identify with a feminine role on that basis. This is not some logical, deliberative, conscious process—as if an initially masculine man were suddenly to be flooded with insight and say to himself, “Oh dear, I really like guys, so that must mean I am like a woman—I guess I had better start identifying with girls.” The association is instinctive or intuitive, not reflective. The basic heteronormative coordinates of gender and sexuality map out the constitutive conditions under which each subject of heteronormative culture accedes to subjective agency and intelligibility. It is an originary, formative process, which is thoroughly social from the start.

A certain gender orientation at odds with heteronormative masculinity is therefore bound to be built into gay male sexual subjectivity. It should not be surprising, then, if many gay men display gender-atypical characteristics or if many gay male cultural practices seem to express feminine identifications—identifications marked as feminine

not by reference to women, necessarily, but by forms of dissent from heteronormative masculinity. That is why femininity hardly exhausts the meaning or content of gay male cultural practices.



Gender identity is formed very early in the life of the individual. And how is it formed, after all, if not in relation to preexisting social models of gender and sexuality, embodied both by a child's earliest caregivers and by the gender values belonging to the cultural forms that those caregivers make available to the child—and that have shaped their own styles of conduct and emotional expression? The differential gender-mapping of cultural forms produces the (heteronormative) social-semiotic system in which a child's caregivers participate, a system that has already contributed to forming their own subjectivities and determining their personal styles of feeling and behavior. Gay (or proto-gay) subjects may well find those styles of expression, along with the entire conventional social-semiotic system of gender and sexuality that subtends them, to be uncongenial, if not downright alien. Under those conditions, it is hardly surprising that many gay (or proto-gay) subjects resist interpellation by traditional codes of masculinity and femininity, or that they find scant personal meaning in the cultural forms and activities that such codes inflect as traditionally masculine or feminine. In which case, they may adopt certain evasive strategies that enable them to dodge the social summons to experience the world in heterosexual and heteronormative ways.

Those standard, straight ways of experiencing the world include ways of feeling as well as ways of responding to cultural objects and activities already coded for gender and sexuality, ways of orienting oneself in relation to all the constellations of interconnected values responsible for inflecting persons, behaviors, and genres of discourse with the dense social meanings that they bear, meanings that also refer—however obliquely—to gender and sexuality. The central portion of this book has been dedicated to tracing the logical connections

among a few of the interrelated values that form those constellations, and to showing how they impart gendered and sexual meanings to many elements of the cultural field—how they structure a larger poetics of culture in terms of gender and sexuality.

Gay femininity is a cultural formation, then, not just a psychosexual one. Gender orientation is an orientation to cultural practices, cultural forms, and their meanings; it is not simply a sexed and gendered subjectivity removed from a cultural context. We should therefore not construe the feminine position of the gay male subject in narrowly sexual and gendered terms, as if it were a mere psychosexual condition, the inevitable consequence of some mechanical working-out of a rigid sexual geometry, of a shifting oedipal configuration of predetermined anatomical and psychological variables. The feminine position that gay male subjects take up is not exclusively defined by the directionality of erotic desire and a corresponding gender role, nor is its meaning exhausted by them. For that feminine position both reflects and expresses a distinctive situatedness within an entire field of discourses and social practices.

Once again, the generic codes of the Broadway musical may be illuminating. “In traditional musical comedies,” John Clum observes, “gender assignments of songs are quite specific. The women got the sensitive songs, the torch songs or songs of unrequited love. The men usually move from songs of philandering to love duets. The women’s songs allowed the lyricist space for more private expression.”¹¹ There is a tight fit, in other words, between gender and genre.

Which implies that feminine identification on the part of gay men is more than the determinate result of the playing-out of the heteronormative logic that coordinates gender and sexual object-choice. It reflects a larger cultural logic by which generic practices connect femininity with particular forms of expression and an extensive set of cultural values. “Feminine identification” is the term which the language of psychology uses to describe what is actually a concrete social process of positioning oneself within a set of cultural codes that define a

multitude of emotional and affective roles, attitudes, and practices of personal life. As Stuart Hall reminded us some time ago, “ideology as a *social practice* consists of the ‘subject’ positioning himself in the specific complex, the objectivated field of discourses and codes which are available to him in language and culture at a particular historical conjuncture.”¹²

So when male subjects who desire males take up a feminine position, they may not so much be yielding to the inexorable force of a rigid set of social norms—to the social logic of heteronormativity—as they may be gravitating toward certain affective and discursive possibilities that are already present in the larger culture. Such possibilities are coded for gender, and associated with gender, but they are not specifically about gender. Rather, they acquire a specific gender association through the differential gendering of the genres that produce them. So a gay subject who is drawn to those affective or discursive possibilities may be expressing not an identification with women so much as an attraction to the cultural values associated with certain practices that happen to be coded as feminine by generic conventions. He may, to invoke Clum’s Broadway example, have a particular predilection for sensitivity, or emotional intensity, or private forms of expression—the sorts of values that are at home in the songs conventionally assigned by the pragmatics of the musical genre to the subgenre of songs sung by women.

In other words, the differential gender-mapping of everything from men’s and women’s songs in Broadway musicals to the genres and styles of expression that we call tragedy and melodrama produces a cultural landscape in which many emotional and discursive practices are coded for masculinity or femininity. Gay femininity may turn out to consist in a *cultural* identification with or attraction to particular gendered modes of feeling and expression, as well as a repulsion to others. Once dislodged from their obligatory, conventional masculine positioning by the fact of their same-sex desire, gay male subjects develop atypical gender identities by working out various kinds of

dissident relations to the standard gender values attached to cultural forms.



Let us consider a representative, indeed a notorious example. It displays one gay subject's dissident relations to the mainstream gender coding of standard cultural values. I am referring to a poem by Frank O'Hara, a gay poet who played a central role in the formation of the so-called New York School of poets, painters, and musicians. The poem appeared in his 1964 collection *Lunch Poems*.¹³

Lana Turner has collapsed!
 I was trotting along and suddenly
 it started raining and snowing
 and you said it was hailing
 but hailing hits you on the head
 hard so it was really snowing and
 raining and I was in such a hurry
 to meet you but the traffic
 was acting exactly like the sky
 and suddenly I see a headline
 LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
 there is no snow in Hollywood
 there is no rain in California
 I have been to lots of parties
 and acted perfectly disgraceful
 but I never actually collapsed
 oh Lana Turner we love you get up

O'Hara appropriates here the ambient melodrama of conventional journalistic discourse—with its emotionally overwrought, attention-getting headlines, its breathless fascination with the lives of public figures and celebrities, and the keyed-up sense of drama it brings to the portrayal of current events in the news—in order to stage his own

dissident relation to the mainstream genres, discourses, and cultural forms that define conventional heterosexual masculinity. It is from those dominant cultural forms, discourses, and genres that he manages to carve out for himself a flagrantly non-standard position within the field of gender and sexuality.

O'Hara represents his attitude to the banner headline as one of mingled credulity and skepticism. He portrays himself as both a dupe and a disillusioned critic of the inflated journalistic discourse he ventriloquizes. Far from exempting himself from the hysterical excitement that the blaring headline strives to impart to the mass audience targeted by its address, he happily assimilates himself to that audience, appropriating the headline's melodramatic rhetoric, citing it, and reproducing it with mock seriousness. By opening the poem with the words of the headline and enunciating them in his own voice, he actively (which is to say, passively—that is, with *active passivity*) occupies the subject position that the trashy headline stakes out for the unresisting reader. At the same time, O'Hara's citation exposes the overheated rhetoric of journalistic discourse, making fun of the headline for its melodramatic excess, for its strenuous effort to get us to invest so much urgent and misplaced meaning in the minor details of the life of a celebrity we don't actually know—though we might be induced by the tabloid press to feel that we do know her—especially when our own lives do not qualify for the same kind of impassioned consideration or sympathy.

O'Hara joins in the headline's exclamation, repeating it as if it expressed his own shock and dismay, and claims the utterance for himself before the reader of the poem even realizes that O'Hara is simply quoting the tabloids. To speak in one's own voice, if one is the sort of cultural dupe that O'Hara at first presents himself as being, is to adopt the trite language and the tendency to melodramatic overstatement that characterize conventional journalistic discourse. By the end of the poem, however, O'Hara has differentiated the movie star's plight from his own. Though he makes no virtue of "never actually collaps[ing]" (after all, he has "been to lots of parties / and acted per-

factly disgraceful”), his comparatively stalwart behavior presents a contrast to the privileged antics of the star, whose celebrity entitles her to benefit from a special indulgence and deference that he cannot claim. Challenging her to pull herself together and get back on her feet, he finally evinces a certain impatience: far from being able to count on any outpourings of sympathy for his own lapses, he has had to fend for himself without them, and that is surely why his concluding exhortation conveys both tenderness and toughness before the spectacle of feminine glamour and abjection.

O’Hara’s knowing combination of alarmed concern and bemused detachment registers his recognition that he is not qualified to be a subject of such flamboyant and melodramatic celebrity discourse, even as it testifies to his admiration and envy of those who are.¹⁴ His ironic voicing of the headline ultimately discloses its discourse to be ungrounded except in the trope of celebrity melodrama itself. By sharing in its groundless excitement, O’Hara projects his own lack of seriousness, especially when judged according to the criteria of heterosexual masculinity. That impression is compounded by the lack of punctuation, as well as by the deliberate ditziness and irrelevance of his dispute with his friend over the correct description of the weather. Further undermining O’Hara’s masculinity is his breathless response to the news of a trivial event in the life of a female movie star and his assumption of an attitude of schoolgirl excitability and prurience before the spectacle of scandal, as well as a more solemn attitude of veneration proper to Lana Turner’s female fans. Finally, there is his telling use of the phrase “trotting along,” to describe his own movement through the streets of New York, which completes this self-portrait of masculine gender dissonance. Real men don’t trot.

O’Hara’s ironic reuse of melodrama does not contest elite society’s punitive judgments against that disreputable subgenre, but knowingly embraces them. He flamboyantly displays a set of affects understood to be silly or pathetic, at once inviting and defying social contempt. He uses melodrama and the social values associated with it to mark out for himself a specific subject position that is clearly at

odds with heterosexual masculinity, that implies a non-standard formation of gender and sexuality—and that in those respects is identifiable as feminine. Ultimately, though, what O’Hara’s appropriation of the melodrama of journalistic discourse expresses is a larger, more comprehensive resistance to conventional forms of sexual and gendered discourse and embodiment. That resistance does not involve the explicit assumption of a feminine identity. At no point in the poem does the speaker use a feminine pronoun or attribute to characterize himself. Instead, O’Hara discreetly constructs for himself a persona that is neither conventionally masculine nor conventionally feminine. Nor is it a persona that is divorced from sexual desire (“I was in such a hurry to meet you,” he says). Rather, his poem stages a subjectivity that is—inexplicitly but recognizably, unmistakably—gay.

That subjectivity is not individual but collective. “Oh Lana Turner we love you,” O’Hara writes. This first-person plural invokes, to begin with, the virtual community of Lana Turner’s fans, whoever they are. But it also slyly smuggles in the possibility of a different and more specific collectivity, an audience of movie queens and gay men in general, a community forged by the shared worship of this feminine icon. In fact, the poem opens up a space for many *we*’s, many inhabitants of that plural pronoun: it imagines fandom as the site of multiple collectives produced by love and identification, not limited to any one gender or sexuality, all of them queerly connected through their transverse relations to the movie star and her mass-mediated image. It ultimately promotes the vision of a love supported by every mediation that such a love can find in cinema (whether as art or as commodity), in friendship, and in melodrama as an emotional and pragmatic genre—though it does not insist that such a vision is realizable. The queer world of belonging it imagines, rather, is a projection of gay desire.



“Melodrama” and “tragedy” refer not only to different genres of drama, then, but also to different pragmatic genres of discourse, dif-

ferent modes of feeling, and different styles of emotional expression, as well as to differential degrees of social worth and differently valorized social performances—all of which are correlated in turn with the difference between femininity and masculinity. Since the systematic interconnection and hierarchical distribution of the social values that contribute to defining those generic differences are formative of human subjectivity as it takes shape within specific cultural contexts, it is not surprising that even quite young children orient themselves, both inwardly and outwardly, with reference to that basic cultural poetics—the conventions of discourse, feeling, and expression that such genres represent.

Long before they ever have sex, in other words, young people have genre.

Which may be all they need in order to forge certain non-standard relations to normative sexual and gender identities. For by making non-standard emotional connections to cultural forms, they effectively refuse the pressing social invitation to assume a conventional, heteronormative positioning and they effectively acquire non-standard sexual and gender identities, identifications, and orientations.

Children, in other words, may not yet be conscious of making a sexual object-choice (though some of them may be quite aware of it, especially when that object-choice is a non-standard and disapproved one), but they are very alert to the standard gendered and sexual coding of specific conventions of emotional expression—conventions which obey in turn the laws of genre and which correspond with pragmatic generic distinctions, like the distinction between tragedy and melodrama. Such distinctions differentiate not only *kinds of discourse*, but also *kinds of feeling*, *styles of emotional expression*, and *conventions of behavior and social interaction*. Children are exposed to genres of discourse, behavior, and emotional expression from an early age.

It is partly *through* such genres, after all, that children find their own voices and personalities, that they gain access to subjective ex-

pression, that they acquire character. So the strict correlation between genres of discourse, feeling, expression, and behavior, on the one hand, and forms of gender and sexuality, on the other, is likely to be clear and palpable to children at an instinctive, intuitive, visceral level, even to very young children, and it is likely to be formative of their subjectivities, although—like most adults, in this respect—they remain largely unaware of that correlation and lack any conscious or explicit terms in which to articulate the inchoate perceptions and intuitions that it generates.

It was therefore in vain that the writer Samuel Delany—trying to raise his three-year-old daughter in a non-sexist environment in the United States in 1977, and despairing of being able to find a sufficient quantity of children’s picture books that featured female subjects in leading roles—set about “with white-out and felt-tip pen” to re-sex the pronouns attached to the animal hero in the somewhat androgynous picture book that he had finally selected to read to the little girl. “I began the story,” he recounts, “and at the first pronoun, Iva twisted around in my lap to declare: ‘But Daddy, it’s a *boy* bear!’” Delany, taken by surprise, was nonetheless prepared for that objection.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “The book says ‘she’ right there.”

“But it’s *not!*” she insisted.

I was sure of my argument. “How do you know it’s a boy bear?”

“Because he’s got pants on!”

Surely she had fallen into my trap. “But *you’re* wearing pants,” I explained. “In fact, you’re wearing the *same* kind of Oshkosh overalls that Corduroy [the bear] is wearing. And you’re a little girl, aren’t you?”

“But Daddy,” declared my three-year-old in a voice of utmost disdain at my failure to recognize the self-evident, “that’s a *book!*”

As Delany himself acknowledges, his daughter was right. Already at the age of three, she was more attuned than he was to the pragmatics of genre—particularly to the unspoken narrative and gender conventions governing the stories in animated children’s books and shaping

narrative discourse in our society more generally. Delany had thought his daughter was still innocent of those conventions—still a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. But she was thoroughly versed in their complex protocols, even at her tender age. Indeed, those protocols are so “sedimented,” as Delany puts it, “that a single instance of rhetorical variation, in 1977, registered not as a new and welcome variant but, rather, as a mistake self-evident to a three-year-old.”¹⁵



Genre shapes the sensibilities of young people from their very first encounters with others, from their initial experiences of sociality, and so it forms their subjectivities. Most children grow up in heterosexual environments, where they are introduced to standard genres of discourse, feeling, expression, and behavior—including the conventions of emotional expression that their parents’ spontaneous manifestations of feeling often mirror and reproduce. Even children raised by lesbian or gay male parents are initially exposed, at least to some degree, to mainstream cultural genres and styles of expression.

The fact that popular culture nowadays routinely includes gay and (considerably less often) lesbian characters in the diegetic register of their stories does not change the generic design of those stories themselves (that is, it doesn’t change whether or not they are comedies or melodramas), nor does it alter the modes of feeling that are codified by traditional generic conventions and that adults take up in their interactions with others. *Will and Grace* is still a situation comedy; *La Cage aux Folles* and *Rent* are still Broadway musicals; *All about My Mother* and *Bad Education* are still melodramas—and none of them is likely to be part of early childhood education anyway. Whereas books about queer families that *are* designed specifically for elementary-school-age children, like *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*, or *And Tango Makes Three*, though they may well contribute to the destigmatization of homosexuality and conduce to greater social tolerance, hardly break down the heteronormative monopoly on forms of expression held by the major popular genres.

In any case, mainstream cultural forms provide the only genres most children know. So those children who acquire a non-standard or dissident gender or sexual identity necessarily forge that identity in relation to mainstream cultural forms. Either they have to *invent* perverse relations to such forms, or they have to *find* in such forms opportunities or occasions or permissions for particular non-standard ways of feeling. In either case, they express queer ways of feeling by devising their own (dissident, deviant) ways of relating to the mainstream cultural objects to which they are exposed, and by identifying with peculiar aspects of those objects that are either non-heteronormative or that lend themselves to non-heteronormative feeling.¹⁶

Which may explain why some gay or proto-gay male subjects gravitate, early on, to specific genres of discourse or feeling, along with their related cultural forms (such as Hollywood melodramas or Broadway musicals). A certain gay student of mine remembered that once, at a much younger age (probably around seven), he held his astonished family captive one summer day, while they cooled their heels in the parking lot of a supermarket, by performing for them all the roles from *The Sound of Music*, or at least all the songs from it. Another gay friend of mine, while still in middle school, rewrote Christina Crawford's autobiography *Mommie Dearest* and made it into a play—only he turned the Christina character into a boy, in the hope that when the play was staged he could play that part himself; the change of sex provided him with a dramatic role that could mediate between his masculine identity and his emotional identification with an abject but powerful, melodramatic feminine role model.

Although “not a single twelve-year-old boy was ever brought before a psychiatrist, or prayed to Jesus for help, on account of his collection of original cast albums,” D. A. Miller writes, the Broadway musical has proved to be “not one whit less indicative [of homosexual development] than those [other, more recognizable ‘signs’ of it] that were horrifically transparent from the moment they appeared.”¹⁷ I have tried to explain why, to suggest what relation the poetics of

American culture might have constructed between genres of discourse—or styles of expression, or kinds of social performance—and forms of sexuality.



The formative, subjectivating effects of genre provide the solution to a persistent puzzle about how kids can get initiated so early into the *cultural* practice of homosexuality. Gay male identity, after all, seems to be a relatively late formation, reaching back no further than adolescence. And gay male culture, as it is collectively practiced and transmitted, is largely an artifact of gay male urban communities, which are composed of grown-ups. Membership in gay male culture—both for gay men and for those women and straight men who enroll in it—is something acquired in the course of later life, through a process of adult socialization. So how can such a process of adult socialization account for what clearly look, at least in retrospect, to have been the gay cultural practices precociously embraced early in their lives by many boys who later turn out to be gay? How do we explain why gay or proto-gay subjects take up the cultural practice of male homosexuality while they are still children, and why certain heterosexual subjects, who will later discover in themselves a deep affinity with gay male culture, sometimes experience a strong and unerring attraction to its cultural forms from an early age, without being aware of such an attraction, at least not under that description?

Furthermore, what sense does it make to speak of culture without reference to processes of socialization or acculturation? Or, rather, how can there be a culture of male homosexuality if there is no evidence of or even possibility for the existence of a process of *primary socialization*, the kind of socialization that takes place in infancy?

The very notion of *culture*, especially in its classic, nineteenth-century, anthropological formulation, presumes a central, even a foundational role for *language*. Cultural groups are conventionally identified by reference to linguistic communities. Language-use defines the boundaries of a culture: a culture, at the very least, is com-

posed of individuals who all speak the same language. To learn a human language is the beginning of acculturation and socialization. Language provides a point of entry into culture.

But gay men, despite some distinctive and characteristic uses of language that differentiate them from other language-users, do not form a separate linguistic group.¹⁸ So if they are to qualify as members of a culture, gay men would need to be constituted as a group through some primary process of socialization akin to language acquisition. Watching Joan Crawford movies with a bunch of your gay friends, at the age of thirty-five, hardly fills the bill.

Language is just one example, albeit a privileged one, of what defines a culture. In fact, culture is usually assumed to consist in various arbitrary but systematic patterns of thought and behavior that have been deeply ingrained in the perception and habits of those who belong to specific human living-groups. Like language, which serves as a model for other processes of acculturation, those patterns of thought and behavior are impressed on children from an early age, whether they are deliberately taught to them or whether they are simply absorbed by children from the people who raise them.

In any case, acculturation refers to a routine process of socialization that takes place identically, or nearly so, throughout a particular group or population. It goes on within all the families that constitute a single society or cultural unit, such that all the members of a particular human living-group spontaneously end up being, for example, native speakers of a single language—even though they learned it in different settings and in slightly different versions.

Real cultural patterns, according to this standard notion of culture, are like linguistic structures. They shape human subjects in specific, profound ways. Because they are impressed on the individual so early, at such a formative age, they are stubborn, enduring, and constitutive of the self. Culture is preserved by regular, long-standing processes of social reproduction that transmit particular patterns of thought and behavior from one generation to the next and consolidate the collective identity of the group. By reproducing itself with each new gen-

eration, culture maintains the identity of the community from the past into the future. Any “culture” that is not acquired through primary socialization would have to be comparatively superficial, a shifting fashion or habit or outlook, rather than an ingrained way of being and behaving; it would not be very deeply rooted in the subjective life of the individual or the group, and so it would be easy to alter and vulnerable to change.

Gay men do not seem to belong to a “culture” in any robust sense of that term. Unlike, say, Americans, they do not constitute a social group that continually renews itself across the generations by means of sexual reproduction and primary socialization. According to those criteria, the kind of gay male culture that is acquired only in later life would hardly seem to qualify as a culture at all.

That is exactly why John Clum is so skeptical: “Is there an indigenous gay culture?” he asks. “Literally, the answer is no. Gayness is not like ethnicity. We do not share a language, a race, or religion.”¹⁹

But that’s not quite the whole story either. For gay male culture, as we have seen, *does* exhibit precisely the stubborn intransigence we associate with language-based cultures. Despite the widely held conviction that gay male culture is constantly going out of date, it turns out to have changed a lot less over time than we like to claim. Gay liberation has actually not been all that successful in its efforts to remake the subjective lives of gay men. It has not managed to install gay politicians or sports figures in the place of female divas, nor has it ended the gay male cultural valorization of taste or style—even if gay fashions have evolved since the 1950s. Gay men have not stopped finding gay meaning in female icons, from *The Golden Girls* to *Desperate Housewives* to Lady Gaga.²⁰

Like the gay students and friends of mine mentioned earlier, many people (both homosexual and heterosexual) who grew up after Stonewall still report having forged queer relations with objects of mainstream culture in their childhood. They seem to have engaged in the cultural practices of male homosexuality well before they engaged in the sexual ones—before they reached sexual maturity, came to

think of themselves as gay (or straight), and came into contact with any of the formal or informal institutions of gay sociability. And those who make gay male cultural identifications often describe those identifications as instinctive, natural, unshaped by social attitudes or prejudices, and as a persistent, enduring aspect of their personhood, deeply anchored in their subjectivity.

Will Fellows assembles a multitude of eloquent personal testimonials to that effect, documenting both the strength and the ubiquity of such perceptions, with specific reference to historic preservation and architectural restoration: “Even as a child growing up in a nondescript farmhouse, I had an eye for the more interesting and attractive buildings” (29); “Gay men are very sensitive to beauty. It’s perhaps a hackneyed stereotype, but I believe in it—I simply *know* it” (30); “I’ve been in love with old buildings and the stories of the people behind them since I was a kid” (51); “As a child I had a great interest in buildings and architecture” (61); “I think I’m genetically predisposed to be a collector” (70); “Mother said I brought home my first treasure when I was seven” (99); “Even as a kid I was always wanting to fix things up” (111); “From my earliest memories I was always fascinated with houses and what happened inside them” (118); “From the time I was three years old, I knew that I was going to be an artist” (131); “Is it a compulsion or an obsession? I don’t know” (210).

Recall, in this connection, Barry Adam’s explanation for the visceral appeal of opera and the Broadway musical to some gay boys: “Musical theater is one of a number of possibilities that speak to the sense of difference, desire to escape, and will to imagine alternatives that seems a widespread childhood experience of many pregay boys.” The very same thing could also be said about historic preservation. Adam concedes that “there may be no single universal pregay experience,” but he suggests that all these cultural activities, and the powerful draw they exert, “nevertheless indicate a range of core experiences with broad resonance among gay and potentially gay men that exceed the notion of ‘gay’ as ‘just’ a social construction or discursive effect.”²¹

Where do those core experiences come from? Or, more specifically, how do gay or proto-gay children learn to engage in such canonical gay male cultural practices—how is it that they come to speak the language of gay male culture so fluently, as if it were their mother tongue—at such a tender age, without having been nurtured from the cradle by gay men? How is it possible that the process of socialization into the cultural practice of homosexuality can begin long before the subjects of acculturation are mature enough to enter gay male communities and take part in the social exchanges of gay male life? What explains how proto-gay subjects acquire gay culture almost as if it *were* their native language, as if it truly were for them an indigenous culture? How is gay culture transmitted and acquired, not just in adult life, but in childhood? Is there, in short, a gay male equivalent of a process of primary socialization?

Those are precisely the sorts of questions to which our model of cultural poetics provides answers, at least in a general and hypothetical way.

For we have already established the three conditions whose conjunction is both necessary and sufficient to explain the social reproduction of gay male culture. (1) If even conventional, heteronormative genres of discourse are also genres of feeling and styles of personal expression; (2) if mainstream genres of discourse, genres of feeling, and styles of personal expression are coded for gender and sexuality according to a standard cultural poetics—by being inflected with specific sets of social values that are differentially associated with specific gendered and sexual roles; and (3) if such genres of discourse and styles of feeling or expression are formative of individual subjects from an early point in their lives—then something like primary socialization into gay male culture is indeed possible, insofar as a dissident relation to those genres of discourse and expression constitutes a dissident formation of gender and sexuality. Children may have limited exposure to the highly developed cultural forms that contain and perpetuate genres of discourse and expression—and even if they are exposed at an early age to musicals, say, or melodramas, they might not

get a lot out of them—but they are thoroughly exposed to the styles of personal expression defined by those forms, since such styles of expression shape ordinary emotional life and construct the various *pragmatic* ways that children’s caregivers speak, express themselves, and relate to children.

In other words, a process of socialization into gay male cultural practices can begin at an early age, long before the start of an active sex life or the beginning of adult participation in a gay community, because already at that age proto-gay subjects begin forging, or perhaps merely finding, a non-standard relation to the sexed and gendered values attached both to mainstream genres of discourse, feeling, behavior, and personal expression and to the cultural forms (musicals, tragedies, melodramas, historic preservation, various aesthetic practices and pursuits), and their correlate emotional forms in individual behavior, that embody, disseminate, routinize, reinforce, and consolidate those genres. And proto-gay subjects respond to the queer solicitation of certain features or elements in those mainstream forms that speak to these kids’ sense of difference, desire to escape, and will to imagine alternatives, as Barry Adam puts it.



What I have just proposed here is not, obviously, a theory of what causes male homosexuality. Instead, I have offered an admittedly speculative account of how some individuals (both gay and straight) acquire a gay male cultural orientation, whose coordinates extend to the fields of both sexuality and gender. My account has been abstract, highly schematic, and undoubtedly simplistic, but at least it is supported by a certain amount of empirical evidence—namely, the evidence provided by a critical analysis of gay male cultural practices and the larger cultural poetics on which they are based. Such an analysis has occupied the major portion of this book. So I can claim to have put forward a conceptual model for understanding the social process of acculturation by which a gay male cultural sensibility is formed.

The acquisition of a gay cultural sensibility takes place within a larger social system that produces both homosexuals and heterosexuals, as well as others who fail to fit neatly into those two categories. Why is it that some of the boys whose sexual subjectivities are formed by this system grow up to become gay, while others do not? Despite a number of claims to the contrary, there is actually no one today—including me—who is able to offer a clue, let alone a complete answer, to that riddle. Nor should we search for answers by focusing narrowly on the constitution of individual subjects, as psychoanalysts do, even if larger social processes necessarily unfold through cumulative small-scale processes, such as those that take place at the level of individual development. For we are dealing not with an individual case but with a collective phenomenon: the mass formation of gay and straight sexualities and subjectivities. That is a feature of our society as a whole, and it is to be accounted for by social factors as well as by individual ones.

The reasons some boys become homosexual, whatever they are, must be more or less the same as the reasons some boys become heterosexual, given that it is only in the last three hundred years or so that boys have started becoming either one or the other. Both homosexuality and heterosexuality are artifacts of the same socio-sexual system, a system largely coincident with Western modernity, though one that has evolved differently for women and for men.²²

It would be nice to know in detail how that system operates and how it mass-produces and distributes these relatively new brands of sexual subjectivity—but, until we do, it is pointless to speculate about the process. Psychologists and psychoanalysts have no more wisdom to offer on this topic than anyone else, which is why third-sex theories are suddenly popular once again: if homosexuality and heterosexuality are actually hard-wired into our bodies, we no longer need to figure out where they come from, nor do we have to come up with causal explanations for why some individuals end up straight while others turn out to be gay. Cognitive science, which also locates the causes of sexual and gender identity in our brains rather than in our

societies, makes a similar appeal by offering physiological answers to complicated social questions.

What I have tried to explain is not why some male subjects become gay, but how gay (and some straight) subjects might come to acquire a gay culture, in the sense of relating to cultural objects and forms—to Broadway musicals, old houses, melodrama, Joan Crawford, the performing arts, or aesthetic perfection, among many other things—in specific ways that implicate both their sexual subjectivity and their gender orientation.

The aim has not been to explain the logic behind each and every gay male cultural practice in all its specificity. It was difficult enough to elucidate the gay appeal of one scene in one Joan Crawford movie. The point was rather to indicate where one might set out to look for explanations—namely, in the ways that interlocking constellations of social values attached to cultural forms are socially coded for gender and sexuality, and in the ways that human subjectivity, including sexual subjectivity, is constituted in relation to those pre-existing constellations of sexually inflected values.

What I have tried to do, in short, is to offer a conceptual model for understanding the complex interrelation among sexual orientation, gender identity, and cultural practices, and for reconstituting the social logic underlying it.

THE MEANING OF STYLE

It is hardly surprising that genres of discourse and feeling, as well as styles of personal expression, should turn out to be coded for gender and sexuality, when nearly all cultural objects are inflected with similar kinds of meaning. We have already seen one instance: there is nothing neutral (or neuter), apparently, about “little gold pedestals full of colored soap balls.” They are evidently so saturated with feminine significations and so redolent of sexual passivity that merely putting one in your bathroom is sufficient to shatter any and all pretense to true manliness.

There may be nothing very mysterious about the process by which such an object comes to be associated with a specific sexual and gender style. In the case of this example from *Tales of the City*, the item in question seems to express a certain feminine touch in home decorating, a fussy impulse to prettify even the empty space “on the top of the toilet tank.” A quick social-semiotic analysis would probably suffice to explain why a man who owned such an item could not possibly be “somebody you could take back to Orlando and they’d never know the difference.”

Other gender codes are more subtle and more elusive, however.

I once had occasion to go shopping in a design showroom for bathroom fixtures with a certain boyfriend, in anticipation of a home renovation that we had fantasized about but that we never managed to

afford. At the store we were confronted by a display of something like fifty or a hundred model faucets. There was a great variety of shapes, sizes, and styles. Many, we could instantly agree, were dreadful, and they could be easily and quickly eliminated from consideration. A few of them struck us as possibilities. But there were other cases—painful cases—in which disagreements between us seemed to reveal not relatively innocuous divergences of taste but profound, embarrassing, personally disfiguring lapses of character, culpable failures to sustain an attitude expressive of the right sort of gender or sexual identity (mostly on my part, of course).

My boyfriend would pause, aghast, while I pointed to a candidate and indicated that I considered it a possible or at least a conceivable choice for our bathroom sink. Looking at me in disbelief and (mock?) horror, he would exclaim, “Oh no. No, please. Say it ain’t so! Don’t tell me I am married to a man who thinks *that* is an attractive fixture.” Properly shamed and disgraced, as well as feeling exposed and discomfited, I would try to recover from my gaffe, withdraw my suggestion, and assure him that I hadn’t been thinking or seeing clearly when I praised that particular object—though I’m not sure it was possible to recover from such an egregiously revealing mistake, once it had been made. For I had not only committed an error of taste; I had also disclosed something shameful about my whole personality, including my sexual subjectivity—something until then unsuspected even by the man I had been living and sleeping with for quite some time. (Well, maybe he really *had* secretly suspected it all along, but now he had the irrefutable, sickening confirmation.)

If the liking for individual cultural objects and artifacts can seem to be revealing not just of our tastes but also of our *identities*, it is because their aesthetic style is pervaded by an entire symbolism, extending to gender and sexuality—a symbolism that is both palpable and very difficult to describe. The fact that you like a particular knob for a faucet says a lot about what you consider classy, elegant, stylish, or cool, and that means it says a lot about your social aspirations as well as the social class you come from.¹ But that’s not all it says. It also ex-

presses aspects of your gender and sexual identity, because, within the society in which we live, the exact arrangement and design of shapes, thicknesses, curves, colors, and other stylistic features, however abstract and non-representational they may be, participate in a specific and highly loaded cultural semantics. They have a particular social and cultural history, and as a consequence they become bearers of a complex cultural symbolism in which gender and sexuality are implicated. Style is saturated with meaning, including sexual and gendered meaning, and so your liking for a particular style reveals a lot about your own sexual and gender identity, about the way you position yourself with respect to already established fields of social and sexual meaning.

We don't ordinarily think about cultural objects in such terms; that's not how they immediately present themselves to us. But when we are confronted with a choice among them—especially the sort of choice that, we imagine, will say something about ourselves, about our tastes and personalities, that will indicate not only what we like but also who we are—in those circumstances we react instinctively to the way such artifacts might reflect on us, which includes an awareness of their coding for gender and sexuality. We recoil from one design, which we would never, *never* have in our home—or wear, or drive—not only because it is ugly, but also because it is, say, cute, or fussy, or showy, or melodramatic. Which is to say, it would betray us: it would express, and thereby reveal, something disgraceful or disreputable or at least potentially discreditable about us, something undesirable or pathetic or pretentious or unattractive, something damaging to our identity. We respond so strongly to these encoded meanings that there can be little doubt that they are really there, or that we know what they are, but—except in a few instances, which are either very obvious or extravagantly repulsive—we would be very hard-pressed to say what they are, to name them, to specify what exactly those meanings consist in, what in particular those meanings actually *mean*.

And even in those obvious or repulsive cases, it may be more diffi-

cult to explain the logic behind our tastes than we would expect. What is it, exactly, that I abhor in a certain style of interior decoration, a certain model of car, the color or pattern of a tie? Why do I shudder at the very thought of acquiring a little gold pedestal full of colored soap balls, or a garden gnome?

This mysterious state of affairs is itself mysterious. It's not just that those questions are perplexing in themselves. What's more perplexing is our inability to answer them or even to understand the grounds of our difficulty in answering them. There's already something mildly odd about the fact that cultural objects and activities and artifacts have meanings that implicate gender and sexuality. But given that such artifacts are, transparently, obviously, undeniably coded for gender and sexuality—and given that their sexual and gendered meanings are clear enough to us that we have no difficulty acting on our recognition of them, expressing our visceral responses, our attractions and repulsions—it's even odder that we have such a hard time specifying those meanings. Why can't we do it?

In most cases, we have no concepts and no language adequate to the task of describing the sexual and gendered meanings which such objects encode, which means we can't fully explain, in a sequential and logical way, our immediate, often vehement reactions to particular objects on the basis of their sexual and gender coding. But the problem is not just one of finding the right category or the right vocabulary to articulate our perceptions. It is a matter of representation and representability. We don't have a ready way to specify the sort of meaning that is expressed not by a representation of something but by the thing itself.

This inability is baffling. We are not dealing with the mysteries of the universe or the wonders of nature, after all; we are dealing with human cultural productions and their significations, with our own social world. Each object or activity has been manufactured and designed with careful intent and laborious deliberation by people like ourselves. It has been specifically intended to produce the specific effect on us that it does in fact produce. So why can't we specify what

that effect is? Why can't we describe coherently and systematically what the object means to us, along with the precise stakes in our response to it? Why can't we identify the values that are at issue in our likes and dislikes, which seem to play such a crucial role in defining who we are?

In some cases a contextual study of design styles and their history might be enough to clear up the mystery behind our instinctive responses to individual objects by indicating the cultural traditions to which those objects allude, the genealogy of representations from which they descend, and the network of associations on which they draw to generate their meanings and acquire the specific social values they express. In other cases, the relations among style, taste, class, gender, sexuality, and identity remain bafflingly elusive, at least given the current array of available instruments of critical, social, and semiotic analysis. It takes a vast effort to unpack those meanings.

That is what makes the task of accounting for gay male culture, for gay male taste, so complicated, at least when you get down to details. Any truly satisfying explanation of the gay male appeal of Joan Crawford, say, would have to be based on a comprehensive understanding of the social-semiotic workings of her cinematic image and their implication in specific orders of sexual and gendered signification.

For example, there is a fleeting but utterly heart-stopping moment toward the end of *Mildred Pierce*. Mildred is setting out from her darkened office to confront Monte, who, she now realizes, has betrayed and bankrupted her. For just an instant, as Mildred dashes across the room to the telephone, the shadow cast by some outside light through the Venetian blinds in the French doors of her office falls, twice, in thin parallel slats over the curves of Joan Crawford's suited, sinuously sheathed, voluptuous body and across her stricken, majestic, knowing, indignant, but resolutely composed face.

All this happens within a *single second* of the film's playing time. The entire sequence of images, though very brief, is filled with potent, eloquent cinematic meaning which substantially enhances the power that Joan Crawford's persona exercises over her audience and



19 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Mildred, having pulled herself together and made a decision, sets out to make a telephone call.



20 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Mildred in shadow.

contributes to defining the particular brand of femininity that she incarnates.

But what meaning? What does this perfectly standard film noir device convey? Film noir criticism, for all its sophistication, elaboration, and accomplishment, cannot help us out here; it has nothing to say about the specific meaning of *this* stylistic element in the context of *this* movie.²



21 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Mildred approaches the telephone.



22 Frame capture from *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945). Mildred at the telephone.

The exact effect that the shot, the lighting of the face, and the face itself all produce exceeds what the technical analysis of visual rhetoric in cinema allows us to capture, because visual analysis cannot get at the contextual, social dimension of the image. It can get at the form, but not at the content of the form. It can describe the style, but not the meaning of that style.

Style does have content. It has to have content, in fact, to *be* style. It must mean *something*. Otherwise it would not even constitute a for-

mal arrangement—not, at least, in the perception of masses of human subjects. It would be disorder, a mere disarrangement, at once formless and meaningless. Only when style has meaning, only when it is about something, does it register as style, which is to say as a *particular* style. A hairstyle *is* about something. It *has* to be about something. If it is not about anything, it's not a hairstyle—it's just hair. (Or perhaps it's bad hair: if style is never just style without content, so content is never just content without style, and content that *looks* as if it is just content is probably the result of an inept, deplorable style.)

But what is style about? Describing the content of a form or the meaning of a style is a very different sort of undertaking from explaining the content of a statement. The brief obscuring and then revealing of Joan Crawford's face by the shadows of the Venetian blinds is not a proposition in an assertion, but an element of a style. The meaning it has derives from its function within an entire aesthetic system, which itself is non-representational, in the sense that it is not *about* anything else besides itself.

In short, a stylistic element is not empty of meaning, or lacking in signification—it is about something, it refers to something. But what it is about, the thing it refers to, is nothing other than itself, nothing other than its value within an internally consistent, formal system of meaning. *It is the thing itself*. Which is why, as D. A. Miller says, “style” is a “spectacle” that is “hard to talk about . . . hard even to see.”³ Or as Oscar Wilde put it, “The true mystery of the world is the visible.”⁴

The central part of this book was devoted to seeing, to understanding, and to talking about *the meaning of melodrama as a gay style*—and to talking about it in its own terms as its own kind of thing.

Hard though it may be to specify the meaning of a style, then, it is not completely impossible. It can be understood, so long as it is described in its own terms.

Let us consider once more that fleeting sequence of images from *Mildred Pierce*. The overall effect—of the lighting, the composition of the shot, and the movement of the actress—is to intensify the mood of the moment, to deepen the seriousness of the new and dire turn in

the plot. The passing shadow of the blinds on Crawford's face and body contributes to the drama of the scene. It conveys a sense of dark foreboding. It builds a palpable tension, suggesting that a climax is not far off and that the spectator should be prepared for an accelerating pace and an impending action. It is both tender and scary, implying that Mildred is being forced to act within the limits of certain narrowing constraints—and, possibly, rising dangers—of which the spectator is now suddenly aware, more aware than Mildred herself appears to be. The shot also communicates a heightened determination on Mildred's part, a new resolve, as well as a gathering of Joan Crawford's dramatic powers. It says to the spectator something like, "Get ready for Joan. She's a-coming. She's on her way. Watch out—here we go!"⁵

So style can be analyzed: it can be made to speak, to say something in its own terms—it can be made not to refer to something else, but to say what it itself means. In the case of this sequence from *Mildred Pierce*, what we would need in order to complete the analysis, to specify the exact value of each particular stylistic element within the context of its system, is a deep technical knowledge of the production values and working principles of the individuals who composed the shot. Its value was understood clearly enough at the time the film was made; after all, someone designed the shot and set it up with great care and deliberateness—presumably for the purpose of conveying the particular effect that it still so powerfully and heart-stoppingly conveys. They knew what they were doing. They might not have had a critical language, or meta-language, in which to describe what they were doing; nor in all likelihood would they have formulated their rationale in the terms formalist critics would understand: they were artists and were operating according to a thoroughly internalized aesthetic logic. They may not even have had a conscious consciousness of the meaning they were making. But if they had been asked at the time what they were doing, why they were making those choices, and what effect they were trying to achieve, they surely could have said *something*, if only within the language of the style in

which they were working. Unfortunately, we no longer have access to what they knew.⁶ And it is not even clear how much access they had to it themselves. They may simply have been immersed in the material vocabulary of the style they were so deftly and ably elaborating.



The project of attempting to specify the meaning of style is not new. Art historians have been writing about the history and function of style for centuries. In 1979 Dick Hebdige wrote a celebrated book concerned entirely with “the meaning of style,” which he took to be the key to understanding the identity of a minority subculture.⁷

And already in 1964, Susan Sontag inveighed “against interpretation,” against the kind of art criticism that preferred content to style, that seemed addicted to *meaning* and consistently determined to find more of it, always more meaning. Interpretation, according to her polemical critique, reduced “the work of art to its content” and then *interpreted* that content in order to extract meaning from it.⁸ Sontag vehemently opposed psychology, as well as the hegemony in liberal circles of psychological humanism. Instead of a hermeneutics of interpretation, a quest to discover what a work of art deeply, truly means, she urged us to take up an erotics of art, an appreciation of surfaces, a description of aesthetic values, of style and its effects. She promoted the “pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy” of art and our experience of it.⁹

In making such a stark opposition between the hermeneutics of depths and the erotics of surfaces, however, Sontag missed what exactly it is about surfaces that makes their sensuous immediacy so appealing: their incarnate meaning. And so she missed, or dismissed, something that is integral to aesthetics and the study of aesthetics, something that is identical to neither content nor style, that is neither deep meaning nor superficial beauty—and therefore neither masculine nor feminine—namely, *style as its own thematics, or counter-thematics*. Although Sontag did call for the description and analysis

of form, she preferred to invert that critical protocol and to emphasize instead the need “to examine in detail the *formal* function of subject-matter.”¹⁰ But her attachment to form and to style should have compelled her to see the necessity of a different undertaking, of a *hermeneutics of style*—a hermeneutics of “surfaces” that would be not suspicious but descriptive—and to recognize the potential importance of an inquiry into the content of form that would highlight the thematics, or the queer counter-thematics, of style itself.

At her best, that is exactly what Sontag managed to accomplish, though she tended to obfuscate it. For example, she presents her “Notes on ‘Camp’” as a description of a “sensibility or taste.”¹¹ But what she was really describing in that essay was a *style of relation* to various cultural objects. And what she was trying to specify was the precise *meaning* of that style. In fact, the original title, or at least the initial designation, of her essay was “Camp as Style.”¹² Camp, after all, is not the formal property of an object; it is not a particular, inherent artifactual style—that is, an aesthetics. Nor is it a psychology, a specific subjective condition. Nor is it a behavior—an ethics or a politics. Camp does involve aesthetics, affect, ethics, and politics. But it is best understood as a style of relating to things, a genre of practice, a pragmatics.

Sontag’s preoccupation with the meaning of camp as a style is what makes her essay on camp still worth reading today. Even though she does not present her analysis in those terms, her understanding of style easily allows the notion of style to be extended and applied to the pragmatics of camp. As Sontag wrote in “On Style” the following year:

Style is a notion that applies to any experience (whenever we talk about its form or qualities). And just as many works of art which have a potent claim on our interest are impure or mixed with respect to the standard I have been proposing, so many items in our experience which could not be classed as works of art possess some of the quali-

ties of art objects. *Whenever speech or movement or behavior or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world, we may look at them as having a "style," and being both autonomous and exemplary.*¹³

It is precisely because style is a deviation from the norm and a mode of autonomous existence, because it is both strange in itself and exemplary of itself—because it is its own queer thing—that its meaning is laborious to describe. And that is also why the objects of cultural studies are maddeningly difficult to analyze. The simplest of them condense a long history as well as a vast and complex range of interconnected meanings, meanings embodied in and inseparable from their very form or style—the shape of that faucet, the abrupt transition from speaking to singing characteristic of the Broadway musical, the lighting of Joan Crawford's face and her delivery of a line that conveys the glamorous extremity of maternal abjection.

To account satisfactorily for the gay appeal of *Mildred Pierce*, we would have to perform a stylistic analysis of nearly every shot in the film, a more complete version of the kind of analysis I just tried to sketch out for one sequence of images. We would have to specify the exact meaning of each of those shots. And then we would have to tie the value of that meaning directly to the specific social situation of gay men.

But in fact it would be wrong to reduce the visual style of *Mildred Pierce* to mere camerawork. The visual style of the film is not limited to camera angles or editing. It also resides in the acting and the conventions of acting. And any serious account of the movie's visual style would have to include all the pro-filmic elements, such as the stage set, the lighting, the production design, and especially the clothes worn by the actresses: the costumes and the underlying fashion system. We would have to include the music as well. All those elements are part of *Mildred Pierce's* style; together they manage to impart to the film a particular style of its own that seems perfect and yet somehow also extravagant. And it is that very excess that makes the

film's style stand out, that makes it so memorable and so gripping. Without taking all those stylistic elements into consideration, and without specifying their meaning—or affect—and its relation to the vicissitudes of gay male existence, we will never be able to account fully for the gay appeal of specific cultural objects, such as *Mildred Pierce*, or for the cultural object-choices of gay men.

Such an analysis would be possible—there are models for it, starting with Roland Barthes's *S/Z* and D. A. Miller's Proustian reading of *Gypsy*—and it would be desirable. But the exercise required, though necessary and unavoidable, would be almost endless. What I have been able to offer in this book is only a small down-payment on that immense project.

Thankfully, not all cultural objects or activities that have been taken up by gay men require such an extended stylistic analysis. So let us return to our exploration of gay male femininity, and consider some cultural practices and genres of discourse that are less complex than an entire Hollywood movie, but whose style likewise encodes a particular set of gendered and sexual meanings.



I have already contrasted the different gendered positions in which sports and the performing arts, respectively, place male performers. Insofar as sports and the performing arts both qualify as mass leisure occupations and as public spectacles, they might seem to solicit largely identical responses from their audiences. Both of them consist of activities that showcase the talents of ordinary people, people like ourselves, who nonetheless do extraordinary things—things that almost everyone can do to some degree, like catching a ball or singing, and that everyone can therefore understand, but that very few people can do with such exceptional skill and virtuosity. Both sports and the performing arts produce spectacles for the pleasure of large audiences, live as well as remote. Both kinds of spectacle involve displays of considerable daring. And they are both highly dramatic.

The player who receives a pass when he is in a position to score,

the batter who faces a decisive pitch, the singer who at a moment of total scenic and auditory exposure takes a breath before hitting the long-awaited high note: all of them in their way are action heroes, who have to perform under pressure, for high stakes, visibly, in public, on once-and-only occasions, at great risk of personal disgrace. The cultural organization of play in our society arranges for such performers what might be thought of as lyrical moments—very brief, transient moments of crucial intensity, a fraction of a second in which everything hangs in the balance. It is to occasions like these that the players are summoned to rise, to exhibit all their dexterity, and to magnetize the spectators with dazzling displays of quick thinking, agility, technical and tactical prowess. The dramatic spectacle provided by the public performance of rare and difficult feats, carried out in the instant with maximum exposure and under immense pressure, constitutes the main source of the thrills for which the audiences of both sports and the performing arts willingly pay great sums of money.¹⁴

And yet, the two activities have radically different class and gender codings. The class implications are less difficult to figure out than the gendered ones. Any kid can kick an object around—it doesn't even have to be a ball—and practice his athletic skills anywhere in the world. He doesn't need money, connections, encouragement by sports figures, or a privileged cultural background, although all of those things come in handy, especially if he wants to rise in the profession of sports or become an Olympic athlete. But at the outset, at least, all he needs is talent, good health, and good luck—things that are not limited to the upper classes, even if the material living conditions of the upper classes favor the cultivation of all three. So it is easy to see why sports should have a democratic dimension and why they should seem to represent a form of excellence to which anyone can aspire—a form of excellence that is open to, and that can be appreciated by, the common man. Opera, which requires complex collaborations among singers, musicians, writers, composers, stage designers, directors, choreographers, and language coaches, would seem to be

closed, with respect to both its audience and its performers, to all but members of the social elite.

But is this actually the case? During the 1980s, I used to work out at a mostly gay gym in my mostly gay neighborhood in Boston. The gym had various organized activities in which I did not participate, such as team sports, including volleyball. I remember opening my locker one day to see a notice that had been taped to the inside of the metal door by the staff, announcing that a team composed of the best volleyball players from the gym would be competing against rival teams in a volleyball tournament in another city. Wishing them luck and success, the announcement ended, “*Ritorna vincitor!*”

That’s Italian for “Come back a conqueror!” or “Return victorious!” And just in case you didn’t get it, the reference is to the great soprano aria in the first act of Verdi’s 1871 opera, *Aida*. Indeed, in order to get that reference, you would need to have come from a highly privileged background, or to have grown up in an Italian or artistic household, listening and going to the opera—or you would have had to undergo an initiation into gay male culture which, though it may present itself as an aristocracy of taste and though it may identify with a social elite, with the sort of people who go to the opera, is hardly limited in its participants to members of the upper classes. Membership in my gym was expensive, in other words, but it wasn’t *that* expensive.

Such an initiation into gay male culture would have had to be performed not only on the person who wrote the notice that I found on the inside of my locker door, but also on those who, like me, opened their lockers and read it. If that allusion to *Aida* was to be meaningful to its intended audience, in its social context, a significant amount of preliminary cultural work would already have had to be carried out by many participants in the local gay community. The members of my former gym could not exactly be described, on the whole, as exceptionally cultivated people—people who could necessarily be expected to be familiar with the arts in general and classical music in particular, let alone with the complete libretti of Verdi operas in the

original Italian. The poster's target readership would have had to be introduced, no doubt one by one, to selected aspects of grand opera, to have had the meanings of particular words explained to them, and to have been initiated into a distinct universe of feeling linked to a specific way of living their homosexuality. The social operations of gay male culture, specifically its practices of initiation, would have had to compensate for the arcane, elitist features of the operatic form that would otherwise have limited an appreciation of it to cultural sophisticates.



What is the gay male appeal of “Ritorna vincitor!”? The answer takes us away from the class associations of opera and a step closer to appreciating how the style of the utterance is coded for gender and sexuality. We already know why sports are socially marked as masculine whereas the performing arts are socially marked as feminine: it all has to do with the specific social coding of doing versus appearing, combat versus performance, unscripted versus scripted activity, action versus role-playing—and, in particular, with the conventional, polarized gender values and meanings assigned to those dichotomies according to a strict, binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. In the case of this soprano aria, there's a bit more to add, a few extra considerations that may help to explain why heads of state do not typically appeal to “Ritorna vincitor!” in order to send off their national teams to the Olympics or to cheer for them in sports stadiums (even if the triumphal military march from *Aida* does get played and even sung at European soccer matches).

In fact, the social pragmatics of genre make it socially and culturally impossible for a national leader to wish an athlete representing his country success by exclaiming “Ritorna vincitor!” The tacit generic conventions of public heterosexual culture prohibit it, and violations of those conventions get social actors into real trouble. When one of the American soldiers in Iraq who arrested Saddam Hussein borrowed a line from Tosca, the eponymous heroine of Giacomo Puccini's opera, and remarked, “E avanti a lui tremava tutta Baghdad”

(“And, before him, all Baghdad used to tremble”), he was thought to have violated the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which banned non-heterosexuals from serving openly in the U.S. military.¹⁵

Why? *What is the meaning of that gay style of utterance?* At first, it would hardly seem that anything could be less queer than *Aida*, created for the formal celebrations of the opening of the Suez Canal. Could we cite a better instance of the pomp and circumstance of official, heterosexual culture than this nineteenth-century pageant of imperialism, nationalism, militarism, colonialism, and European chauvinism? Of course, that was then, and this is now. Fashions have changed, and nowadays it would be hard to find a better example of unintentional camp than this outlandish, extravagant, absurd, demented costume drama, with its histrionic overstatement, its emotional excess, and its demonstration of the power of erotic passion to overturn the norms of family, nation, race, and social hierarchy.

In order to explain further the gay meaning encoded in the notice I found inside my locker, I need to say something about the identity of *Aida* herself and about the dramatic situation in which she finds herself when she sings the aria, “*Ritorna vincitor!*” It is surely significant for the gender coding of opera that, like the Broadway musical, opera accords pride of place to female performers and organizes its plots as well as its music around them, so as to put them constantly in the spotlight. Accordingly, the title role of Verdi’s opera is sung by a woman. And not only is *Aida* a woman—she is also both a princess and a slave. Specifically, she is an Ethiopian slave, captive in Egypt, who is actually the daughter of the Ethiopian king, and who has just joined a mob of frenzied, bellicose Egyptians in wishing their military leader—in reality, her secret lover—success in his impending battle against the Ethiopians, led by her own father. A chorus of Egyptians, egging their hero on to victory, cry “*Ritorna vincitor!*” and *Aida* echoes them. In the famous aria that follows, she recoils in horror and confusion from the sentiment she has just uttered, repeating, in anguish and amazement, the treasonous send-off she has given her lover, commenting on her implicit betrayal of her homeland and her father, reflecting on the conflict between erotic love and patriotic

love, between family and husband, between duty and desire, and calling on the gods to pity her in her perilous and abject (if undeniably glamorous) condition.

So the phrase “*Ritorna vincitor!*” already bears a heavy burden of dramatic irony in the text of Verdi’s opera, and the ironies multiply when the phrase is cited and reused by gay men more than a century later in the context of a local sporting event. The citation implies, first, a cross-gender identification on the part of gay men, a cultural relation to femininity—this much is suggested both by the feminine coding of the operatic form itself and by the female subject of the utterance that the author of the notice inside the locker, as well as its reader, quote and ventriloquize. But that is not all. The gay usage also interpellates the speaker of the utterance (in this case, both the man who wrote the notice and the man who is intended to read it) as a royal woman, as a Black woman, as a slave woman, and as a woman who is destined to be destroyed by love. Once again, we witness the multiplication of glamorous and abject roles, as well as an acknowledged delight in the melodramatic form itself.



But if what we rediscover here is the homosexual love of melodrama, we also cannot fail to notice the valorization of melodrama as a vehicle for the expression of homosexual love, for the adoration of a male love-object. The gay male appropriation of “*Ritorna vincitor!*” implies not only cross-gender identification but also same-sex erotic desire, not only a feminine subject position but a homosexual and melodramatic one as well—a posture of desperate, forbidden desire for a heroic warrior. And so, in the context of the volleyball tournament, the gay appropriation of that line injects an implicitly sexual element into the relation between the team and the club that supports it. Evoking the standard division between queens and trade, it teases the members of the gym, inviting them to identify with the female speaker of the line, and thus to position themselves as queens, while aligning the sporting heroes who make up the volleyball team with her butch military love-object, and so representing them as trade. By

claiming for the collective subject of the utterance the persona of a captive, doomed princess tragically in love with a martial hero, and by recapitulating the heterosexual theatrics of the love story, the citation ironically constructs for the team's fans a feminine subject position of passionate, delirious, despairing, and transgressive sexual desire, combining feminine gender role, homosexual desire, melodramatic histrionics, racial difference, and subversive wit.

In particular, the operatic citation points to the possibility of an erotic connection between the fans, who voice the send-off, and the team members, who represent the gym at the tournament not only as its protagonists, but also as the sexual partners (or perhaps as the desired sexual partners) of (some of) its members. Which is a reminder that we're dealing with an openly *gay* gym here, in which the team members qualify not only as figures of local pride, but also as figures of implicit erotic admiration and even explicit sexual appreciation. The allusion to *Aida* imparts a specifically erotic dimension to the ordinary practices and pleasures of athletic hero-worship, at once literalizing and sexually allegorizing the heroic qualities of the sporting hero. The success of this gay male cultural appropriation of opera depends, then, not only on its coding for gender, but also—at least once the gay subject is positioned in the subject position of a desiring straight woman—on its coding for gay sexuality.

Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing the melodramatic thematics of secret, illicit, forbidden, foredoomed love, which contributes to making the love of *Aida* a possible basis for homosexual identification. Yet another part of the effect of the citation derives from its deliberate, knowing incongruity, from the consciousness of the comic inappropriateness of citing grand opera in the context of a competitive sporting event—especially given the former's feminine gender coding and the latter's masculine one, as well as the former's high-brow coding as an elite art form requiring only cool, disengaged spectatorship and the latter's lowbrow coding as a participatory activity proper to mass culture that calls for sweaty exertion on the part of anyone and everyone who claims to be a real man.

Finally, the multiple intended ironies of this incongruous citation

underwrite a sense of in-group distinctiveness, solidarity, and unity of sentiment among the members of the gym—that is, a sense of collective *identity* (something that is proper to locally based sports clubs supporting individual teams). The fact that the supporters of *this* team can cheer their athletes on by using *this* reference to *Aida* implies that they share, or that they can be presumed to share (I'm sure there must have been some guys who didn't get it), a common set of social practices and cultural understandings distinctive to gay men. The allusion to *Aida* thereby serves to consolidate the identity of the members of the gym as belonging to a particular social group—a group composed of gay men—which subscribes to a particular, typical, or stereotypical, culture.

In short, the multiple ironies produced by invoking opera in the context of a sporting event impart to the members of the gym a shared consciousness of being part of a specifically gay collectivity. Those ironies also undermine the chauvinism that typically attaches to team sports: it is impossible to take the valediction “Ritorna vincitore!” straight. So the overall effect of the operatic reference is to transform and transvalue the nature and definition of team spirit in order to make an altered, ironic version of it available to the gay members of this gym. Which becomes possible once athletic competition is rid of its conventional function in heterosexual culture—that is, once it no longer operates as an instrument of terror typically used to intimidate boys into masculine conformity—and is transformed into a counterpublic vehicle of communal gay male knowingness, of conscious erotic and cultural solidarity.



This instance of gay male feminine identification, then, actually expresses neither an underlying female nature nor a masculine one, nor something in between. Rather, it expresses something else—something specifically gay. It actually helps to constitute a gay identity that does not equate straightforwardly with any existing gender position, but that is defined instead by its dissonance, by its departure from the conventional gender map of masculinity and femininity.

Gay male culture uses a female subject position and a feminine identification to contest the normal coding of cultural objects and activities in accordance with a strict gender polarity, masculine versus feminine, while also taking up a female subject position in order to make possible a sexualizing—in fact, a homosexualizing—of cultural activities (sports, opera) that are normally coded as heterosexual. The result is to refuse the dominant sexual- and gender-coding of cultural values and to forge a non-standard, dissident relation to cultural practices, a relation more in tune with gay desire.

Gay male culture does not exactly position its subjects at some intermediary point—halfway, say—between masculinity and femininity. It affords an alternative, a new set of possibilities. Just as the counter-thematics of style can be reduced neither to content nor to form, which means such counter-thematics can be pegged neither to masculinity nor to femininity, and should not therefore be confused either with depths of hidden meaning or the meaningless, purely sensuous sheen of surfaces, so gay male culture's melodramatic style allows no calamity, and no emotion that calamity awakens, to be perceived as purely tragic or purely pathetic. Hence, gay male culture's melodramatic style treats love not as pure passion or as pure irony, but always as something else that, rather than existing somewhere in between the two, incorporates elements of both while departing from them.

Gay male culture's investment in style as a thematics of its own implies a uniquely gay male form of reading. The only way to analyze gay male culture is to use this uniquely gay male form of reading to read the styles that gay male culture forges. This is not to say that only gay men can understand gay male culture. Rather, gay male culture itself is a form of understanding, a way of seeing men, women, and the world.

IRONY AND MISOGYNY

Gay male subjectivity may be socially constituted, but social constructions are not irreversible fatalities: they are not inescapable determinations.¹ They may not be alterable at will, susceptible of being rebuilt at any moment from the ground up according to a totally new design, but they do allow some room for improvisation, resistance, negotiation, and resignification. It may not be possible to undo your social positioning, but it is possible to own it, to take advantage of it, to reorient it, to turn it to perverse reuses. Gay male cultural practices and identifications (such as the camp citation of “Ritorna vincitor!”) illustrate that point.

Gay male cultural practices, then, are comprehensible in the context of the larger system of interrelated cultural values that collectively define both personal and social identity within contemporary American society. But that context alone does not determine how gay cultural practices work or what effects they achieve. The cultural practice of male homosexuality often aims to forge a particular, dissident relation to heteronormative cultural values, a necessary and determined resistance to the dominant sexist and heterosexist coding of them, and a distinctive, perverse recoding of them—which is to say, a queering of them. Let us summarize how that queering operates in the case of gay femininity.

The homosexual desire that gay men feel places them in the sub-

ject position of women, and marks them symbolically as feminine, but it also allows them to retain at least some features of traditionally masculine gender roles. Many gay male cultural practices accentuate the feminine positioning of gay men, actively encouraging their participants (of either sex) to take up the socially devalued and marginalized position of women, and even to exaggerate its marginality and degradation.

Gay male cultural practices therefore tend to place their subjects, whether those subjects be gay or straight, in the position of the excluded, the disqualified, the performative, the inauthentic, the unserious, the pathetic, the melodramatic, the excessive, the artificial, the hysterical, the feminized. In this, gay culture simply acknowledges its location—the larger social situation in which gay men find themselves in straight society—as well as its unique relation to the constellation of social values attached to that society's dominant cultural forms. Given how both social and psychic life, both the social world and human subjectivity, are structured in a heteronormative society, and given heteronormative society's hostile judgment against both homosexuality and effeminacy, gay men have little choice but to occupy that abject, feminized realm.

But we can still resist our social positioning. And the most immediate way for gay men to defy social humiliation, and to assert our own subjective agency, is not to deny our abjection, or strive to overcome it, but actively to claim it—by taking on the hated social identity that has been affixed to us. That identity, after all, is the only identity we have. Resistance to it requires us to engage with it, to find value in it, and to invent opportunities for self-affirmation in the limited but very real possibilities that it makes available to us, which include possibilities of manipulating, redeploying, renegotiating, resignifying, and perverting it. Whence gay male culture's tendency to carve out for its participants an absurdly exaggerated, excessive, degraded feminine identity, which is also a highly ironic one, clearly designed to support a larger strategy of political defiance.

Gay male culture typically assumes an abject position only to rede-

fine it, to invert the values associated with it, to take an ironic distance from them, to challenge them, and to turn them against themselves. For example, gay male culture applies the label “melodramatic” to itself, not just to those it laughs at, thereby throwing a wrench into the machinery of social depreciation. For to forgo any claim to social dignity is also to preempt others’ efforts to demean you, and it is to strike an ironic attitude toward your own suffering. It is to refuse the cultural dichotomy that treats the suffering of others as *either* tragic *or* (merely) pathetic, according to their degree of social prestige. It is to know one’s own hurt to be laughable, without ceasing to feel it—and to embrace inauthenticity as an ironic means of contesting other people’s claims to seriousness, thereby challenging the underlying logic of social devaluation that trivializes the pain of unserious people.

Such ironic reuses of melodrama do not contest elite society’s punitive judgments against that disreputable subgenre, but knowingly embrace them, calling down on the necessarily flamboyant performance of feelings judged to be pathetic the social contempt that such performances also defy. Gay male culture’s self-consciously melodramatic ethos explains the high value it sets on artificiality, performance, inauthenticity, camp humor, and a disabused (but not disenchanting) perspective on love.

By taking up, while ironically redefining, the social roles and meanings traditionally assigned to women, gay male culture performs a unique, immanent social critique and effects a characteristic but recognizable form of political resistance.



Gay male culture’s simultaneous embrace and ironic reversal of the abject social positioning of women may help to explain certain perennial misunderstandings between gay men and feminists, as well as the reputation for misogyny that gay male culture has acquired. Far from attempting to elevate the position of women, to re-present them as dignified, serious, heroic, authoritative, capable, talented, loving, pro-

tective, and generally better than men—far from attempting to promote a *positive image* of women, in other words—traditional gay male culture consistently delights in excessive, grotesque, artificial, undignified, revolting, abject portrayals of femininity, and it seeks its own reflection in them. It can afford to do so, because gay men, being men, are—unlike women—never in danger of being completely reduced to their social marking or positioning as feminine.

Women themselves, however, may not always find the experience of being women terribly ironic, let alone downright hilarious, although they may well want or need, on occasion, to step back from it and to distance themselves from its social meanings. To women, therefore, gay male culture may appear to collaborate with straight male culture in denigrating women; it may seem to reinforce the depreciation and devalorization of women, implicit or explicit, that is typical of patriarchal societies and of the cultural attitudes upheld by them. Despite its loving celebration of various divas, stars, and feminine-identified activities, gay male culture's investments in femininity may well seem entirely consistent with a pronounced hostility to real women.² Hence, the eternal feminist reproach: that's *not* funny.

I believe the tension between traditional gay male culture and feminism is based at least in part on a misunderstanding of the political design of gay male culture. The gay male cult of Joan Crawford, as I have interpreted it, allows me to clear up some of that misunderstanding, if not all of it.

Gay male culture's embrace of degrading representations of the feminine is not an endorsement of them. Those representations, after all, are ridiculous—at least, they appear to be ridiculous as soon as one is no longer either the chief beneficiary of them or the immediate, personal target of them (as gay men are not). Gay male culture's appropriation of those representations is not approving but strategic. Its acceptance of a position of disempowerment, which gay men partly share with women, is merely provisory, merely the first stage in

a strategy of resistance. To be sure, it does express a sense of the futility of attempting to escape wholly, once and for all, from a position of social disempowerment—the futility of trying to seal yourself off from the damaging impact of degrading representations. But there is a certain wisdom in the acceptance of disempowerment.

After all, you can't overcome social denigration merely by inverting its terms, by attempting to substitute positive images for negative ones. As anyone who has lived through the second wave of feminism has now had ample opportunity to observe, every supposedly positive image of women that feminists attempt to promote quickly gets reconfigured by our society into an offensive and oppressive stereotype. For example, once the upstanding, dignified, capable figure of the "strong" woman, so dear to feminism, migrates to Hollywood, she quickly turns into either an impossible, unattainable paragon (*Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, from 2003) or a power-hungry, castrating, love-starved, unfeminine monster (*Fatal Attraction*, from 1987). So there is no safety in so-called positive representations—*especially when you don't have the social power to make them stick*. Other strategies of resistance are necessary.

Gay male culture's active passivity, its delight and pride in submission, its willingness to identify with the terms in which women and gay men are caricatured or demeaned, should be seen not as a ratification of those terms, but as another expression of the camp intuition that there is no outside to power, that minorities and stigmatized groups cannot choose how we are regarded and what value our society sets on our lives. We are subject, like it or not, to social conditions and cultural codes that we do not have the power to alter (not in the short run, anyway), only the power to resist. Taking up a position in which we are inexorably situated is not to consolidate it, nor is it to accept the adverse conditions under which we accede to representation. It is the beginning of a process of reversal and resignification: it is a way of claiming ownership of our situation with the specific purpose of turning it around, or at least trying to turn it to our account.³ As we have already observed, dominant social roles and meanings

cannot be destroyed, but they can be undercut and derealized: it is possible to learn how not to take them straight.



If gay male culture embraces the disqualification of femininity, then, it does so in order to challenge and to interrupt some of the most noxious consequences of that disqualification, for gay men if not for women. Its strategy is to reappropriate an already degraded femininity and to redefine that degraded status ironically, so as to contest the nexus of values responsible for its degradation, to dismantle others' claims to dignity, and thus to level the social playing field. Feminists recognize this, of course, but many of them tend to be unpersuaded by it, unconvinced of the wisdom of the camp strategy of accepting, appropriating, citing, and recoding hateful representations. With the notable exceptions of Esther Newton, Judith Butler, and their followers, many feminists—especially straight feminists—tend to regard irony as a poor alibi for the recirculation and perpetuation of demeaning stereotypes. Irony, on their view, cannot excuse the sin of compounding the original social insult.

But gay male culture's strategic, ironic reappropriation of a devalORIZED *femininity* neither implies nor produces a continued insult to *women*. For gay femininity, though it necessarily *refers to* women, is not necessarily *about* women, as we have seen. Just as gay femininity often consists in cultural practices (diva-worship or architectural restoration) that are socially marked as feminine but have nothing to do with femininity as it is embodied by women themselves, so gay male culture's delight in grotesque versions of femininity does not imply a contempt for or a hostility to actual women. Many gay male cultural practices that feature female figures, that refer to women or that mobilize aspects of femininity, have in fact *nothing at all to do with women*.

In most versions of camp humor, for example, it is not actual women who are objects of mirth (or envy, or admiration) but contemporary cultural constructions of the feminine—femininity in its

performative dimension, femininity as social theater. The target is the already anti-feminist model of femininity produced by the heteronormative order and promoted by its gender ideology.

Gay male culture's knowing embrace of degraded models of femininity does not in fact constitute a gay male insult to women, in other words, because it is *femininity*—not *women*—that is being insulted. Nor are gay men the ones who are doing the insulting. It is the larger cultural symbolism of femininity itself, and the social semantics of gender in which that symbolism is inscribed, that constitute an insult to women. But gay men are not responsible for *that*. On the contrary, gay men are themselves the victims of the cultural symbolism of femininity—though they suffer from it differently from women. Gay male culture's anti-social brand of aesthetics adopts that symbolism precisely in order to challenge it.

If gay male culture borrows the demeaning cultural symbolism attached to femininity, and if it even takes pleasure in doing so, that is because it sees a strategic opportunity, which it gleefully exploits, in feminine identification—an opportunity to undo the seriousness with which our society treats its own gender constructions. In the course of claiming femininity as a proxy identity for gay men, gay male culture exposes and denaturalizes it. It combats the cultural symbolism of femininity by magnifying its absurdities. The effect, which may not always be deliberate or intended, is to explode that cultural symbolism—to undermine its power and authority, to puncture its solemn respectability, and to erode its plausibility. By treating feminine identities as roles instead of essences, as social performances instead of natural conditions, gay culture threatens their dignity as well as their legitimacy and thereby weakens their claims on our belief. But it also goes further and shows up the mad extravagance of our cultural constructions of the feminine. *For femininity, as our society imagines it, reveals its utter incoherence, excessiveness, and absurdity more clearly when it is embodied and enacted by men than when it is embodied and enacted by women.*

Women, too, have had to struggle against the social category of

the feminine. Femininity as we know it is a sexist construction, and women are the ones who are most affected by it. It is they who suffer from it the most. Women therefore have to figure out how to take advantage, if they can, of the prestige and social rewards that conventional femininity makes available to them, without purchasing respectability at the price of their own devalorization, of their own trivialization and abjection. That is no easy trick. At the very least, feminist politics requires the partial desymbolization and derealization of femininity as it is currently defined, practiced, and enforced; it demands the disaggregation of femininity from womanhood and femaleness. Which means that feminist politics depends on the possibility of seeing gender as a role, as a performance, as something other than natural or authentic.⁴ Gay male culture, as I have tried to describe it, is entirely consistent with that project and offers powerful support for it.

This doesn't mean that gay male culture is exempt from misogyny or that its feminist credentials are spotless.⁵ Gay men can be misogynistic: Why, after all, should they be so different from anyone else—including both straight men and many women—in that unfortunate respect? Many drag shows are plainly divorced from any feminist consciousness; they are often blithely, casually misogynistic, and so are many other instances of gay male culture. The practices I have tended to focus on here may not be typical. They may not be representative of gay male culture as a whole.

But they do make an important point. The kind of gay male culture that tends most to misogyny is likely to be the masculinist variety promoted by Jack Malebranche and the g0y brotherhood; they are the ones, after all, who dream of inhabiting a world without women (of any sex). Gay femininity may have its misogynist streak, but its misogyny tends to be less pronounced than the misogyny generated by gay masculinity in its panicked determination to eradicate any hint of the feminine in man.

If traditional gay male culture's ironic send-up of femininity does not necessarily express hostility to women, however, that still does

not tell us what effects it has on actual women or how positive those effects are.

Furthermore, even though gay culture's parodies of femininity may denaturalize that conventional and socially devalued gender role, undercut its status as a natural essence, and treat it instead as a social performance—and even though gay culture's grotesque caricatures of femininity may sometimes be designed to achieve that very end—many women may feel that the target of all this gender parody is not *femininity* alone, but *femaleness* as such. They may feel that gay male aggression is being directed against the very condition of being a woman.

Convenient as it would be to maintain—for the purposes of framing a political apology for gay male culture—an absolutely airtight distinction between femininity as a gender role or performance and femaleness as a sexed or biological condition, the boundary between them often turns out to be less sharp or hermetic than one might wish, especially since some gay male cultural practices themselves tend to fudge it. And the distinction I have tried to draw between femininity and femaleness may be a distinction without a difference for many women, who often find the two categories difficult, if not impossible, to separate in their daily experiences of gender and gender identity. They may not be wrong to feel personally targeted, to feel attacked in their very being as women, by gay male culture's exuberant portrayals of extravagant, flamboyant, hysterical, suffering, debased, or abject femininity.

Let us reconsider the Fire Island Italian widows from this perspective. Their act, I argued, is not misogynist: it does not express hatred for women, so much as envy of some women's ability to carry off a public spectacle of private pain. By putting on Italian-widow drag, they attempted to appropriate for themselves, however ironically, a feminine role that they would ordinarily be denied. Their demonstration of the performativity of Italian widowhood aimed to make the status of widow transferable to themselves, so they could claim the

social privileges that go with that status—namely, the entitlement to grieve for lost loved ones before the eyes of the world.

But the very appropriation of that honorable female role can also be seen as a male theft of female privilege, as a familiar instance of masculine cultural imperialism. It typifies the male insistence on claiming the status of a universal subject—the status of one to whom no experience, and no social role, is ever definitively closed. Moreover, since being a widow is one of the few gender-specific, conventional feminine roles that is held in wide esteem, and that commands a certain social power and prestige, when gay men claim it, they deprive women of their monopoly on it, and of the social dignity that accrues to them via their unique ownership of it.

It is of course entirely consistent with the logic and implicit politics of gay male cultural practices to hold that no one is naturally or automatically entitled to that kind of dignity, and that it is dishonorable to claim a social privilege at the expense of others in a world in which some people are disqualified from serious consideration because of their social marking. But there are many people, some women among them, who do not share that view. Those who feel that the grounds of their own social dignity are being trespassed, or even pulled out from under them, may not welcome that undeniable political encroachment—especially when the social privileges attaching to their conventional gender identity are already so few, so far between, so provisional, and so easily forfeited. Women do have something to lose in this situation, even if it is not something that gay male culture considers worth retaining. So they would be entirely justified in objecting to losing it.

The Fire Island Italian widows could claim that they do not address themselves to women—that straight women, at least, are not the direct, intended, immediate audience of their performance. The same is true of many gay male cultural practices. To the extent that the politics of gay male culture may require defending or salvaging, that task is easier to accomplish when we consider that much of gay

culture takes place within a largely tribal context: it is undertaken and carried out among the members of a specific social group, and it is destined for in-group consumption. It is not specifically targeted at heterosexual women or designed for a straight social world where it could well produce obnoxious effects for all women, where it might lower them in the eyes of straight men and encourage or comfort the latter in their misogyny. Context and reception make a big difference. Within the confines of its own tribal universe, the political effect of gay male culture's caricatures of femininity may actually turn out to be comparatively harmless to women.

Nonetheless, it is worth asking what the cumulative effect or impact of gay male culture on women ultimately is. What does gay femininity do for women, not just for gay men? Straight women and lesbians, butch women and femme women, and women variously positioned along a transgender spectrum have all responded differently to gay male cultural reappropriations of femininity. It is certainly legitimate to inquire where such reappropriations leave all these actual women, and whether gay femininity contributes to the improvement or impairment of women's symbolic, discursive, and material situations. Those interesting, complex questions demand to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Although a full-scale treatment of them would exceed the scope of this study, and should be reserved for a separate, detailed analysis, it may be possible to shed some light on those questions by examining one test case that brings out the distinctiveness of gay male culture's relation to femininity and helps to define more precisely the specific political thrust of its irony.⁶



In 1990 Sonic Youth, the classic punk / grunge / indie rock band, creators of *Confusion Is Sex* (their first album, issued in 1983), included a song, or scream—in any case, a track—called “Mildred Pierce” on their cross-over *Goo* CD, their first release for Geffen Records. The song is actually one of Sonic Youth's earliest compositions. Its initial

title was “Blowjob.” The original nine-minute demo tape of that track can be heard on the 2005 deluxe reissue of *Goo*.⁷

The nature of the connection between oral sex and Joan Crawford’s cinematic alter ego may not be immediately evident. The evil genius responsible for the association turns out to be Raymond Pettibon, a graphic artist much beloved of Sonic Youth’s bass player Kim Gordon and widely popular in the Los Angeles punk scene (Pettibon’s older brother founded the legendary band Black Flag).⁸ According to Stevie Chick, “The title [of the track] . . . was taken from a T-shirt owned by Thurston [Moore, the group’s lead singer and guitarist], featuring a Raymond Pettibon illustration of Hollywood diva Joan Crawford in her role as the titular heroine of classic noir *Mildred Pierce*, with the word ‘Blowjob?’ scrawled underneath.”⁹ “Blowjob” was initially intended to be the title of both the track and the entire Geffen Records CD, with Pettibon’s image of Crawford reproduced on its sleeve, but when David Geffen overruled that idea, the song was edited down to two minutes and retitled “Mildred Pierce,” the CD was renamed *Goo*, and a different Pettibon image was chosen for the cover.¹⁰

Sonic Youth are perfectly queer-friendly. Their cultural references include many gay artists and works. And in 1994 the band achieved gay immortality with “Androgynous Mind” (on *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*) which—perhaps by way of tribute to their newly deceased protégé and fan Kurt Cobain—reclaimed God for gay identity:

Hey sad angel walks, and he talks like a girl
 Out trying to think why it stinks, he’s not a girl
 Now he’s kicked in the gut, they fucked him up, just enough
 They got me down on my knees, I kiss his ring, God is love

Androgynous mind, androgynous mind
 Androgynous mind, androgynous mind
 Androgynous mind, androgynous mind

Hey hey are you gay? are you God?
 My brain's a bomb, to turn you on
 Everything is all right
 God is gay, and you were right¹¹

God may be gay, but Sonic Youth are not. Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon got married in 1984 and stayed married, to each other, for twenty-seven years.

Sonic Youth's take on Joan Crawford is not easy to gauge from "Mildred Pierce." The track itself is largely instrumental, and the lyrics are pretty rudimentary:

Mildred Pierce
 MILDRED!!!!!!
 MILDRED PIERCE!!!!
 MILDRED PIERCE!!!!
 NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!!!!!!!!!!!
 MILDRED PIERCE!!!!
 MILDRED PIERCE!!!!
 WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!!
 MILDRED PIERCE!!!!
 WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!¹²

What does Mildred Pierce do for Sonic Youth? The question is worth asking, because straight hipster irony is probably the dominant mode nowadays of detaching and appropriating bits of mainstream culture and refashioning them into vehicles of cultural dissidence, according to a process analogous to the gay male cultural practice we have been examining.

If we want to figure out straight hipster culture's attitude to Joan Crawford and her Oscar-winning role, we will learn more by examining Dave Markey's 1990 music video of Sonic Youth's "Mildred Pierce" than by poring over the lyrics of the band's track on *Goð*. The video includes performance clips and shots of the band members playing their instruments (including a shirtless Moore with "MILDRED

PIERCE” written on his hairless, adorably scrawny chest in what purports to be lipstick), alternating with pans of movie marquees, of Joan Crawford’s star on Hollywood Boulevard, and of other locations in and around Hollywood. But the most interesting feature of the video is a flamboyant impersonation of Joan Crawford by Markey’s friend Sophia Coppola, who appears briefly but repeatedly throughout the video in a series of very rapid cameos.¹³

The exact tenor and tone of Coppola’s performance, as well as the particular impression it leaves, are hard to describe in mere words. You have to watch the video (it’s available on YouTube and on Sonic Youth’s 2004 DVD *Corporate Ghost: The Videos, 1990–2002*).¹⁴ In the context of a printed book, the best I can do to convey the video’s general flavor is to include a few stills from it.

An online commentator on the video, a fan of Sonic Youth, tries to capture “what SY are trying to convey” by remarking, “Sometimes I imagine that they’re channeling Ms. Crawford’s inner turmoil and pain.”¹⁵

That may be true of Moore’s singing, or screaming, though the track’s original title, “Blowjob,” implies a less sentimental and more satirical attitude. Kim Gordon, however, describing her fascination with the spectacle of onstage “vulnerability,” especially after a performer has experienced a “breakdown,” provides some justification for the fan’s compassionate reading of the video. Here she is speaking about Mariah Carey and Karen Carpenter, but her remark could apply just as easily to Joan Crawford: “I’m sure they’re similar A-type personalities—driven perfectionists who just want to please people so much.”¹⁶ Gordon seems drawn to vulnerable female performers who hurt themselves in their drive to provide their audiences with a display of perfection.

Whether or not Sonic Youth actually felt Joan Crawford’s pain, Coppola’s portrayal of Crawford in Markey’s video does not come off as especially empathetic. Coppola certainly delivers a brilliant, exaggerated, highly theatrical rendition of conventional femininity run amok—“if you can call that acting,” she is reported to have said.¹⁷



23 Frame capture from the music video “Mildred Pierce” (Dave Markey, 1990). Sophia Coppola as Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford, complete with wire hanger.



24 Frame capture from the music video “Mildred Pierce” (Dave Markey, 1990). The ordeal of lipstick.

With her pouting, bloated, painted lips (to which she applies lipstick in one sequence; see Figure 24), her thick, darkened eyebrows, her bulging eyes lined with black mascara, and her 1960s outfit, Coppola could just as easily be doing a Maria Callas imitation. She tilts her head back, so as to display the whites of her eyes; she looks wildly about, her mouth held in a wide grimace; she impulsively raises her hands to smooth her hair, thrusts them pleadingly and defensively in



25 Frame capture from the music video "Mildred Pierce" (Dave Markey, 1990). Gasping for breath.



26 Frame capture from the music video "Mildred Pierce" (Dave Markey, 1990). The scream.

front of her, or runs them down either side of her neck, as if gasping for breath. The ultimate effect is one of hysterical excess, rather in keeping with Moore's screaming.

The image of Joan Crawford that Coppola projects is grotesque, even mildly censorious. Her Crawford is narcissistic, maniacally obsessed with her appearance, though unable to restrain her movements or to control the seething anxieties that burst through her elegant, well-coiffed, carefully put-together persona. Coppola's performance

is an absolutely classic enactment of a woman visibly “losing it”—what Gordon, perhaps, would describe as breakdown and vulnerability—and it pays tribute to Faye Dunaway’s precedent-setting star turn in *Mommie Dearest*, which taught us to treat Crawford herself as a kind of visual shorthand for feminine glamour and abjection combined, for delirious extravagance and dramatic, hysterical, helpless disintegration. It’s as if Coppola were imitating a drag queen imitating Faye Dunaway imitating Joan Crawford.

For that reason alone, the relation to femininity staged by Markey in the music video makes gay male culture’s relation to femininity look comparatively simple and straightforward by comparison. The band members present themselves as deliriously passionate Joan Crawford devotees, but the attitude to Crawford implied by Coppola’s knowingly over-the-top portrayal tells a dizzyingly complex story.



The SY video seeks to acquire a certain hip credibility by impressing its audience with its suave deployment of some obscure, wacky, dated cultural references. It uses the disturbing twistedness of the arcane material it has unearthed to consolidate a group identity around that bit of dark insider knowledge, thereby setting its social world and its audience apart from the unhip, the normals. Joan Crawford, or her commodified image, provides a means of registering difference and dissent from mainstream American culture.

Hence, Coppola’s performance is *intended* to be camp.¹⁸ She can’t afford to be taken straight. She *tries* to look like a drag queen, and her act directly appeals to the precedent of drag performance, already understood to be at one remove from the involuntary impersonation of authorized gender models—from the everyday normative performance of gender—that is femininity itself.¹⁹ She delivers an imitation of an imitation of an imitation, and our hip understanding of that—if, indeed, we *are* hip enough to get it—is registered by the irony and knowingness with which we view Coppola’s performance. The video encourages us to take up a stance of mingled detachment and superi-

ority, as we enjoy our shared sense of being in on a joke. There is, in other words, nothing ironic about this irony: it is, as irony goes, perfectly serious.

Faye Dunaway, by contrast, is not a drag queen. Nor was she trying to imitate one when she portrayed Crawford, even if her kabuki-like makeup often made her face look like a mask and her volcanic outbursts of rage, self-pity, despair, and emotional need typically achieved a physical expression so outlandish and so undignified as to be at odds with conventional female embodiment. It was left to gay male culture to appropriate her performance and to claim for ourselves her spectacular failure to sustain a serious, moralistic portrayal of a deeply disturbed and dysfunctional woman. Gay male culture's embrace of *Mommie Dearest* encourages gay men to occupy that abject position, making it ironically our own, identifying with such demented femininity while also refusing to take it literally—thereby resisting the film's tendency to treat women as the locus of some awesome, frightening, demonic Otherness, as the vehicles of a dangerous and destructive emotional excess that is, supposedly, wholly unique to them.

The SY video also refuses to take Joan Crawford's demented femininity seriously, and it similarly delights in Coppola's failure to project a tragic, authentic image of a glamorous woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. So its gender politics could be described in analogous terms. But where camp is inclusive, straight hipster irony is exclusive. It invites us to enjoy, not to share, Coppola's/Crawford's insane histrionics. The figure of Joan Crawford serves as a ready-made symbol of out-of-control, female freakishness and camp extravagance, but the video encourages no real participation in the extravagance and not much sympathy with the freakishness. Sonic Youth do not genuinely aspire to make such freakishness their own.

Instead, Coppola's caricature of Crawford expresses Sonic Youth's distinctive, dissident slant on mainstream American entertainment. It signals the band's alienation from a consumer culture that already commodifies feminine emotion, that markets it and repackages sam-

ples of it for mass enjoyment. The ultimate purpose of Coppola's impersonation of a female impersonation of Joan Crawford is to grant Sonic Youth access to a subcultural style of queer cultural resistance, directly opposed to such commodification, which they can invoke, appropriate for themselves, and proffer to their audience as a hip alternative to it.



Straight hipster culture actually thrives on the “artificial appropriation of different styles from different eras,” according to a scathing cover story about hipsters in the hipster magazine *Adbusters*; it loves to play with “symbols and icons” of marginalized or oppressed groups, once those symbols and icons “have been appropriated by hipsterdom and drained of meaning.”²⁰ In another, now-notorious attack on hipsters, Christian Lorentzen goes even further. “Under the guise of ‘irony,’” he complains, “hipsterism fetishizes the authentic and regurgitates it with a winking inauthenticity.”²¹

Lorentzen was anticipated by queer playwright Charles Ludlam, founder and director of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in New York. Ludlam did not live long enough to know and to despise hipsters, but he had already come across what he termed “heterosexual camp,” for which he had very little esteem: “The thing that’s really horrible is heterosexual camp, a kind of winking at you saying, ‘I don’t really mean it.’”²² By contrast, the kind of irony that defines gay male camp does not express distance or disavowal. As we have seen, it is fully compatible with passion, pain, and belief.²³

Although hipsterism’s habit of ironic citation—fetishizing the authentic and regurgitating it with a winking inauthenticity, as Lorentzen puts it—certainly resembles camp, and although the SY video engages in a subcultural practice that is arguably analogous to camp, there is in fact a clear distinction to be drawn between the two. The SY video fetishizes camp itself and grounds its own cultural identity, or anti-identity, by looking to camp for authenticity, by invoking it as

an authentic counter-cultural aesthetic practice, which hipsters can then ironize and thereby deauthenticate in their turn.

That procedure is the exact opposite of the gay male cultural practice we have been studying. Instead of appropriating, and queering, mainstream cultural objects, straight hipsterism delights in reappropriating minority cultural forms, seizing authentically queer or dissident “symbols and icons,” and using them to consolidate its own identity, while exempting itself—through its heterosexual privilege and its hip knowingness—from the social disqualifications that gave rise to those anti-social forms in the first place.

By treating camp as its straight man, as fodder for its irony—by trying to produce a camp version of camp, through reappropriating gay male culture’s appropriation of *Mildred Pierce*—straight hipster culture turns a gay cultural practice into a vehicle for the affirmation of its own identity, or anti-identity. It makes that practice into a means of asserting its alienated perspective and consolidating its anti-social credentials. But it does so without maintaining any further affiliation or identification with gay male culture. The video appropriates gay symbols and icons, just as the *Adbusters* article says, while draining them of specifically homosexual meaning.²⁴

Gay male culture does the same thing with symbols and icons of femininity, of course—but in draining them of their sexist meaning, it performs a specific act of civil disobedience, of political resistance. The effect of the SY video is rather different. And here, it seems to me, is where we can measure the divergence between the queer performance styles on which Coppola draws for her impersonation of Joan Crawford and the kind of straight hipster irony her antics authorize—the kind of irony that permeates this video.

Hipsters have to be ironic about identity. Because they would never seriously identify themselves as hipsters, they need their own identity as hipsters to be an anti-identity. Which is what every contemporary identity aspires to be. Every social identity nowadays disclaims its own identity; at least it wants the option, some of the time, to refuse

identity “labels”—to be “post-[your identity here].” Contemporary, mainstream gay identity also likes to deny its difference, to play down its social salience, to soft-pedal its queerness, as we have seen. But camp does just the opposite: it is nothing if not flamboyant. Once you use “Ritorna vincitor!” to send off your local volleyball team, you really have no place left to hide.

Unlike camp, which allows no possibility for distance or dis-identification, straight hipster irony is at once satirical and apathetic; it signals both detachment from and a certain sense of superiority to the “authentic” cultural forms and aesthetic practices that hipsterism fetishizes—even if it is quite fond of them, in its way. By acknowledging straight hipsters’ affection for such quaint cultural forms and practices, while refusing to express that affection except in a grotesque, exaggerated fashion, in case someone should get the wrong idea, straight hipster irony maintains and consolidates (though it’s much too cool to flaunt it) a distant and disengaged position for hipsters—that is, a position of relative social privilege.²⁵



The point is effectively underscored and exemplified by a line in an ironic article on irony, dated February 3, 2008, posted to the website called “Stuff White People Like,” and now published in a best-selling book of the same title. Written by “clander” (Christian Lander), the founder of the site, the article expresses a hipsterish take on White hipsters—meaning, actually, straight, upper-middle-class White hipsters. Lander, a Canadian and a self-described “PhD dropout” who now lives in Los Angeles, has a number of interesting and amusing things to say about irony’s appeal to such people, about why irony figures so prominently among the stuff White people like. His most telling and self-aware observation seems to be the following: “But the reason that white people love irony is that it lets them have some fun and feel better about themselves.”²⁶

That kind of irony allows cool straight prosperous White people, including Lander, to deal with the shame of being privileged and

White by distancing themselves from the culture to which they already belong, comforting them with the possibility of being less than fully implicated in it, positioning themselves above it and outside of it through a critical perspective on it, as well as through an identification with marginalized people, thereby allowing them to continue to participate in it with a clearer conscience. I doubt many of us would accept that as a good description of camp irony, which—at least as I have described it—leaves its practitioners little opportunity for self-exemption.



Despite its frank delight in absurd and outlandish sexist representations, gay male culture's ironic appropriation of femininity does not express a lack of personal implication in those representations or a sense of invulnerability to the symbolic violence of reductive stereotypes. On the contrary, it indicates a willingness to see oneself reflected in such sexist representations. It demonstrates an exhilaration in identifying with the lowest of the low, and it signals a resistance to the cultural technology by which social exclusion is brought about. It therefore implies a greater degree of solidarity with women, or at least a greater investment in struggles against sexism, than does the straight exploitation of camp style, which distances itself from the female figures whose demented flamboyance it takes such pleasure in staging.

"Camp means a lot at a gathering of queers," wrote Richard Dyer in 1977, especially when it is "used defiantly by queers against straightness: but it is very easily taken up by straight society and used against us." The straight media "appreciate the wit, but they don't see why it is necessary. They pick up the undertow of self-oppression without ever latching on to the elements of criticism and defiance of straightness." Which is to say, "The context of camp is important too. . . . So much depends on what you feel about men and women, about sex, about being gay."²⁷

PART SIX



What Is Gay Culture?

JUDY GARLAND VERSUS IDENTITY ART

In the run-up to New York's Gay Pride celebration, in June of 2008, *Time Out New York* (TONY) published a feature called "What Is Gay Culture?"¹ The staffers of the magazine acknowledged that the answer to that question eluded them. They tried to compensate for their inability to meet the challenge they had set themselves by making a classic defensive gesture, combining humility with defiance: "We realize that we don't have all the answers," they admitted, "but we do know that it's the questions themselves that really matter" (16). Although I shall have some unkind things to say about their effort, I can only sympathize with their feelings of inadequacy, with their embarrassment at failing to meet the expectations they had gone out of their way to raise. Unlike them, however, I'm in no position to be defiant.

It is an awful thing to have an idea that is bigger than you are. Many are the times I regretted ever setting out to understand the relation between male homosexuality and cultural form or to explain the logic behind gay male culture's fascination with particular artifacts of mainstream culture. I'm not an expert on popular culture, and I have no background in any style profession, so I wasn't well equipped to take this project on. I have stuck with it, even though I knew I would never be able to come up with all the answers, or even very many of them, precisely because the questions matter more than any answers

I could produce. But that has not made me less determined to find at least some answers.

If my course “How To Be Gay” had not caused a scandal, and if it had not done so repeatedly, I probably would not have made myself write this book. I simply would have taught the course, using the class discussions to explore the central questions about gay male subjectivity that puzzled me, coming up with various ideas, hypotheses, and solutions, working through them with a generation of students, and publishing occasional essays on the topic, as moments of enlightenment offered themselves to me. But once the course became notorious, it was clear that I would need to do more to justify the entire project—to address the topic in some sustained, if partial, fashion, and to arrive at some real answers.

As I tried to answer the unanswerable questions I had set myself, I came to have a lot of admiration for earlier writers on the topic who did manage to produce distinguished answers, convincing interpretations of male homosexuality as a cultural practice. I see my own efforts as supplementing theirs, not superseding them. From Jean-Paul Sartre to Susan Sontag, from Esther Newton to Neil Bartlett, from D. A. Miller to Richard Dyer, a number of previous thinkers and researchers have puzzled over the issues, and I have tried to take advantage of their insights and to pay tribute to their achievements. But I have not attempted to summarize their ideas, to synthesize them, or to systematize them and consolidate them into a kind of *summa*.

When I started out on this adventure, I was more ambitious. I wanted to explain all of gay culture. I intended to integrate everything into a single, comprehensive theory. I even had my own hypotheses about the reasons for the gay male appeal of Judy Garland. (But because Richard Dyer had already accounted for it so well, I did not feel the need to add further speculations of my own, even though I think that Dyer did miss a few things here and there and that more remains to be said.) I ultimately realized, however, that even if I could lay everything out, explain and justify my methods, anticipate and preempt all conceivable objections to my project, review and criticize the work of my predecessors, and build a single, coherent, cumula-

tive argument, no one would put up with such an elaborate, ponderous exercise or want to read to the end the massive volume that would result.

And so I changed course, lightened my project and my prose, published certain parts of the overall argument separately,² and omitted a number of intuitions that could not be supported by the relatively limited analysis that I settled for undertaking in its stead—though I have tried to include a few of those intuitions here and there, sometimes by means of suggestion or insinuation, even if that meant making claims in passing that I didn't know how to defend.

I found that by concentrating my attention on a single figure, Joan Crawford, and on a single scene in a single movie, not only did I have more than enough material to go on, but the material I had was so rich in implications that it touched on many aspects of gay male culture which would have been impossible to treat fully, directly, and independently of one another in a single volume. So I confined myself to one cultural object, and to one instance of the pragmatics of genre, and I tried to draw out the wider implications of my limited material. The result, I hope, has been to shed light on an elusive topic—a topic that has been relatively neglected even within feminist studies and queer theory—namely, *the sexual politics of form*.

I am aware of the limitations of my approach. I would have liked to extend it further, to cover many facets of gay male culture and to write additional chapters about them. Any decent account of gay culture would have to survey and to examine a great number of its characteristic practices, genres, social and aesthetic forms. Opera, pop music, fashion and style, architecture and design, printing, painting and the fine arts; the gay lure of British culture, French culture, Arabic culture, Japanese culture; divas and their defining features in different national contexts (Mexico, Argentina, France, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Japan); dishing, bitching, and camping; urbanity, suavity, and wit; even pet-ownership, especially the predilection for certain kinds of dogs and cats: all of that needs to be included in any general description of how to be gay.

And sex, what about sex? Cruising, body modification, open rela-

tionships, circuit parties, clubbing, pornography, intergenerational romance, friendship, and the distinctive combination of promiscuity and solitude, of erotic intensity and austerity, aestheticism and asceticism—how on earth could I have left out everything that makes gay male erotic life so distinctive and unique?

Well, you've got to start somewhere. You can't cover everything. No book can do it all. I also admit that there's something pleasingly perverse about devoting so much time nowadays to thinking about the gay appeal of an archaic figure like Joan Crawford and of a largely forgotten cult movie like *Mildred Pierce*. Of course, I needed to pick an established and uncontroversial example of gay men's cultural practices. I had to appeal to a well-documented case of gay men's emotional investments in selected bits of mainstream culture, even if that meant picking something old-fashioned and not terribly current.

In any case, there are particular advantages to studying a classic—a canonical work that is *not* of our time. Precisely because Joan Crawford does not loom large in our own culture, however we define it, we can attempt to inquire into her gay appeal without feeling personally implicated by the result—or, at least, without feeling quite so personally implicated as we might feel if we picked an object in which we are currently invested (like Lady Gaga). Our own identities are not immediately on the line. And even if we lack an instinctive understanding of what Joan Crawford meant to gay men of earlier eras, we at least have the privilege of being able to step back from the gravitational field of her powerful attraction and consider the nature of her appeal in a relatively detached, unimpassioned way—calmly, curiously, and from a number of possible perspectives—which means we are more easily able to forge a critical meta-language in which to talk about it.



We also have the necessary distance at this point to ask a number of other questions. How would my account of gay male culture have had to change if it had revolved around a different figure? Some an-

swers to *that* question have already been provided by Richard Dyer's study of gay men and Judy Garland, Neil Bartlett's study of gay men and Oscar Wilde, even D. A. Miller's study of gay men and the Broadway musical, all of which offer quite distinct visions of gay male culture and gay male subjectivity—though ones that are not incompatible with the picture I have sketched here.

For example, Richard Dyer's classic essay "Judy Garland and Gay Men" highlights her "combination of strength and suffering," identifying it as a source of her gay appeal.³ That gripping combination would seem to correspond in certain ways to the combination of glamour and abjection that distinguishes Joan Crawford's screen persona and that accounts, at least in part, for the power she exercises over her gay male fans. Both strength/suffering and glamour/abjection could be reduced to a more basic formula, a general equation, an underlying structure defined by the binary of *power* and *vulnerability*. But the two sets of contrasting values are not at all the same, and the differences between them point in interestingly divergent directions. So it is not a good idea to abstract them, despecify them, generalize them, homogenize them, and reduce them to a universal grammar of gay male culture.

An interpretation of gay male culture based on a study of the gay appeal of Maria Callas or Tammy Faye Bakker or Tonya Harding or Oprah Winfrey or Princess Diana might well lead to some very different conclusions. It might not challenge the entire analysis I have laid out, since all of those gay icons exhibit some of the features displayed by Joan Crawford: a tendency to "lose it" in public, a talent for melodrama as well as for pathos, a volatile mix of glamour and abjection, and larger-than-life performances of conventional (if excessive) femininity. But the details of their embodiment and their star quality (or monstrosity) are all different, and those differences count. All of those figures need to be studied in their specificity in order to disclose the secret of their gay appeal. It is not useful at this point to amalgamate their features into a simple, imprecise diagram, a few general truths, a universal cultural grammar.

In any case, the constellation of genres, practices, and values that I have described—the whole camp-diva-abjection-aesthetics-roleplaying-inauthenticity-melodrama nexus—represents only one dimension of gay male culture and subjectivity. It is certainly not to be taken for the whole of gay culture, nor does it reflect the full scope of gay men's subjectivity. Even a slight modification in the design of my project would have had far-reaching consequences for the resulting picture of gay male existence offered here. Simply switching from one female Hollywood icon to another could be decisive. What if, instead of Crawford, my exploration of gay male culture had taken as its paradigm example her rival and sometime antagonist Bette Davis? What if, in the place of *Mildred Pierce*, I had chosen to focus on such gay cult classics from among Davis's films as *Jezebel*, *Dark Victory*, *The Letter*, *The Little Foxes*, *Deception*, *Now, Voyager*, or *All about Eve*? How would my model of gay male subjectivity have to change? What different picture of gay culture would result?

Conventional wisdom has it that Bette Davis was the great screen sadist, just as Joan Crawford was the great screen masochist. That wisdom reflects the character types both actresses excelled at playing, especially during the second halves of their careers, and it depends in part on their spectacular division of roles in the one movie in which they played opposite each other, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), where Bette Davis ultimately takes Joan Crawford prisoner, keeping her literally bound and gagged. But although that conventional understanding of the two actresses as embodying opposite identities and personality types is probably exaggerated and too schematic, it seems undeniable that Bette Davis's distinctive ethos and style produce a visual, emotional, moral, and sensual impact very different from Joan Crawford's. In particular, Davis's glamour, which is every bit as dazzling as Crawford's, seems to be much less bound up with abjection. Even if Davis is not necessarily a sadist in many of her screen roles, her characters often do take an unmixed pleasure in coming out on top, wielding power or authority, defying social conventions, and getting their way even or especially at the cost of other people's suffering.

That is why a friend of mine tries to find out whether the latest guy he's dating has a liking for Bette Davis or Joan Crawford. Such preferences do not simply reflect different tastes in movies, or matters of aesthetic partisanship in general. They tell my friend a lot about the kind of guy he's dating, the nature of the relation he is destined to have with him—in particular, what the sex is going to be like . . . in the long run.

A model of gay male subjectivity based on an understanding of the peculiar gay appeal of Bette Davis might well differ, then, from the limited and partial model of gay male subjectivity that I have sketched out here and that I extracted from one line of Joan Crawford's. The two models would not be totally dissimilar, to be sure: I imagine—and I am not about to anticipate the outcome of a separate research project that I hope someone will undertake, so I don't want to presume—but I imagine that both models of gay subjectivity would likely make *some* reference to melodrama, camp, diva-worship, and gay male femininity, for example. The differences between them might well be significant, however. And the resulting picture of gay male culture and subjectivity might be even more different if it took as its starting point a practice like gardening or window-dressing or home decoration, not to mention diving or heavy-metal music or religious mysticism.⁴

Those differences would confirm us, nonetheless, in our basic approach to the topic. Far from returning us to a psychological model of gay male subjectivity, they would highlight the sexual politics of cultural form, the meaning of style, the far-reaching aesthetic, gendered, and sexual consequences of formal or stylistic differences, the constitutive effects of the pragmatics of genre—the cultural poetics, in short, of human subjectivity.



Though gay male culture may no longer be preoccupied with either Joan Crawford or Bette Davis, it continues to reserve a large share of its attention for Hollywood stars, divas, pop icons, and various contemporary feminine figures incarnating different combinations of

strength and suffering, glamour and abjection, power and vulnerability. It continues to make passionate investments in aestheticism and to display an ironic taste for melodrama, both as an artistic form and as a mode of feeling or personal expression. It continues to be divided between aristocratic and democratic impulses, between elitist aspirations and identifications with the lowest of the low. But it doesn't understand its persistent attachment to these traditional sources of queer pleasure, and it doesn't know how to make sense of its own obsessions.

The feature article on gay culture in *Time Out New York* is striking in this connection, not only because it freely confesses its own incapacity to deal with its chosen topic, but because it registers so clearly and symptomatically a larger confusion about what "gay culture" could possibly mean, refer to, or consist in. Indeed, the "Gay & Lesbian editor" of *TONY*, Beth Greenfield, herself admits that gay culture "may be a difficult concept to pin down" (though "it sure is an exciting one to ponder"). The examples of gay culture that she lists reveal, accordingly, a number of slippages among different conceptions or definitions of it.

When *Time Out New York's* queer staffers sat down to figure out what would go into a feature about "gay culture," we quickly realized it would be no easy task. Did we want to tackle it in the classic, universal sense—as in Judy Garland, campy drag shows and *Stone Butch Blues*? Did we want to talk about new queer indie films, and why they are often low-budget and unimpressive? Or about the hottest, freshest talents around, and how they're shaking up media ranging from music and downtown theater to edgy lit and trans burlesque? (16)

A lot is being compressed into a small space here, so it's no wonder that some weird amalgams get made. For instance, it's not clear how Judy Garland exemplifies gay culture "in the universal sense" that drag does. Drag is an international queer phenomenon, which does indeed make it almost universal, whereas the gay male appeal of Judy Garland tends to be limited to the English-speaking world—or to some restricted portions of it.

Similarly, it's hard to see how *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg's powerful transgender working-class novel published in 1993, nearly a quarter-century after the Stonewall riots, could qualify as "classic" in quite the same way as Judy Garland. The problem is not one of relative merit or importance. Feinberg's novel is a classic, and it has had a major impact on readers all over the world. But it's a classic in part because of how clearly and explicitly it articulates an experience of queer *identity* that had rarely been described before in such lucid, moving language. (Perhaps Beth Greenfield wanted to replace that classic *cri de coeur* of lesbian/transgender misery, Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, with a less politically obnoxious, more up-to-date version.) Judy Garland, by contrast, became the focus of a gay male cult in the years before Stonewall because, far from finding new words to describe queer experience, she somehow gave voice to gay men's unspeakable longings *without* ever enunciating them. She thereby served as an effective vehicle of gay male *identification*. She was a figure gay men could identify with, not—like Feinberg's novel—a champion of queer identity itself.



Some of these confusions may be generational. John Clum, growing up in the 1950s, did not suffer from any such confusion. "For many of us," he writes, "there was something called 'gay culture' and it involved camp as a discourse and musical theater as an object of adoration."⁵ But that was a long time ago. *TONY*'s queer staffers themselves point out that much uncertainty about what gay culture is today may arise from what they call "the ever-present generation gap," which "can seem particularly wide in our community." That gap, in their understanding of it, divides, predictably, "folks over thirty"—who are likely to be found "catching the latest Paul Rudnick play or ducking into a lively piano bar for the evening"—from "queers in their twenties and younger [who] may have less of a need to belong to anything other than society at large. They came out in their teens, after all, and find themselves more or less accepted everywhere they go" (16).

It is always hard to tell whether assertions like this—which are by

now so familiar to us, and which insist that gay culture is out of date, a thing of the past, irrelevant to the younger generation, and no longer necessary in a world where lesbians and gay men can now get married or be elected heads of state (at least in Iceland)—it is always hard to tell whether such assertions are statements of fact or expressions of desire, startled discoveries of unanticipated good news or articulations of a wish that gay culture would simply disappear. In any case, we have already had occasion to take stock of many similar claims. Young queers fit easily into youth culture, we are told; they don't like to be labeled, they don't feel the need for a separate, distinct social world, and they don't identify with gay culture.⁶

And a good thing, too, I might add, because the social costs of insisting on your differences from normal people are exorbitant *when you have no choice but to integrate yourself into heterosexual society*—because substantive gay alternatives to the straight world no longer exist, now that the urban infrastructures of gay life have been largely dismantled. And if you want your straight friends to accept you as one of them, despite your being queer, you would be wise to deny that you wish “to belong to anything other than society at large.” What, after all, does such a denial indicate, if not that straight society at large is actually a good deal less accommodating of queer kids, especially queer kids who want to proclaim their difference from straight kids, than we are sometimes led to believe?

Witness John Clum, to take only the example nearest to hand. Clum reported in the late 1990s that “gay fraternity boys” on a lesbian e-mail list at Duke University “spoke of how it was all right to be openly gay in a fraternity as long as you played by the rules of gender appropriate behavior. No sissies or queens, please.”⁷ Reacting sharply to this trend, gay legal scholar Kenji Yoshino has issued an eloquent critique of “covering,” the tendency on the part of stigmatized groups to acknowledge their differences but to minimize the significance and the visibility of those differences, so as to be acceptable to society at large. Gay people may now come out of the closet, but they get ahead in the world only if they make sure that their non-

standard identities do not obtrude flamboyantly on the consciousness of straight people. In order to resist that pressure, Yoshino wants to call our attention to “the dark side of assimilation.” He argues that when women and minorities defensively downplay their differences, they cave in to “covering demands” that simply reflect the ongoing realities of racism, sexism, and homophobia. “Covering is a hidden assault on our civil rights,” he argues.⁸

Sometimes those assaults do not stay hidden. It is all very well to celebrate the fact that “queers in their twenties and younger . . . find themselves more or less accepted everywhere they go,” at least in New York, and the last thing I want to do is to minimize that good news. But I’d also rather not try telling it to Kevin Aviance—the brilliant African American performance artist who led two workshops for my “How To Be Gay” class in 2000 and 2001—even if he was no longer in his twenties in 2006 when his jaw was broken in front of a gay bar in the East Village by half a dozen guys who attacked him while shouting anti-gay insults.

The notion that traditional gay male culture is completely meaningless and irrelevant to the younger generation, or the new and upcoming generation, is one I espoused fervently when I considered myself a member of such a generation, back in the 1970s. Now that I’ve gotten older and changed my mind, I wonder what makes *teenagers* our leading authorities on gay culture and its ongoing relevance, or why we should necessarily measure the continuing meaningfulness of gay culture by gauging how well it plays to the youngest gay men, those who are least likely to have been exposed to it or initiated into it, and who in any case know next to nothing about it. Even I knew virtually nothing about Judy Garland when I was younger. I got to know her only when I had to do my homework in order to teach “How To Be Gay” for the first time. Judy Garland, after all, was not exactly an icon for *my* generation.

Ever since the 1970s, as we’ve already seen, gay men have been drawing self-serving generational comparisons between well-adjusted gay people in their teens and twenties, who have no need of gay cul-

ture, and all those older queens who are fanatically attached to it. A particularly witty and trenchant, but otherwise quite typical, instance of this contrast can be found in the central, programmatic conversation between Nick (played by Steve Buscemi) and Peter (Adam Nathan) in Bill Sherwood's 1986 film of contemporary gay life in New York, *Parting Glances*—one of those low-budget, independent queer films that *TONY*'s staffers would probably find “unimpressive,” but that I happen to think highly of. In that scene, the cute gay twentysomething club kid with patriotic sentiments, romantic longings, and Republican politics boasts of his normality to a thirtysomething punk rocker with AIDS, only to end up begging his older acquaintance, nostalgically, “Show me the Village.” And that was already almost three decades ago; the cute Reaganite club kid, if he survived, would be past fifty by now. Which is old for a teenager.

If all these perennial claims of generational difference turned out to be accurate, and still current, then it would seem that the folks over thirty who haunt the piano bars today were, just a short time ago, the new generation who came out in their teens and felt no personal connection with gay identity, gay culture, or gay community. Between feeling no need to belong to anything and feeling an irresistible urge to walk through the beckoning doorway of your local piano bar, there is not some unbridgeable chasm between the generations, it turns out, but merely a slender border zone no wider than a decade.



The persistent denial that gay culture exists or that it is relevant to the younger generation is part of a larger pattern. Gay people seem to be constantly discovering, and then rediscovering—always with the same shock of surprise, the same unanticipated astonishment—what a trivial thing their gayness is, how little it matters to them, how insignificant it is in the larger scheme of things, how little they identify with it, how little they need to belong to a culture built around it. They continually assert, with the same hollow insistence, that being gay

does not define them. And perhaps it doesn't. But being gay still seems to be the only thing they ever talk about. They talk about it endlessly. The more they talk about it, the more they feel an obligation to proclaim how unimportant it is. On a list of the ten most significant things about me, they always say, being gay comes in at number ten.

Even the folks who are actually in charge of the gay media, whose job it is to produce and maintain a public gay culture, feel duty-bound to take the same loyalty oaths to the insignificance and irrelevance of being gay. "Oscar Raymundo, twenty-five, could be considered a professional gay," aptly observes Scott James in the annual Gay Pride state-of-the-gay report for the *New York Times*. "He writes a gay blog, and edits for the Web site Queerty. But he said being gay is not as important as other aspects of his life—he has faced more discrimination for being Latino, he said."⁹ When the topic of what it means to you to be gay comes up, the thing to do is to shift it to some more politically respectable identity, even though being gay is how you make your living.

The fact that you have to say, over and over again, how unimportant to you being gay is, in order to retain some kind of social or cultural credibility, is an eloquent sign of the times we live in. For it actually indicates just how important being gay truly is—if only to the extent that it dramatizes how much pressure you evidently feel to proclaim that being gay is unimportant. If it were really so unimportant, why would you have to keep saying so?

"I, for one, can say I'm really not proud to be gay," proudly writes Bre DeGrant in Salon.com, penning the compulsory gay-disavowal article for the annual Gay Pride issue. "I'm not proud to be in a gay community. I'm more proud that I survived abuse as a child, that I'm on the Dean's List, and that I'm on track for my nursing degree after years of indecision. Basically, I'm proud of the things I've accomplished. I don't want to be known as the gay girl. I want to be known for all of the things I am instead of just one of the things I happen to be. My entire personality doesn't revolve around being a lesbian." Ex-

cept, that is, when writing an article for the Gay Pride issue of Salon, an article that revolves around nothing else but being a lesbian.

“I understand that oppressed minorities need a community to feel acceptance until they become integrated into the rest of society,” De-Grant concedes. “But as we grow more and more accepted, as we evolve from a psychiatric case to just another person, do we still need to actively disassociate ourselves from mainstream society and our straight counterparts? Will we still need gathering places when the rest of our peers accept us in nongay bars, nongay community centers, and nongay houses of worship?”¹⁰ Well, unless we truly relish the dismal prospect of spending the rest of our lives hanging out in nongay houses of worship, the answer to that question is surely going to be a resounding yes.

Corresponding to the perennial disavowal of the importance of gay identity is the constant denial, especially on the part of gay men, of the importance of gay sex. Scott James fastens upon a twenty-three-year-old Stanford graduate with a Master’s degree in computer science, who lived in a gay dorm at Stanford and moved to the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco immediately upon graduating; the more his social life revolves around being gay, the more he insists on the unimportance of being gay, just as coming out at the age of sixteen was a complete “non-event.” “Socially, he is seeking a relationship, not casual liaisons, meeting men mostly through ‘friends of friends.’ . . . ‘I’m inspired by the gay couples I know who want to get married,’ he said.” And James goes on to remark, with apparent satisfaction, “Others in [his] generation also appear to have less of an obsession with sex, which is reflected in some social media. Grindr, a smartphone application that connects gay men by GPS proximity, has more than 25,000 San Francisco users. Though some exploit the technology for pursuing sex, 67 percent in a recent customer survey said they use the app primarily to make friends.”¹¹

What amazing news! Gay men are no longer interested in sex. They’re interested in relationships. They want to get married. Have you ever heard anything like that before? Well, perhaps you’ve heard

something rather like it every year during Gay Pride for the past thirty years, or at any moment when some incident produces a passing curiosity in the straight media about the current state of gay life in the United States. And no doubt you're always astounded by the news, which is why people keep telling it to us. We are regaled non-stop with reports about "the new gay teenager," the divisions in the gay community, the generational conflicts, the changing modes of gay life, the disappearance of gay politics, of gay dance parties, of gay sex, of gay culture. Gay kids these days don't feel a political urge to manifest their sexuality. They feel comfortable in their sexuality. They find themselves more or less accepted everywhere they go.

So why do they keep killing themselves when they get outed?

The report by Scott James is actually quite informative. To be sure, it doesn't tell you much about what it is that more than 25,000 gay boys in San Francisco are actually doing on Grindr. (If, as one Grindr user told another reporter, you're using Grindr primarily to make friends, if you're simply networking, "if you're just there to meet people in a nonsexual context, why aren't you wearing a shirt in your picture?")¹² But it does say a lot about the social pressure that two-thirds of those boys feel to deny that they're using Grindr for sexual hook-ups. So it's not especially surprising that the young man interviewed by James says he is looking for a relationship. Everyone is looking for a relationship. Why, even I am looking for a relationship—I just have to have sex with thousands of men to find the one I really want.



To be sure, the social and political conditions of gay life have been changing very rapidly over the past fifty years, and gay culture has been changing along with them. Even practices that appear to be continuous over the course of many years may be less stable than they look. The irony with which we regard Joan Crawford movies now is surely very different from the irony with which gay men watched *Mildred Pierce* in the '50s and '60s, when the melodrama, so-

cial setting, and gender styles seemed less far-fetched and therefore less emotionally alien than they do today (which is why no universalizing, psychoanalytically phrased theory of gay spectatorship can account for gay viewing practices in all their specificity). Gay men's identification with the female stars in classic Hollywood movies would have been more immediate and intense in the old days, when ironic distance from the characters they played took more of an effort to achieve. It is entirely to be expected that every half-generation of gay men would feel disconnected from the cultural objects and the ways of relating to them that had been so meaningful to the half-generation before them. And the volatile interactions between gay male culture and its heteronormative context have constantly evolved. That in turn has altered the nature, the methods, and the goals of gay cultural borrowing, appropriation, and reuse.

When Todd Haynes, once an architect of the "new queer cinema" of the early 1990s, remade *Mildred Pierce* for HBO in 2011, his slow-paced, six-hour, comparatively faithful adaptation of the James M. Cain novel never lost an opportunity to remind its viewers, by means of its rich social realism and insistent period detail, how far away in world and time they were from the family drama Cain had depicted. Haynes made distance and irony into the very conditions of spectatorship, effectively alienating his audience from the spectacle and depriving it of the need to balance passionate absorption with a countervailing irony in order to bring itself into a meaningful relation with the scenario. Which is one reason his version is so much less gripping than the original movie, despite the visual beauty of the cinematography and the enhanced plausibility of the story. No wonder it did not evoke an equivalent response from gay male viewers. Kate Winslet's earnest portrayal of the title character—inexperienced, ordinary, downtrodden, pitiable, and often pathetic, more victim than independent woman—has nothing of the fierceness, elegance, and authority with which Joan Crawford embodied an aristocratic model of middle-class femininity.

So I don't want to imply that the *TONY* writers are simply in denial

when they attempt to describe the generational differences between succeeding versions of gay male culture. But those differences provide no excuse for refusing to acknowledge the remarkable continuities across the generations. Or for dating gay culture irrevocably to the past.



It is altogether too easy to be snide at the expense of *TONY*, I admit, and my goal is certainly not to be snide—that’s just a catty, self-indulgent detour on the way to my main point. Which is a simple one. The fundamental hesitation about what gay culture is that the writers responsible for this feature article seem to feel arises from a basic and characteristic uncertainty: Does gay culture refer to queer artifacts produced by queers themselves or to works of mainstream culture produced by heterosexuals, which queers then appropriate for their own uses, queering them in the process?

The *TONY* feature foregrounds this dilemma by including a poll, addressed to its readers, called “Which Is Gay?” It pairs instances of explicit, identity-based, out-and-proud, post-Stonewall gay culture with bits of the surrounding culture that lend themselves to queer appropriation. In that way, direct, unencrypted representations of gayness are opposed to coded, figural representations of gayness, and readers are asked to choose the ones they prefer, to vote for the representations that answer more satisfyingly to their ideas of gay culture or to their desires for what they would like it to be. As the *TONY* lead-in puts it, “You don’t have to be openly gay to be really queer.” So which is gayer, the magazine asks, *Brokeback Mountain* or *Sex and the City*? Truman Capote or Herman Melville?¹³

In other words, do you prefer the kind of gay culture that is rooted in gay identity or the kind that is rooted in gay identification? Would you rather listen to Rufus Wainwright or Judy Garland? *TONY* solves *that* problem by giving first place in its list of “Top ten moments in NYC gay culture” not to the Stonewall riots—they come in at number two—but to “Rufus Does Judy,” the 2006 performance at Carne-

gie Hall in which Rufus reperformed Judy's legendary 1961 concert, singing all the same songs in the same order and in the same venue.¹⁴ Nonetheless, *TONY* poses the choice to its readers in fairly stark terms. Do you still feel "a need to connect with some sort of LGBT culture"? If not, "Why cling to old-fashioned notions of barroom communities and identity art?" (16).

The problem is that what is *really* old-fashioned is not gay bars and baths, or the communities they produce, or David Hockney paintings of boys diving into swimming pools, or novels of gay male life by Andrew Holleran and Edmund White—old-fashioned though they all may be. Long before there was an open, explicit gay male culture, with its own "identity art," there was already a gay male cultural practice that consisted in appropriating, decoding, recoding, and queering figures like Judy Garland and Joan Crawford, finding homosexual meaning in the novels of Herman Melville, and embracing all-female melodramas like *The Women* or *Sex and the City*. These are precisely the sorts of mass-media cultural objects that can still serve as vehicles of queer feeling (Lady Gaga, anyone?). As it turns out, they are also the objects that the *TONY* staffers particularly adore, much preferring them to those unimpressive, low-budget movies by new queer filmmakers which they tend to despise (Ariel Schrag, a contributor to the *TONY* forum and a former writer for *The L Word*, expresses particular disdain for the MIX queer experimental film festival in New York).

In lobbying for an understanding of how "really queer" certain cultural icons or objects can be that do not register as "openly gay," the *TONY* staffers demonstrate—unwittingly, and despite their conviction of being trend-setters—just how archaic their model of gay culture is. For their delight in finding queer meaning in cultural items that do not depict homosexuality explicitly, and that were not produced by an openly gay culture, recapitulates a pre-Stonewall gay practice of queering straight culture—that is, it recalls and reproduces gay culture "in the classic, universal sense." Far from dying out, that practice lives on, and the *TONY* editors bear witness in their cultural

preferences to its continuing vitality, even as they claim that traditional gay culture is no longer relevant to their own generation.

There is, however, a kind of contemporary gay culture that the *TONY* staffers do champion. Even while they lampoon “identity art” as old-fashioned, at least when it consists of items they don’t happen to like, they are eager to celebrate gay culture when it is produced by “the hottest, freshest talents around” with a reputation for “shaking up media ranging from music and downtown theater to edgy lit and trans burlesque.” But those instances of gay culture, which they hold up to us for admiration, seem to consist precisely of new work that bears on queer life, or at least that expresses a queer sensibility, and is produced in any case by the current crop of queer artists. And what is that if not “identity art”?

It is only because that new work is supposedly so sharp and smart and trendy that it doesn’t come in for that derogatory label . . . yet. You can just imagine what tomorrow’s queer teenagers will be saying about “downtown theater” and “trans burlesque,” as well as the folks over thirty who love them, ten years from now.



The point of this analysis is not to ridicule the *TONY* staffers, but to bring out the kinds of conflicts and denials around gay culture that gay people constantly display. The contributors to *TONY* provide a typical example. They represent a symptom of our larger malaise.

In the end, Beth Greenfield’s answer to the question “What is gay culture?” is a generous one. It includes images of gay people as well as straight icons with whom they identify, a culture of gay identity as well as a culture of gay identification, youth as well as age, gay people as well as straight people. Her evocation of the scene at the first of the Gay Pride parades in the New York summer season, the one in Jackson Heights on June 1, is intended to span all those oppositions: “Queens Pride ’08 remains one of the city’s most vibrant, least commercialized and most ethnically diverse festivals. Check it out and

you could find yourself thinking—amid Colombian drag queens, gay cops, queer-youth groups and flocks of Indian families applauding on the sidelines—that you’ve just stepped into the very heart of the elusive gay culture.” That is entirely as it should be.

But it still leaves us with some questions to consider.

CULTURE VERSUS SUBCULTURE

Gay culture can refer to new works of literature, film, music, art, drama, dance, and performance that are produced by queer people and that reflect on queer experience. Gay culture can also refer to mainstream works created mostly by heterosexual artists, plus some (closeted) queer ones, that queer people have selectively appropriated and reused for anti-heteronormative purposes.

The distinction is of course neither airtight nor absolute. Even the most original contemporary gay writers frame their work in relation to mainstream society and history or initiate a dialogue with received cultural forms. Neil Bartlett's novels *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1991) and *Mr Clive and Mr Page* (1996) imagine what the gay equivalent of heterosexual courtship, romance, marriage, conjugality, family, property accumulation and transmission, inheritance, and reproduction might look like; those novels refer back, for their central terms and preoccupations, to preexisting heterosexual social and cultural institutions. The later novel even cites and reworks a number of actual historical documents in order to adapt them to a gay male theme. And yet it is a wholly original work of contemporary gay literature, whose goal is to give form to a specifically gay way of life.

Similarly, in *An Arrow's Flight* (1998), Mark Merlis offers a gay retelling of the Fall of Troy and the story of the Greek hero Philoctetes—though he could also be understood as creating a Homeric myth of

the Vietnam War, gay liberation, and the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Jamie O'Neill reclaims Irish Republican history for gay liberation and for gay male love in his novel *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), whose very title invokes an earlier, classic, non-gay novel by Flann O'Brien.¹ And Michael Cunningham's most successful work, *The Hours* (1998), seems gayest not when it tries to represent gay male characters but when its author tries to write like—or, indeed, to *be*—Virginia Woolf, rather like Rufus channeling Judy.

The list of original works by gay men that take straight society or mainstream culture as their point of departure could be almost infinitely extended. Nonetheless, there is a distinction to be drawn between the kind of gay culture that consists in new work by (in this case) gay men who for the first time in history reflect directly and openly and explicitly on gay male experience as it is being lived, or as it might be lived (or might have been lived), and the kind of gay culture that is parasitic on mainstream culture. The latter finds in the non-gay world queer representations that can be made to express gay male subjectivity or feeling—with a little tweaking, if necessary—and that afford gay men an imaginative point of entry into a queer utopia, somewhere over the rainbow, which is not entirely of their own making.

The difference between these two versions of gay male culture can be understood in terms of a broader distinction (though, once again, not an airtight one) between culture and subculture. Gay writers, artists, performers, and musicians have been creating an original culture for well over a century now, even if many of them have had to operate under the cover of heterosexual subject matter and only a few, such as Walt Whitman, André Gide, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Radclyffe Hall, Jean Genet, and James Baldwin, were able to treat gay themes explicitly. By contrast, drag, camp, and various cultural appropriations and identifications are all, properly speaking, *subcultural* practices, insofar as they are in a dependent, secondary relation to the preexisting non-gay cultural forms to which they respond and to which they owe their very existence—such as social norms of mascu-

linity and femininity; the serious business of politics; authentic identities and emotions; mainstream figures like Judy Garland or Joan Crawford; and mainstream aesthetic or social practices, from opera, Broadway musicals, torch songs, and popular music to architecture, historic preservation, flower-arranging, fashion and style.

The most eminent examples of gay male cultural production before the era of gay liberation lie somewhere in between. They are dependent on preexisting cultural forms, which provide them with social authority and protective camouflage, and they are easily claimed by mainstream culture, but they also constitute significant achievements of queer expression and vital resources for the formation and elaboration of gay identity—virtual bibles of gay existence. I am thinking, for example, of Oscar Wilde’s dramatic and non-dramatic works, Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Virginia Woolf’s novels and essays, W. H. Auden’s poetry, and Noël Coward’s songs.

A subculture is not the same thing as a culture. The dynamics of its formation, its aims and purposes, and its politics are all necessarily different. A subculture is in an oppositional (if not adversarial) relationship to an already existing set of authoritative cultural values, and it refers, explicitly or implicitly, to a world that is not its own independent creation. It is an expression of resistance to a dominant culture and a defiance of a social order. If I have spoken consistently throughout this book of gay male culture rather than subculture, that’s not because I’ve been trying to dodge the implication that the gay male cultural practices with which I’ve been most concerned are secondary, subcultural ones, but only because I have wanted to avoid littering my text with that unlovely, compound term. The endless repetition of “culture” and “cultural” has been bad enough.



In any case, this book has had little to say about gay male culture of the original kind, the sort of gay cultural production that is predicated on the existence of gay identity and on the ability of representational practices to convey it; it has been preoccupied almost exclu-

sively with gay male culture of the subcultural variety. In fact, it has largely taken for granted the notion that male homosexuality as a cultural practice consists in a series of subcultural responses to mainstream culture—namely, the appropriation and resignification of heterosexual forms and artifacts.

But I hardly wish to deny the existence of a gay-authored gay culture or to undervalue it. Much original gay male culture is grounded not in identification with non-gay figures or with non-gay social and cultural forms, but in gay male identity itself and in the effort to explore it. Gay men still look for representations of themselves and reflections of their existence in cultural productions, and they are interested in finding out about other gay men past and present, how gay men have managed their lives, their loves, their struggles for freedom and dignity. To those ends, gay men have created a vibrant, wide-ranging, explicit body of writing, film, and music, a distinguished accumulation of scholarship and criticism, as well as institutional spaces for further study and reflection and discovery.

Moreover, there is a vast popular literature devoted to disseminating useful knowledge about gay men to gay men, from grooming advice to gay history to what to expect from a gay love-affair.² The original edition of *The Joy of Gay Sex*, published in 1977, contains not only illustrated articles describing different sexual positions, but also explanations of what discos are, why gay men go to them, and how one should behave in them, as well as entries about the particular importance of friendships in the lives of gay men or about how to cope with jealousy and still have a happy relationship that is not sexually exclusive. Although the title of that manual promises that it will be about gay sex, the book was actually designed to be an all-purpose user's guide to gay male life.

Some gay men do venerate their historical forebears, as Bartlett's book on Wilde testifies. They make lists of gay male heroes and role models.³ And they keep an eye out for traces of their own history. There has long existed a clandestine knowledge that circulates among gay men about the submerged life and work of earlier gay figures—whose homosexuality, though well known, is usually relegated to

the unspoken margins of official histories, where it stays concealed from the uninitiated. (“Did you know that Cole Porter / Maurice Sendak / Richard Chamberlain . . . ?”) Similarly, gay men have often exchanged bits of information about where in straight public culture one can locate little gems of gay wit, secret double meanings with a gay significance, or sly winks and nods that gay male artists have somehow managed to slip into mainstream movies or music where they remain protectively hidden and usually go unnoticed—except by those who know where to look for them.⁴ Nothing I say here is intended to question the value of all that.

On the contrary. If, as I confessed at the outset, I was the wrong person to teach a class on “how to be gay,” just as I am the wrong person to write a book on the topic, that is because I have always been grateful for and deeply invested in explicit, non-encrypted, identity-based gay male culture, especially literary fiction. The emergence of such fiction in the past several decades provided me with an exhilarating, instructive, necessary experience—with a kind of epistemic breakthrough—insofar as it enabled me to read, at long last, about people like myself and to understand my larger situation. I no longer had to insert myself, somehow, into those visions of life produced by non-gay writers, no matter how humane, profound, or inclusive they aspired to be. Just as straight readers have always done with mainstream literature, I could finally read fictional works to see my own life reflected, explored, analyzed, and reimagined. Through gay literature I could come to understand my place in the world.

My sense of myself as a gay man has evolved at least partly through that experience. If I could, I would want to honor the achievements of the gay men who, since Stonewall, have written, in English, novels, stories, and plays about gay male life and whose work has meant so much to me. I think particularly of Neil Bartlett, Alan Hollinghurst, Mark Merlis, Jamie O’Neill, Christos Tsiolkas, John Weir, Dale Peck, Melvin Dixon, Joe Keenan, and Adam Mars-Jones; also Robert Ferro, Tony Kushner, Albert Innaurato, Robert Glück, Dennis Cooper, John Rechy, James Purdy, Samuel Delany, Ethan Mordden, Essex Hemp-hill, Allan Gurganus, Stephen McCauley, David Feinberg, James

Robert Baker, Gary Indiana, Randall Kenan, David Leavitt, and many others.

By contrast, I have been slow to appreciate and to enjoy the divas and the camp perspectives that the subcultural practice of male homosexuality held out to me, and I have retained an ambivalent attitude toward them. Which is why writing this book has gone against the grain of my own instincts some of the time—though it has also taught me a lot about how to be gay, and it has made me gayer as a result.

If for the purposes of this study I have wanted to turn my back on gay male culture proper, and to investigate the nature and the workings of gay male subculture instead, that is because the latter is mysterious in ways that the former is not. It is abundantly obvious why gay men produce and consume a culture that consists in representations of gay men and of gay male experience. And it would even be easy to understand why, in an era before such an open, explicit gay male culture was possible, gay men's cultural expression took the form of the subcultural practice of appropriating and resignifying select items from the surrounding heterosexual culture. What is less expected is that the emergence of an open, explicit gay male culture should not have put an end to those subcultural practices or extinguished the appeal of reading heteronormative artifacts queerly against the grain. Gay men still engage in the reappropriation and recoding of straight culture.

Even the panel of “local LGBT culture makers,” assembled by *Time Out New York* in order to answer the what-is-gay-culture? question, acknowledge that much, however grudgingly. Here is what they say in response to the query, “Have you seen *Gypsy*?”

ARIEL SCHRAG: What is *Gypsy*?

STACEYANN CHIN: I've never seen it.

CHRISTIAN SIRIANO: I haven't. Wait, I think I've seen the movie, but I can't remember. What's it about?

ARIEL SCHRAG: Isn't there a mother and a daughter in it? It's kind of coming back to me . . .

CHRISTIAN SIRIANO: Sounds fabulous!

DOUGLAS CARTER BEANE: I haven't seen it for a while. I like to see it every seventy-two months—I love that overture. I even put a joke in *Xanadu* about *Gypsy*!

KAI WRIGHT: I haven't seen it, but for gay Broadway, give me *Xanadu*. That was fucking brilliant! I urge you to go.

DOUGLAS CARTER BEANE: Working on *Xanadu* made it pretty clear that the word “camp” is still used to dismiss something. People are still saying the show is too gay, even though it appeals to a wide audience. They would never think of calling *Fiddler on the Roof* “too Jewish,” or *The Wiz* “too black,” or *Camelot* “too long”—oh wait, they do say that.

GLENN MARIA: I actually saw *Gypsy*. And I'm the weird, fat trannie—the one who's supposed to be into weird and freaky shit. People always come up to me and talk about obscure avant-garde artists that I “should” know. But the reality is, I love *Gypsy*. When I perform, I jump out of spandex sacks and tap-dance to show tunes.⁵

It is clear that traditional gay male culture—that is, subculture—continues to provide queers of all sorts with emotional, aesthetic, even political resources that turn out to be potent, necessary, and irreplaceable. The open and explicit gay male culture produced by gay liberation has not been able to supplant a gay male subculture, grounded in gay identification with non-gay forms, or to substitute for it an original gay male culture grounded in the vicissitudes of gay identity. The impetus driving much gay cultural production still springs less from gay existence than from gay desire.



So, then, have I written a reactionary book? Have I, by insisting on the continuing relevance, power, and indeed wisdom of much traditional gay male subculture, betrayed the revolutionary achievements of gay liberation, rejected the new gay identity it produced, and turned my back on its goals of social and individual transformation, along with its original cultural creations?

If I have often cast a withering glance on post-Stonewall gay iden-

tity, and on the politics, literature, music, and sexuality that derive from it, I have done so less out of personal conviction than out of an experimental attitude, one that consists in testing what initially seemed to me to be a counter-intuitive hypothesis: that the Golden Girls might still matter to us a lot more than Edmund White, that *Desperate Housewives* might prove queerer than *Queer as Folk*.

But I have also been motivated by the shock and disappointment of seeing a revolutionary movement of sexual liberation and political insurgency settle down into a complacent, essentially conservative form of identity politics that seeks less to change the world than to claim a bigger piece of it. Many gay people nowadays seem determined to imitate and to reproduce the most trite, regressive social values of heteronormative culture: family, religion, patriotism, normative gender roles—that venerable trinity of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*. They have also taken up the heterosexual ethic of erotic impoverishment, which lobbies for the benefits of renouncing sexual pleasure. The less sex you have, so this ethic goes, the more meaningful it will be, and what you should want above all in your sexual life is not pleasure but meaning, meaning at the expense of pleasure, or meaning to the exclusion of pleasure. That is the ethic against which gay liberation once led a world-historical rebellion.

Much of the openly gay-themed culture that has emerged since Stonewall continues to share the revolutionary goals of gay liberation. Its originality, artistic experimentation, and sheer brilliance are very far removed from the standard gay identity politics of the mainstream gay movement. But that genuinely inventive gay culture has suffered the same fate as the identity-based culture that emerged in the same period, insofar as both seem to arouse in gay audiences a similar sense of tedium. It is as if contemporary gay people have a hard time distinguishing truly original, innovative queer work from the comparatively trite, politically earnest, in-group cultural productions that you find on the Logo Channel.

My intention has been not to depreciate post-Stonewall gay culture but to champion the forms of social resistance to heteronormativity that much of pre-Stonewall gay culture represented and contin-

ues to represent, while exploring the reasons why so many gay men seem to find the official, parochial, rainbow-flag-draped gay identity-based culture that has replaced it so unsatisfying and deficient. I have wanted to discover the source of so much gay discontent.



That discontent is real, and sometimes the political complaint I have just articulated merely serves as an alibi for gay homophobia. Gay men are highly critical, if not contemptuous, of their artists, writers, and filmmakers, just as they are disdainful of their political leaders. That is why gay male cultural production (to say nothing of gay male politics) is such a thankless affair. Gay men may claim they want to see representations of themselves and their lives, but they often don't like the representations of gay men that gay men produce, or they fail to stay interested in them.

And you can understand their lack of enthusiasm. Gay men don't excite gay men. Gay men have female icons—divas, fashion models, Hollywood stars, and nowadays even female politicians—to identify with. And they have straight male icons—sports heroes, photospread models, stars of the big and small screens, men in uniform—to desire. Either way, they don't need gay men. And they don't need to read novels, watch movies, take classes, see exhibitions, or go to cultural festivals that focus on gay men.

In 1978 the Canadian sociologist Barry D. Adam, whom I have already had occasion to cite, published his doctoral dissertation (which became the first of his many books), called *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life*. A comparative study of Blacks, Jews, lesbians, gay men, concentration camp prisoners, children, and other inmates of "total institutions," it was an early classic of lesbian/gay/queer studies, and it remains worth reading today. Among the coping mechanisms for dealing with social domination that Adam found to be common to the various oppressed groups he studied were what he called the "flight from identity" and "in-group hostility."⁶

Those phrases referred to social and individual strategies by which

members of oppressed groups sought to lessen the personal cost and psychological pain of social rejection. They tried, for example, to escape the social marking responsible for their inferior status by refusing to identify with the group to which they belonged, by showing dislike or contempt for other members of that group—especially for those individuals more indelibly marked than themselves by the stigmatizing signs that identified them as belonging to it—and by shunning contact with people from their own communities.

Adam's account of social domination and its consequences continues to have a lot of explanatory power. Still, as Adam himself would be the first to admit, and as his subsequent work suggests, the vicissitudes of inferiorization and abjection do not entirely explain or exhaust the meaning of the phenomena I have been trying to explore. The contemporary gay repudiation of contemporary gay culture, and the ongoing popularity of suitably queered items appropriated from mainstream, heterosexual culture, cannot be reduced to a mere symptom of internalized homophobia. Nor does the perennial gay preference for camp rereadings of heterosexual culture merely reflect a failure to achieve gay pride or the incurable effects of social domination. On the contrary, the strategic appropriation of straight culture continues to serve vital purposes for gay men, and others, and to provide an important, if implicit, vehicle of social critique and political resistance.

The persistence and popularity of traditional gay male cultural practices more than forty years after Stonewall may indeed reflect the continuation of adverse political conditions, of ongoing experiences of anti-gay oppression, exclusion, social domination, and stigma—but not in the sense that they are simply pathological consequences of social hostility. Rather, as we have seen, they represent both a recognition of the difficult situation of gay male life and a determined response to it, including a categorical rejection of the mainstream social values which demean and devalue gay men.

Nonetheless, I think we need to inquire more closely into the reasons why the open and explicit and gay-themed gay male culture that

gay liberation made possible continues to have such a difficult time finding a gay male constituency. Why do so many gay men continue to worship and to identify with non-gay figures, to prefer cultural representations from which gay men are absent? It would be good to know whether *society is to blame* for the fact that so many gay men seek non-gay alternatives to the vibrant, ambitious, artistically accomplished, diverse, highly energized, and uncompromisingly “out” gay culture that is now available to them . . . just as they sometimes still have trouble desiring other gay men *as* gay men instead of as facsimiles of straight men or specious embodiments of straight masculinity.

Gay liberation, in other words, may still have a lot of work to do.

QUEER FOREVER

And when gay liberation has done its work, what then? Will gay male culture, of the subcultural variety I have described here, wither away? Will it lose its appeal? Will gay men of the future be unable to understand, except in a kind of pitying, embarrassed way, why their forebears who lived in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries found so much meaning, so much delight in heterosexual cultural forms that excluded them, at least insofar as such forms contained no explicit representations of gay men or gay male life?

Is the gay male culture, or subculture, that I have described here the product of homophobia? If it is not itself necessarily homophobic, is it nonetheless the result of oppressive social conditions? Is it rooted in social hostility and rejection? And so when homophobia is finally overcome, when it is a thing of the past, when gay liberation triumphs, when gay people achieve equal rights, social recognition, and acceptance, when we are fully integrated into straight society, when the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality has no greater social significance than the difference between righthandedness and lefthandedness does now—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 Daniel Harris and Andrew Sullivan have claimed. I have disputed their assertions that gay male culture, or subculture, is a thing of the past, that it is obsolete and out of date. But

perhaps their prognostications were not wrong, only premature. Perhaps the day is coming when more favorable social conditions will vindicate their claims. What was a defective analysis of our present may turn out to be an accurate prediction of our future. Time may yet prove them right.

There is good precedent for such an outlook.

People have wondered, for example, 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 (the presidency of Barack Obama, admittedly, makes such a prospect seem harder rather than easier to imagine at the moment). 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?

Any serious attempt to answer those questions would take us well beyond the scope of the present study. But it may be possible to explore them in greater depth with reference to gay culture. For the future of gay culture really does seem to be clouded, and many voices have already heralded its imminent demise. What have yet to be considered are the specific social factors that are putting the survival of gay culture in doubt.



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 massive transformation in the material base of gay life in the United States, and other metropolitan centers, during the past three decades. That transformation has had a profound impact on the shape of gay life and gay 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 HIV/AIDS; and the invention of the Internet.

In order to appreciate the nature of the change and its decisive, far-

reaching effects, we need to recall the conditions under which gay culture emerged in the years immediately preceding those three large-scale developments. 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 particular 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,¹ 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, where new kinds of collective reflection, consciousness-raising, cultural effervescence, and self-constitution could take place. The gay ghettos gave rise, in short, to new forms of life.

The people who established those ghettos were not chiefly middle-class folks. The Castro, the Folsom, and the Polk Street enclaves in San Francisco were not populated by guys who had waited for a job to open up at a downtown law firm or the University of California at Berkeley (though there were plenty of lawyers and academics). The new urban migrants were mostly people from modest backgrounds who, in the relative prosperity that marked the late '60s and early '70s, could find the same menial jobs in California that they had held in Iowa or Alabama. They saved up their money for months or years and eventually moved to a big city, where reasonable rents in the gay neighborhoods that were forming in former ethnic, working-class, or

postindustrial areas made it possible for people of limited means to support themselves working as waiters or nurses while still inhabiting a gay urban center—though they might have to share an apartment with several roommates in order to split the rent. Even so, they could make gay life, gay sex, and gay culture the center of their existence, and they could build a life around those new possibilities. Many people did: it was the gay equivalent of the Exodus.

And 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 cell phones 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, especially in sexual institutions such as the bars and the baths, you were bound to meet all sorts of people you would never have encountered in your own social circles, 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. You couldn't select the folks you were going to associate with according to your own criteria for the kind of men you approved of or thought you wanted as buddies. You had to deal with a wide range of people of different social backgrounds, physical types, appearances, gender styles, social classes, sexual tastes and practices, and sometimes (in the case of White folks) different races. Which meant that you were exposed to many different ideas about what it meant to be gay and to many different styles of gay life. You might not have wanted to be exposed to them, but you didn't have much choice.

"I still remember the terrifying, giddy excitement of my first forays into gay pubs and clubs," writes June Thomas in an extraordinary tribute to the role of the gay bar in gay history and community, "the

thrill of discovering other lesbians and gay men in all their beautiful, dreary, fabulous, sleazy variety.”² 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. Their old attitudes were liable to be shaken up.

The sheer mix of people in the new gay social worlds favored a radicalization of gay male life. It lent weight and authority to the more evolved, sophisticated, experienced, and radical members of the local community. And so it tended to align the coming-out process with a gradual detachment from traditional, heterosexual, conservative, mainstream notions about the proper way to live. Although guys who looked like regular guys, who displayed an old-fashioned, standard masculinity, were often prized as erotic objects, many of the new recruits to the gay ghettos found themselves gradually argued out of their old-fashioned, rustic, parochial, unenlightened views—their “hang-ups” and their “unliberated” attitudes—including their adherence to rigid gender styles, inappropriate romantic fantasies, restrictive sexual morality, political conservatism, prudery, and other small-town values. Psychic decolonization was the order of the day: gay men needed to identify, and to jettison, the alien, unsuitable notions that the ambient culture of heterosexuality had implanted in their minds.

Many gay men rejected the radical ideology of gay male life, to be sure, and many people formed their own subgroups within gay communities according to their sexual tastes, gender styles, identifications with a particular social class, political sympathies, morals, values, interests, and habits. There was a great variety of outlooks and ways of life. But most of the new inhabitants of the gay ghettos shared the experience of taking part in a new, exhilarating, and unprecedented social experiment: the formation of a community around homosexual desire, gay sex, and gay identity.³



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 massive 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. In San Francisco, the planning process began in the 1950s. By the 1960s, it was well under way, though its implementation was delayed by a decade of political conflict during the 1970s.

The AIDS epidemic facilitated the ultimate triumph of urban redevelopment by removing or weakening a number of social actors—both individuals and communities—opposed to the developers' plans to rezone, reconfigure, raze, and rebuild entire neighborhoods. In the end, the malign coincidence of the HIV/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 formerly been centers of gay life and gay culture in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. That destruction has had vast consequences for gay communities, especially for radical sexual subcultures. Ultimately, it has come to affect how all gay people live.⁴

AIDS decimated a couple of generations of gay men. By the end of 2005, there had been over 550,000 deaths from AIDS in the United States. More than 300,000 of those deaths were among men who have sex with men.⁵ In the San Francisco Bay Area alone, tens of thousands of gay men died, including some 17,000 in the city of San Francisco itself.⁶ At the same time, the waves of gentrification that contributed to the transformation of gay neighborhoods resulted in an economic boom in inner-city real estate, as suburbanites began to return to the newly gentrified inner cities, with the result that property values in U.S. urban centers skyrocketed.

The gay men of modest incomes who had populated the gay ghettos and who later died of AIDS were often not property owners. And those who did own their own homes often had no living heirs or surviving lovers to pass them on to. As real estate prices climbed, the vacancies left by AIDS were not filled by new waves of working-class gay migrants. The former gay ghettos, now that they had been transformed from modest, ethnic, or working-class neighborhoods into stylish urban enclaves, attracted people with serious money who didn't object to the dwindling presence of gay people and who could afford the rapidly rising rents—or who could spend the considerable sums now required to purchase residential property.⁷ So the gay population was slowly diluted and dispersed—as data from the 2010 Census has confirmed.⁸ As a result, the entire social infrastructure of gay male life gradually deteriorated.

That has had a devastating effect on gay culture. Without significant gay populations concentrated in local neighborhoods, the power base of the gay movement in specific municipalities was significantly weakened.⁹ The economic base of the gay media was also much reduced: in one city after another, local gay newspapers went out of business. Those papers had provided a forum for political discussions. They had facilitated the exchange of views about the needs of communities, the implementation of local policies, the politics of sex, the threat of AIDS and what to do about it. And they encouraged the mobilization of gay people around various issues affecting them where

they lived. The gay press had also provided a focus for cultural life, for the promotion of new plays, musicals, art shows, and performances targeted at small-scale gay audiences. Similarly, gay newspapers and bookstores had publicized emerging work in gay history and queer theory, interpreting its breakthroughs to the community in a language that interested readers could understand.

The dispersal of gay populations and the decline of gay neighborhoods meant the disappearance of the material and economic base of the gay press. Local gay newspapers were now replaced by national, highly capitalized glossy magazines aimed at a niche market defined by a delocalized gay identity. The new gay glossies were not about to cover political debates of purely local interest, much less critique the market category of gay identity on which their business depended. In an effort to appeal to everyone, to a national public of prosperous gay individuals who could afford the products advertised in their pages (which paid the costs of staff salaries, printing, and distribution), these publications became increasingly uncontroversial, commercial, and lightweight, eventually turning into the gay equivalent of in-flight magazines.



This 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, which had already been on the wane, now became increasingly dispensable.¹⁰ 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.

The Internet has completed the destruction of the non-virtual gay commercial infrastructure. "In 2007, *Entrepreneur* magazine put gay bars on its list of businesses facing extinction, along with record stores and pay phones," June Thomas observes. "And it's not just that gays

are hanging out in straight bars; some are eschewing bars altogether and finding partners online or via location-based smartphone apps like Grindr, Qrushr, and Scruff. Between 2005 and 2011, the number of gay and lesbian bars and clubs in gay-travel-guide publisher Damron's database decreased by 12.5 percent, from 1,605 to 1,405.¹¹ The decline was even steeper before 2005. Thomas estimates that "the number of gay bars [in major cities] has declined from peaks in the 1970s. . . . In 1973, Gayyellow Pages placed 118 gay bars in San Francisco; now there are 33. Manhattan's peak came in 1978, with 86; the current tally is 44."¹² Meanwhile, "Grindr launched in March 2009 and currently has more than two million users, one-half of them in the United States. Eight thousand guys sign up for the service every day."¹³ No wonder Thomas asks, in dismay, "Could the double whammy of mainstreaming and technology mean that gay bars are doomed?"¹⁴

The replacement of gay bars by online social-networking sites means that you can now select the gay people you want to associate with before you meet them or come to know them. You can pick your contacts from among the kinds of people you already approve of, according to your unreflective, unreconstructed criteria. You don't have to expose yourself to folks who might have more experience of gay life than you do or who might challenge your unexamined ideas about politics. You can hang on to your unliberated, heterosexist, macho prejudices, your denial, your fear, and you can find other people who share them with you. You can continue to subscribe to your ideal model of a good homosexual: someone virtuous, virile, self-respecting, dignified, "non-scene," non-promiscuous, 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. It also eliminates the material preconditions for a community-based, politically and socially progressive media culture, and it favors instead the growth of glossy lifestyle magazines and cable channels, targeted at a national niche market, grounded in a canonical, official, mainstreamed gay identity, and hostile to progressive intellectual, political, and aesthetic expression, especially to forms of reflection and critique.

Under these conditions, the agenda of gay politics and gay life is 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.

That explains a lot about the character and preoccupations of contemporary gay politics. When gay people are deprived of a common, communal existence, of a social world of their own, the keynote of gay politics ceases to be resistance to heterosexual oppression and becomes, instead, assimilation—that is, accommodation to the mainstream, the drive to social acceptance and integration into society as a whole. It's all about the need to fit in, to adapt yourself to the locality in which you already happen to be living and working. Issues like gay military service or marriage equality, which had formerly been about access to benefits, distributive justice, and the removal of discriminatory barriers, now become struggles over the symbolism of social belonging. They are reframed to center around social recognition, the definition of citizenship, the meaning of patriotism, the practice of religious worship, the idea of family. There are still important material demands behind such struggles for inclusion, but they tend to be subordinated, at least in the rhetoric of the movement, to the goals of assimilation and conformity.

In such a context, gay culture seems an increasingly bizarre, insub-

stantial, intangible, nebulous, irrelevant notion. 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. It impedes the achievement of assimilation. No wonder we keep asking, with barely suppressed impatience, why gay culture doesn't simply disappear. Surely social acceptance and integration will spell the end of gay culture. Since gay people are no longer so oppressed, there is little reason for them to band together in separate social groups, let alone to form distinct cultural communities. The assimilation of gay people into straight society has put an end to all that. Gay culture is a vestige from an earlier time. It is archaic, obsolete. Gay culture has no future.



These predictions, I believe, overlook a crucial consideration. Social acceptance, the decriminalization of gay sex, the legalization of homosexual social and sexual institutions, the removal of barriers to same-sex marriage, to military service, to the priesthood and psychoanalysis, along with other previously off-limits professions, should not be confused with the end of sexual normativity, let alone the collapse of heterosexual dominance.

Some gay people, to be sure, may see social equality as tacitly implying an affirmation of the essential normality of lesbian and gay folks. That is indeed what it signifies to many people, straight as well as gay, for better or for worse. And of course the release of gay people from social oppression, as well as the breakdown of the once-universal consensus about the fundamental pathology of homosexuality, which served to justify that oppression, represent absolutely momentous developments, of wide scope and astonishing rapidity, whose significance cannot be overstated. In fact, the gay movement (as David Alderson argues) may be the only progressive social movement from the 1960s to have prevailed, to have consolidated its successes, and to have realized some of its most far-fetched aims (such as gay

marriage)—despite the rise and eventual triumph of the New Right during the past thirty-five years. Nonetheless, 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. Not only have gay versions of radical politics, radical sex, and radical styles of life fallen out of fashion among us; 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.¹⁵ We are trying to beat heterosexuals at their own game.

Mere normality no longer seems to satisfy assimilationist-minded gay people. Normality itself is no longer *normal enough* to underwrite gay people's sense of self-worth. 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 gay Washington-based political lobbying organization, 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.’’¹⁶ Electing a gay president would change nothing, apparently: nobody would be able to tell the difference. It would be a “non-event.” (In which case, why bother?)

A particularly striking example of this attitude was provided by Patrick Califia-Rice in a cover story for the Queer Issue of *The Village Voice* on June 27, 2000. In an article pointedly entitled “Family Values,” Califia-Rice (the former lesbian writer Pat Califia) gave an account of queer parenthood that emphasized its lack of queerness. The article’s header succinctly summarizes what makes Califia-Rice’s family so queer: “Two Dads with a Difference: Neither of Us Was Born Male.” But the opening line insists that this difference makes no difference. “Our mornings follow a set routine,” Califia-Rice begins, “that any parent with a high-needs baby would recognize.”¹⁷

The *Voice* announces its Queer Issue with a programmatic banner headline on the cover: “Don’t Call Us Gay.” But Califia-Rice’s article could just as easily have been subtitled “Don’t Call Us Queer.”

As Califia-Rice takes care to indicate, both he and his male partner are “transgendered men (female-to-male or FTM), and my boyfriend is the mother of my child” (48). According to the article, Califia-Rice met his partner, Matt, when they were both still women and lesbians. They began a “torrid affair,” but Califia-Rice was in another relationship at the time and broke off the affair with Matt; when they got back together, three years later, “Matt had been on testosterone for several years, had chest surgery and a beard. . . . Our relationship was a scandal. We were generally perceived as a fag/dyke couple rather than two gay/bi men in a daddy/boy relationship, which was how we saw ourselves” (48). Soon Califia-Rice began the process of transitioning from female to male.

Meanwhile, Matt Califia-Rice, who wanted a child and didn’t think he would be allowed to adopt one, “had been unable to take testosterone for a couple of years because of side effects like blinding migraines.” Doctors informed him that it was still “biologically possi-

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VOICE

THE QUEER ISSUE: DON'T CALL US GAY



Portraits of
Radical Lives
(p45)

TRANS GAYS
PATRICK
AND MATT
CALIFIA-RICE
WITH THEIR
SON, BLAKE

27 Cover of *The Village Voice*, 45, no. 25, June 27, 2000:
"Trans Dads Patrick and Matt Calafia-Rice with their son, Blake."

ble” for him to conceive a child and give birth to one, and the couple “found three men who loved us but didn’t love children” to donate their sperm. Patrick and Matt’s son was born a year and a half later (48).

It would be hard to imagine a queerer family: two same-sex parents of different generations, who form a paederastic couple; both of them men, but neither of them born male; one of whom gave birth to a child *after* transitioning from female to male; and a son with three possible biological fathers and no positively identifiable one. It is quite understandable that Patrick Califia-Rice, who is painfully aware of the hostility and intolerance that a non-standard family such as his provokes, should want to play down its queerness and champion its ordinariness. He may have been fortified in that impulse by the support he received from his and his partner’s “birth families and straight neighbors,” in shocking contrast to the outrage expressed by “a handful of straight-identified homophobic FTMs online who started calling Matt by his girl name, because real men don’t get pregnant. One of these bigots even said it would be better for our baby to be born dead than be raised by two people who are ‘confused about their gender’” (48).

Nonetheless, what is striking about this testimony is its insistence on, precisely, “family values.” The cover of the *Voice* announces that its special issue will contain “Portraits of Radical Lives,” and indeed it is difficult to picture a life more radical than the one described by Califia-Rice. “Our family configuration is bound to be controversial,” he acknowledges, “even among lesbians and gay men, especially those who believe mainstreaming is the best strategy for securing our civil rights.” But Califia-Rice’s article engages in its own kind of mainstreaming. Not only does it celebrate the possibility of “enjoy[ing] a place at the table” (48), evoking the title of a notorious book by right-wing gay polemicist Bruce Bawer.¹⁸ It also contains lyrical evocations of the banality of coupled domesticity, adorned with sentimental commonplaces that most heterosexual journalists nowadays might well be embarrassed to publish:

Since the baby arrived, there are precious few moments when Matt and I can meet each other alone. The occasions when lust can break through the fence are even more rare. We are oddly shy during these adult-only interludes, as if becoming parents has made us strange to one another. The house is sticky. Piles of clean laundry that we can't find time to put away topple over and get mixed up with the dirty clothes. Yet we continue to be loving and kind with each other and with Blake. Matt especially is a monument of patience. I am often struck dumb by his profound and consistently deep love for our son. (46)

Move over, John Updike!

Patrick Califia-Rice had good reason to defend the ordinariness, the basic humanity of his existence, surrounded as he was by enemies gay, straight, and trans. His over-compensatory rhetoric is entirely understandable. What makes it significant is that it represents an unusually revealing instance of a far more general tendency—a tendency on the part of many gay people today to insist on being not just “virtually normal,” as Andrew Sullivan used to claim, but utterly banal.¹⁹ The effect of this insistence is to erase the specificity and distinctiveness of queer life, thereby denying its ability to contribute anything of value to the world we live in.

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 openly gay New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who had broken the news of the state legislature's suspenseful final vote during a press conference by New York mayor Michael Bloomberg. Quinn declared, according to the AP, that “the decision [would] change everything for her and her partner.”

What did Quinn mean by “everything”? The changes she went on to enumerate 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 re-

moval of legal barriers to the formation and preservation of intimate relationships. Any of those changes might well have qualified as momentous. Quinn, however, 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.”²⁰

Is the moment Quinn describes really the one we have all been so urgently waiting for? Is *this* the glorious culmination of a century and a half of political struggle for gay freedom and gay pride? And how is this new and “totally different day,” which sounds a lot like heterosexual business-as-usual, actually all that different from the day that went before it? Is the whole purpose of gay politics, or gay culture, to return gay people to the fold of normal middle-class heterosexual family life, with all its obligatory rites and rituals—to enable us to reproduce the worst social features, the most ghastly clichés of heterosexuality?



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. Social equality for gay people will not in and of itself make the world gay. It will not enable us to attain a queerer world more in line with our desires, our wishes, and our fantasies. It should therefore not be confused with, nor will it lead to, the erasure of gay subjective specificity or cultural difference.

Gayness would still be a deviation with respect to the cultural

norm, the ways in which the majority of people live or expect to live, and the socio-cultural forms which their lives take or aspire to take.

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 social world in which heterosexuality retains the force of a norm. In fact, heterosexuality is the name for a system of norms that goes far beyond the relatively harmless sexual practice of intercourse between men and women.

"The received wisdom, in straight culture," as Michael Warner describes it,

is that all of its different norms line up, that one is synonymous with the others. If you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual, identify with other heterosexuals, trust in the superiority of heterosexuality no matter how tolerant you might wish to be, and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence. Heterosexuality is often a name for this entire package, even though attachment to the other sex is only one element.²¹

This system of norms may not describe how people actually behave. It's a system of *norms*, after all, not an empirical description of social existence. But it does define the expectations that many people have for the way they and other people live. It implies that "gender norms, [erotic] object-orientation norms, norms of sexual practice, and norms of subjective identification" are congruent and stable.²² "If you deviate at any point from this program," Warner adds, "you do so at your own cost. And one of the things straight culture hates most is any sign that the different parts of the package might be recombined in an infinite number of ways. But experience shows that this is just what tends to happen. . . . No wonder [heterosexuality] needs so much terror to induce compliance."²³

Because, as Warner emphasizes, sexual desire for a person of a dif-

ferent sex is “only one element” of this larger package, heterosexuality can cease to be an all-powerful *sexual* norm and still exert normative power. In fact, as a specifically sexual norm, heterosexuality seems to be loosening up a bit. It is gradually becoming less unbending and inflexible. It may even be losing its monopoly on acceptable sexual behavior. But for the survival of gay culture, what matters is not the normativity of heterosexuality as a sexual practice. What matters is the larger package—the fact that heterosexuality remains a social and cultural norm, that heterosexuality retains the power of *heteronormativity*.²⁴

Heteronormativity is a system of norms connected with a particular form of life, a form of life that comprises a number of interrelated elements, all of them fused into a single style of social existence. That system of norms does not so much describe how people live or ought to live as it defines a horizon of expectations for human life, a set of ideals to which people aspire and against which they measure the value of their own and other people's lives.

According to those norms, the dignity and value of human life find expression in a particular form of intimate, coupled existence. Such an existence, in order to be brought into being, requires a stable domestic life indivisibly shared with one other person of more or less the same age, but of a different gender and a different sex (the one that person was born with, subject to no modifications), in an exclusive, dyadic, loving, non-commercial arrangement that is conducted in a jointly inhabited home space, established and consolidated by the ownership of property and other kinds of wealth that can be transmitted to future generations. Intimacy, love, friendship, solidarity, sex, reproduction, child-raising, generational succession, caretaking, mutual support, shared living space, shared finances, property ownership, and private life go together and should not be parceled out among different relationships or otherwise dispersed. They should all take place under one roof. They combine to constitute a single, uniquely valuable, and more or less compulsory social form. Ideally, you should have all of those components together—or not at

all. (This is what Michael Warner calls the “totalizing tendency” of heteronormativity.)²⁵

Linked to this single form of life are models of appropriate community membership, of public speech and self-representation, political participation, freedom, family life, class identity, education, consumption and desire, social display, public culture, racial and national fantasy, health and bodily bearing, trust and truth.²⁶ All are associated with heterosexuality as a sexual practice and preference. But this heteronormative system can accommodate some minor variations in sexual preference without undergoing any significant alteration in its basic structure—and without imperiling the social dominance of the single form of life in which heteronormativity finds its most powerful and imposing expression.

Heteronormativity can therefore survive the end of the monopoly of heterosexuality on sexual life. Just as you can participate in gay culture without being homosexual, so you can participate in heteronormativity without being straight. Gay people nowadays often do participate in heteronormativity in this sense—either because they dearly want to or because they find themselves pressured to conform to the single model of dignified human intimacy that heteronormativity upholds. In neither case is it a matter of sex; in both cases it is a matter of cultural norms. For what heteronormativity involves is not only the normativity of a specific sexual practice, but also the obviousness and self-evidence of a style of social existence which carries with it an unquestioned prestige and normative power.

Heteronormativity represents the privileging of a normative horizon of expectation for human flourishing. It generates an ethics of personal and collective reproduction, implying an orientation toward a future. It yields an aesthetics of social being, which attaches to the shape of a proper life and gives it beauty and value. It embodies an imaginative structure that imparts meaning to the form of individual existence. There is also the dimension of heteronormativity that Warner calls “reprosexuality—the interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal iden-

tity” into a style of life that produces “a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission” and gives rise to an ethos of “self-transcendence” as the basis of human dignity.²⁷

The dominance of heteronormativity depends on the pervasiveness and inescapability of that ethos—much more than it does on compulsory heterosexuality as a sexual practice. Just as gay culture is more taboo nowadays than gay sex, so it is the culture of heterosexuality—what we call heteronormativity—that currently provides the strongest guarantee of heterosexuality’s social legitimacy. Social equality for gay men and other sexual outlaws, should we ever achieve it, will not in itself overthrow heterosexuality’s cultural and normative dominance, or the single form of intimacy it produces and imposes. So gay equality alone will not spell the end of heteronormativity and its social ramifications. Heteronormativity may well be qualified, restricted, limited, and possibly undermined or weakened to some extent that is now hard to predict. But the model of human life that it represents, and that it promotes as a horizon of aspiration for every proper human subject, will not disappear with the legalization of gay marriage or the ability of non-heterosexuals to serve openly in the U.S. military.

That is why queer politics is so much more far-reaching, so much more transformative than the politics of gay rights. “Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world,” Warner observes, “queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts.”²⁸ Queer politics takes aim at the very heart of our modernity.



Gay men, like all queers, are necessarily detached or alienated, at least to some degree, from heteronormative culture, as well as from the received forms of personal and social life that heteronormativity fash-

ions, elevates, and normalizes, rendering them “mainstream.” Gay life does not easily accord with the basic premises of heteronormativity. And to the extent that the social protocols of normal or heterosexual life continue to be alien to gay men, gay men cannot take their world for granted in the same way that straight people can.

In that sense, gay men are also alienated from “nature,” which is to say from social definitions of the natural. They remain at a certain distance from what passes for innocent, spontaneous, natural feeling, from the kind of feeling that seems natural—insofar as it is completely at home within heteronormative social conventions, and insofar as it fits those conventions and does not challenge or violate them. Unlike heterosexuals with normal desires—who (in the words of gay poet Frank Bidart) “live as if, though what they / desire is entirely what they are / expected to desire, it is they who desire”—gay men cannot mistake their desire for a confirmation and ratification of their subjective sovereignty. They do not experience their desire as proof of their human agency, as a vindication of the naturalness of their human nature, as an expression of their spontaneous alignment with the natural, given world.²⁹ They cannot perceive their instincts, their emotions, their longings and lusts as the default settings of a universal human nature, as obvious, self-evident, and completely in harmony with the way that things just naturally are—with human nature *tout court*.

Many heterosexuals are also alienated from heterosexual culture, from the culture of heterosexuality. Much of what I have written here about male homosexuality—its status as a particular social form, its performativity, its inauthenticity, the inability of a social identity to capture the desire that defines it—could also be said about heterosexuality. The difference is not one of social vicissitudes or actual degrees of “naturalness,” but one of consciousness. Straight men have to learn to perform one or another version of heterosexual masculinity, and they may well have a consciousness of the inauthenticity of the form—they may well find it a constraining imposition on their spontaneous instincts. But they do not often have a *conscious* conscious-

ness of their social being as a performance. Why not? Because the culture of heterosexuality, which insists on its own naturalness, encourages straight people to endow their desires and their ways of living with a self-evident taken-for-grantedness. The ideological weight of normality both impedes an active awareness of the social specificity of heterosexual forms of life—it prevents heterosexuals from thinking of heterosexuality as a profound enigma that calls for painstaking investigation—and warns heterosexuals against inquiring too deeply into heterosexuality as a specific social form. Indeed, it discourages them from inquiring into social forms in general.

Queers, however, are forced to engage in at least a modicum of critical reflection on the world as it is given. As Michael Warner says, “Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer.”³⁰ That practical social reflection gives rise to a second-order processing and reprocessing of immediate experience. Queer people’s distance on the social world (as defined and naturalized by heteronorms), and the acutely *conscious* consciousness they have of the different forms in which life presents itself to different people, issue inevitably in an irreducible critical attitude.

The queer reprocessing of personal and social experience turns out, in other words, to be productive. It is in fact essential to the arts—to literature, to creative and critical thought, to cultural production in general. The kind of practical social reflection and second-order processing that queers do instinctively, necessarily, is of course available to anyone, and it is characteristic of every artist, every stylist, every cook, and every theologian, whether gay or straight. But it is an activity to which gay men are particularly given because of the particularity of their social situation.³¹

Which may be why there are so many gay men in the arts and in various cultural professions. No doubt “the great majority of gays,” as Edmund White wrote in 1980, “are as reassuringly philistine as the bulk of straights” (one of the benefits of gay liberation, he argued, would be to liberate “many talentless souls” from the compulsion to produce bad art and free them to become plumbers and electrical engineers).³² But the point is not that gay men themselves are innately

“artistic,” even if all of them are alienated, to some extent, from unprocessed experience (which might account for why those gay men who are *not* innately artistic nonetheless feel a queer compulsion to produce art, as White complained). The point is that homosexuality, in addition to representing a departure from nature, or a resistance to what passes for the natural, also demonstrates a consistent affinity with culture. Homosexuality has a particular, special relation to culture. Its very existence dramatizes the workings of the cultural, rather than the natural, order. It is innately, necessarily on the side of culture.

For what is culture if not a turning aside from nature, from the givenness of the world, especially from the givenness of the social world, from the self-evidence of human existence and everything about it that we unreflectively take for granted? The conscious consciousness of (some) gay men is itself the essence of that *clinamen*, that swerve away from the gravitational pull of the obvious, of the way things just are. Sexual difference or dissidence is likely to be the starting point for a more categorical, more conscious, more programmatic deviation from nature and from everything in the social world that passes for natural.

“Whenever speech or movement or behavior or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world,” Susan Sontag wrote nearly fifty years ago, “we may look at them as having a ‘style.’”³³ Without style, or form, there is no such thing as culture. Sontag’s “deviation” is the very ground of culture, then—its origin and its definition. Only a departure from the given can bring culture into existence, and can yield the distance and detached reflection necessary to cultural activity.

In a certain sense, homosexuality *is* culture.

Which is why society needs us.



Where would we be without the insights, the impertinence, the unfazed critical intelligence provided by gay subculture? And where would we be without its conscious consciousness, its awareness of so

much about the way we live our lives that is particular to specific social forms? Without that alienated perspective, those social forms would pass for obvious, or natural—which is to say, they would remain invisible, and the shape of our existence would escape us.

And what kind of spiritual freedom would heterosexuals achieve without the benefit of the detached, alienated perspective on their world, and its socially naturalized values, that gay male subculture—now that it is no longer secret—affords them? How otherwise would they stay honest? Without the benefit of various queer cultures—of the queerness of culture itself, of the queerness that *is* culture—how would heterosexuals acquire an understanding of the protocols and priorities of the heteronormative world in which they remain immersed?

Which points to a final paradox. It may be heterosexuals, nowadays, who appreciate, and who need, gay male culture more than gay men do themselves.



We will be queer forever.

Gay kids still grow up, for the most part, in heterosexual families and in heteronormative culture. That is not going to change to any great extent. And even kids who do not grow up in straight families are still exposed, to an overwhelming degree, to heterosexual cultural forms. Heterosexual culture remains the first culture we experience, and our subjectivities, our modes of feeling and expression, our sense of difference are all bound to take shape within the context and framework of heterosexual culture.

Gay men, as Sartre wrote sixty years ago, avail themselves simultaneously of two different systems of reference.³⁴ That is because of the typical social situation in which gay male subjectivity originates and in which gay male cultural practices assume their initial form: the situation of growing up and being raised by heterosexual parents in a normatively and notionally, if not actually, heterosexual environment. From our earliest years, many of us are asked to act in ways

that are at odds with the way we feel and the way we instinctively respond to the established social order. We are called to subjectivity by a demand to be inauthentic. We are required by the social vicissitudes of our very existence to *play a role* that involves faking our own subjectivity.

Those social conditions have great explanatory power for the phenomena we have been studying here. The formation of gay male subjectivity in an originary experience of inauthenticity defines for many gay men what it is to be gay. It accounts for the doubleness of gay consciousness, for that hypersensitivity to the artificial nature of semiotic systems—a hypersensitivity which expresses itself so distinctively in camp and which generates the specific battery of hermeneutic techniques that gay men have evolved for exposing the artifice of social meaning and for spinning its codes and signifiers in ironic, sophisticated, defiant, inherently theatrical ways.³⁵ And so it conduces to the production of the gay cultural forms and styles with which we have become familiar.

So long as queer kids continue to be born into heterosexual families and into a society that is normatively, notionally heterosexual, and so long as they remain alienated from heteronormative social forms, they will have to devise their own non-standard relation to heterosexual culture. And they will have to find ways of understanding, receiving, and relating to heterosexual culture that express or condense their lack of subjective fit with its protocols. Straight culture will always be our first culture, and what we do with it will always establish a certain template for later, queer relations to standard cultural forms. 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 at least for a *very* long time. And we'd better hope it doesn't. For what is at stake is not just gay culture. It is culture as a whole.

NOTES

1. *Diary of a Scandal*

1. Matthew S. Schwartz, "Gay Course Penetrates U-M Curriculum," *Michigan Review*, April 12–30, 2000. Matt later requested, and obtained, my permission to audit the course; his commitment to the Men's Glee Club ultimately took priority over it, queerly enough.
2. Those looking for pointers about how to effect such conversions should consult the not entirely tongue-in-cheek advice offered by [John] Mitzel, "How to Proselytize," *Fag Rag* 6 (Fall 1973): 11.
3. See Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–135, who formulates the concept of "a structure of feeling" in order to describe a dynamic mode of social formation that mediates between the subject and culture, thereby blending "psychology" and "aesthetics." Williams presents his concept, tellingly, as a social analogue of the literary term "style" and associates it with minority formation.
4. See June Thomas, "The Gay Bar: Is It Dying?" *Slate.com*, June 27, 2011, www.slate.com/id/2297604/ (accessed July 11, 2011): "Unlike other minorities, queers don't learn about our heritage from our birth families. Bars are our Hebrew school, our CCD, our cotillion. As activist pioneer Dick Leitsch wrote in *Gay* magazine in September 1970: 'Gay bars . . . teach and enforce the ethics and rules of gay life and pass on traditions and gay culture.'"
5. For a comprehensive example, see Stephen Colbert's segment on "How to Ruin Same-Sex Marriages," www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/343140/august-05-2010/how-to-ruin-same-sex-marriages (accessed August 11, 2010).
6. "Armstrong Successfully Turns Student Body Gay," *Every Three Weekly* 12.4 (October 2010): 1, 11.

7. Isabelle Loynes, "Having a Stroke Made Me Gay," *Daily Mirror*, September 22, 2011, www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2011/09/22/having-a-stroke-made-me-gay-115875-23436853/ (accessed September 24, 2011). The "before" and "after" photos alone make this article worth consulting.
8. For humorous testimony to the widespread, taken-for-granted belief in male homosexuality as a cultural orientation, see Freeman Hall, *Stuff that Makes a Gay Heart Weep: A Definitive Guide to the Loud and Proud Dislikes of Millions* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2010).
9. C. G. Jung, "Psychological Aspects of the Mother Complex," *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, vol. 9, pt. 1, of Jung, *Collected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 86–87, para. 164, as quoted and cited by Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 243. James J. Gifford observes that "artistic temperament . . . is frequently seen as a homosexual signal" in the pioneering work of Edward Irenaeus Stevenson, both in his 1906 novel *Imre* and in his monumental *summa* of 1908, *The Intersexes*; see Gifford's Introduction to Edward Prime-Stevenson, *Imre*, ed. James J. Gifford (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003), 20.
10. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first publ. 1972), 29 (my emphasis).
11. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002, 2004), xvii, 257. Florida often writes as if it is the presence of gay people in a city that correlates with the potential for economic growth, but in fact his claim is based on data gathered from the 1990 U.S. Census, which revealed only the existence of households composed of "unmarried partners" of the same sex, as he acknowledges (pp. 255, 333). So it is actually not the presence of *gay people* but of *gay couples*, which may mean lesbian couples, that is a good sign for future economic development, though Florida never says this. To be fair, Florida went on to supplement that 1990 Census data with figures from the 2000 Census, which did collect information about the sexual orientation of individuals.
12. *Ibid.*, 256–260, xvii–xviii, 294, 296.
13. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), 8.
14. See the exhibition catalogue, which features both gay and non-gay figures venerated by gay men: *Gay Icons* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2009).
15. I'm not making up that bit about gay cars. For a list of models supposedly favored by gay people, see the notorious article by Alex Williams, "Gay by Design, or a Lifestyle Choice?" *New York Times*, Automotive Section, April 12, 2007.
16. For a fuller version of this plea for an impersonal, non-individualizing, non-psychologizing approach to the study of the human subject, see David M. Hal-

- perin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).
17. On lesbian cinematic spectatorship, see Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); also Valerie Traub, “The Ambiguities of ‘Lesbian’ Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)articulations of *Black Widow*,” in *Body Guards: The Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 305–328; Judith Mayne, “Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship,” *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 103–135; Ann Pellegrini, “Unnatural Affinities: Me and Judy at the Lesbian Bar,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 65 = 22.2 (2007): 127–133; Lisa Henderson, “Love and Fit,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 67 = 23.1 (2008): 172–177; and Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). See, further, Terry Castle, “In Praise of Brigitte Fassbaender (A Musical Emanation),” *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 200–238, 268–273. On the relations between gay male and female, feminist, and lesbian spectatorship, see Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
 18. I refer here to the brilliant, though as yet unpublished, work by my former student Emma Crandall. Publish it, Emma!
 19. Compare Brian Larkin, “Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities,” in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, ed. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 350–378, who does not discuss gay audiences in particular; Gayatri Gopinath, “Bollywood/Hollywood: Queer Cinematic Representation and the Politics of Translation,” *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 93–130, 208–213.
 20. See, for example, Richard Parker, *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality, and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Niko Besnier, “Transgenderism, Locality, and the Miss Galaxy Beauty Pageant in Tonga,” *American Ethnologist* 29.3 (2002): 534–566; Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); William L. Leap and Tom Boellstorff, eds., *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*; Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); William J. Spurlin,

Imperialism within the Margins: Queer Representation and the Politics of Culture in Southern Africa (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Ricardo L. Ortiz, *Cultural Erotics in Cuban America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Fran Martin, Peter A. Jackson, Mark McLelland, and Audrey Yue, eds., *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

21. George Archibald, "'How To Be Gay' Course Draws Fire at Michigan," *Washington Times*, August 18, 2003, A1.
22. I have speculated at length about the reasons for the panic that perennially surrounds the male instruction of boys. See my essay "Deviant Teaching," *Michigan Feminist Studies* 16 (2002): 1–29; reprinted, with revisions, in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 144–165.
23. Here, for the record, is the complete text of the press release.

AFA-MICHIGAN URGES CANCELLATION OF U of M CLASS "HOW TO BE GAY"

LANSING—The American Family Association of Michigan Wednesday urged Gov. John Engler, the Legislature, and the University of Michigan Board of Regents to push for cancellation of a class scheduled for the University of Michigan's fall semester entitled, "How To Be Gay: Male Homosexuality and Initiation."

UM's Fall 2000 catalogue says the course—offered by Professor David Halperin—"will examine the general topic of the role that initiation plays in the formation of gay identity . . . [and] . . . the course itself will constitute an experiment in the very process of initiation that it hopes to understand."

AFA-Michigan President Gary Glenn, Midland—in a written statement e-mailed Wednesday to the governor, members of the House and Senate appropriations committees, U.M. President Lee C. Bollinger, and the U.M. Board of Regents—said "the proposed course, which openly admits its purpose is to recruit and 'initiate' teenagers into the homosexual lifestyle, is already national news and a source of embarrassment to Michigan, its citizens, and our university system."

"UM actually wants to force Michigan taxpayers to pay for a class to openly recruit and teach teenagers how to engage in a lifestyle of high-risk behavior that is not only illegal but many believe immoral, behavior that further increases the burden on taxpayers to pay for its public health consequences," Glenn wrote.

"Rather than 'experiment' in recruiting and 'initiating' our teenagers into

the homosexual lifestyle, Professor Halperin should tell students the truth, that homosexual behavior will make them 8.6 times more likely to catch a venereal disease, with a 1-in-10 chance of acquiring the potentially fatal HIV virus,” he said. “UM may as well force taxpayers to pay for teaching students how to play Russian Roulette.” (See Center for Disease Control study at: <<http://www.cdc.gov/epo/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4835a1.htm>> <www.cdc.gov/epo/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4835a1.htm>.)

“On behalf of Michigan families whose tax dollars and children are at stake, AFA-Michigan urges you to do everything in your power to stop this outrage before it becomes a reality this fall,” Glenn wrote.

He said, however, that just the proposal of a class on “How To Be Gay,” and especially Professor Halperin’s description of it in the course catalogue, makes an important concession in the ongoing debate over homosexual behavior.

“If such a renowned expert says you need a course from the University of Michigan to learn ‘how to be gay,’ then it’s obvious that high-risk homosexual behavior is a ‘learned’ lifestyle that is a matter of choice, not genetics,” he said.

Halperin wrote in UM’s Fall 2000 course catalogue: “Just because you happen to be a gay man doesn’t mean that you don’t have to learn how to become one. Gay men do some of that learning on their own, but often we learn how to be gay from others, either because we look to them for instruction or because they simply tell us what they think we need to know, whether we ask for their advice or not.”

24. “B+ Could Try Harder,” *Sydney Star Observer*, March 23, 2000, 10. Many thanks to Jason Prior for clipping this article and sending it to me.
25. Edward Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? A Play* (New York: Athenaeum, 1962), 3–6.
26. See, generally, Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For the notion of a queer public sphere, or “queer counterpublic,” see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998): 547–566.
- Compare Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 21: “Over the decades gay men have become so adept at communicating their forbidden desires through camp allusions that a sort of collective amnesia has descended over the whole process, and we have lost sight of the fact that our love for performers like Judy Garland was actually a learned behavior, part of our socialization as homosexuals.”
27. “Skool Daze,” *San Francisco Bay Times*, March 30, 2000, 9–10.
28. For my information and quotations in this paragraph, I rely on Hanna LoPatin,

- “‘How To Be Gay’ Course under Fire from House,” *Michigan Daily*, ca. May 24, 2003. See also Beth Berlo, “Michigan Legislators Debate Gay Studies,” *Bay Windows* (Boston), June 8–14, 2000; Antonio Planas, “Gay Course at U-M Scrutinized by Group,” *State News* (Michigan State University), August 6, 2003.
29. At the request of a local newspaper, I attempted to intervene in the debate, but my response did not appear until two days after the primary. See “U of M Course Has No Intentions of Recruiting Gays” (Letter to the Editor), *Hastings Banner*, 147.32, August 10, 2000, 4.
 30. Geoff Larcom, “‘Outrage’ over Gay Identity Class Prompts Run for U-M Regent Seat,” *Ann Arbor News*, August 22, 2000; Charlie Cain, “Divisive Issues Top U-M Race: GOP Considers Quotas, Gays in Picking Candidates,” *Detroit News*, August 25, 2000, 1.
 31. Jen Fish, “U of Michigan Regents Hear ‘How To Be Gay’ Class Complaints,” *Michigan Daily*, October 20, 2000.
 32. Geoff Larcom, “U-M Gay Studies Class Leads Lawmakers to Seek Controls: Bill Would Give State Legislators the Power to Prohibit Courses,” *Ann Arbor News*, Thursday, August 21, 2003.
 33. For the information in this paragraph, I am indebted to Kim Kozlowski, “Man on a Mission,” *Detroit News*, February 4, 2001. See also Jay McNally, “Modern-Day Gideon: Gary Glenn Wages War for Family Values,” *Credo*, March 5, 2001.
 34. Kozlowski, “Man on a Mission.”
 35. Dustin Lee, “Gay Courses and the First Amendment,” *Michigan Review*, April 12–30, 2000.

2. History of an Error

1. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 2, makes precisely this complaint about Ethan Mordden’s writing about the Broadway musical. Some prominent exceptions to the general pattern include Clum himself; Michael Bronski, “Judy Garland and Others: Notes on Idolization and Derision,” in *Lavender Culture*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: Jove, 1979), 201–212; Al LaValley, “The Great Escape,” *American Film* (April 1985): 28–34, 70–71; Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993); Sam Abel, “Opera and Homoerotic Desire,” *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 58–75; Kevin Kopelson, *Beethoven’s Kiss: Pianism, Perversion, and the Mastery of Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Mitchell Morris, “It’s Raining Men: The Weather Girls, Gay Subjectivity, and the Erotics of Insatiability,” in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, ed. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamesseley (Zurich: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), 213–229; Richard Dyer, “Judy

Garland and Gay Men,” *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 141–194, and *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ellis Hanson, ed., *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Patrick E. Horrigan, *Widescreen Dreams: Growing Up Gay at the Movies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Michael DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Roger Hallas, “AIDS and Gay Cinephilia,” *Camera Obscura* 52 = 18.1 (2003): 84–127; Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); the double issue of *Camera Obscura* entitled “Fabulous! Divas,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 65 and 67 = 22.2 (2007) and 23.1 (2008); and, most recently, Marc Howard Siegel, “A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010). For a brilliant analysis of gay male musical culture by someone who is not a gay man, see Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

2. For the notion, underlying the argument of this book as a whole, that style has a meaning, and that form has a content, I am directly indebted to Myra Jehlen, *Five Fictions in Search of Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), and to my many conversations with the author.
3. Already in the 1970s, mutual accusations of self-hatred and internalized homophobia were being exchanged between gay activists critical of gay male effeminacy who favored a virile style of gay deportment and others critical of the vogue for gay masculinity who defended effeminacy: see Alice Echols, “The Homo Superiors: Disco and the Rise of Gay Macho,” *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2010), 121–157, esp. 124–134.
4. Compare Echols, “Homo Superiors,” 128, who attributes “gays’ . . . identification with tragic, doomed women like Garland” during the pre-disco period to the notion—widely accepted by gay men at the time—that “gayness . . . signaled failed masculinity.”
5. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 23, quips that this “new, far more sexual gay culture” was “a form of musical theater in which everyone could be a performer.” Spoken like a true show queen! (Clum proudly identifies himself as such throughout his book.)
6. For the quotation, see Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance: A Novel* (New York: Morrow, 1978), 15, and rpt. (New York: Bantam, 1979), 7, as cited by Echols, “Homo Superiors,” 130.
7. C. Westphal, “Die konträre Sexualempfindung: Symptom eines neuropathischen (psychopathischen) Zustandes,” *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nerven-*

krankheiten 2 (1870): 73–108 (the fascicle of the journal in which Westphal's article was published actually appeared in 1869); Arrigo Tamassia, "Sull' inversione dell' istinto sessuale," *Rivista sperimentale di freniatria e di medicina legale* 4 (1878): 97–117. The latter was the earliest published use of "inversion" that Havelock Ellis, at least, was able to discover; see Ellis, *Sexual Inversion = Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1922), 3.

See, generally, the fundamental study by George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female Deviance," in *Homosexuality: Sacrilege, Vision, Politics*, ed. Robert Boyers and George Steiner = *Salmagundi* 58–59 (1982–1983): 114–146, revised in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 87–117.

8. Westphal, "Conträre Sexualempfindung," 107n, explaining his choice of "contrary sexual feeling" as a clinical designation for the mental condition he had identified: "Es soll darin ausgedrückt sein, dass es sich nicht immer gleichzeitig um den Geschlechtstrieb als solchen handle, sondern auch bloss um die Empfindung, dem ganzen inneren Wesen nach dem eigenen Geschlechte entfremdet zu sein, gleichsam eine unentwickeltere Stufe des pathologischen Phänomens." See, further, David M. Halperin, "How To Do the History of Male Homosexuality," in Halperin, *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 104–137 and 185–195, esp. 127–130.
9. See Hubert C. Kennedy, "The 'Third Sex' Theory of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs," in *Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. Salvatore J. Licata and Robert P. Petersen = *Journal of Homosexuality* 6.1–2 (1980/1981): 103–111; as well as Hubert C. Kennedy, *Ulrichs: The Life and Works of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Pioneer of the Modern Gay Movement* (Boston: Alyson, 1988), 43–53.
10. This formulation is highly deliberate. I do not want to deny that same-sex sexual contact could qualify as deviant in the period, and I don't want to make a falsely stark and simplistic historical division between an era of inversion followed by an era of homosexuality, as if the two never occurred together, coincided, or were conflated. Nonetheless, I continue to believe it is useful to distinguish between them, as I have done, most recently, in "How To Do the History of Male Homosexuality," where I emphasize the temporal overlaps between inversion and homosexuality. Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, trans. Teresa Mesquit and Tim Davies (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 85ff. and 239–242, argues powerfully that historians have overplayed the distinction between inversion and homosexuality, and perhaps he is right. Bech cites evidence that same-sex sexual contact in itself was targeted as both criminal and pathological in the nineteenth century even without an element of gender deviance. But his examples tend to occur quite late in the nineteenth century, and his claim that "before the modern homosexual, men's same-sex attraction was

not inescapably . . . conceptualized in terms of femininity” (242), while accurate, is misleading, because at no time was men’s same-sex sexual attraction *inescapably* conceptualized in terms of gender deviance. What Bech’s sociological model of male homosexuality as a concept and form of existence gains in inclusiveness and systematicity it loses in historical precision.

11. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, quoted in Arnold I. Davidson, “Closing Up the Corpses: Diseases of Sexuality and the Emergence of the Psychiatric Style of Reasoning,” in Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1–29, 217–224 (quotation on p. 23): “Perversion of the sexual instinct . . . is not to be confounded with *perversity* in the sexual act; since the latter may be induced by conditions other than psychopathological. The concrete perverse act, monstrous as it may be, is clinically not decisive. In order to differentiate between disease (perversion) and vice (perversity), one must investigate the whole personality of the individual and the original motive leading to the perverse act. Therein will be found the key to the diagnosis.”
12. See Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality.”
13. See Lawrence R. Murphy, *Perverts by Official Order: The Campaign against Homosexuals by the United States Navy* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1988); George Chauncey, Jr., “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War One Era,” *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985/1986): 189–211, rpt. in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 294–317, 541–546.
14. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 81–83. Also, Matt Houlbrook, “‘London’s Bad Boys’: Homosex, Manliness, and Money in Working-Class Culture,” in Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 167–194.
15. See the extraordinary research done by Australia’s National Centre in HIV Social Research: for example, Michael Bartos, John McLeod, and Phil Nott, *Meanings of Sex between Men* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1993). See also Jane Ward, “Straight Dude Seeks Same: Mapping the Relationship between Sexual Identities, Practices, and Cultures,” in *Sex Matters: The Sexuality and Society Reader*, ed. Mindy Stompler, Dawn M. Baunauch, Elisabeth O. Burgess, and Denise Donnelly, 2nd ed. (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2007), 31–37; Jane Ward, “Dude-Sex: White Masculinities and ‘Authentic’ Heterosexuality among Dudes Who Have Sex with Dudes,” *Sexualities* 11.4 (2008): 414–434; Eric Anderson, “‘Being Masculine Is Not about Who You Sleep with . . .’: Heterosexual Athletes Contesting Masculinity and the One-time Rule of Homosexual-

- ity,” *Sex Roles* 58.2 (2008): 104–115; and Amanda Lynn Hoffman, “‘I’m Gay, For Jamie’: Heterosexual / Straight-Identified Men Express Desire to Have Sex with Men” (M.A. thesis, San Francisco State University, 2010).
16. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), 615. The point was considerably expanded by a subsequent writer in the Kinsey tradition, C. A. Tripp, *The Homosexual Matrix* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 22–35, who devotes an entire chapter to it.

Kinsey was anticipated by Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, who distinguished sexual object-choice from gender role, but who did not limit their definitions of “homosexuality” to same-sex sexual behavior as consistently or as categorically as Kinsey did.
 17. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, 616, 623.
 18. See Louis-Georges Tin, *L’invention de la culture hétérosexuelle* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2008), who traces the earliest stages of this evolution back to the literary culture of the Middle Ages.
 19. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 111–121; E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic, 1993), 274–279; Axel Nissen, *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
 20. Nils Axel Nissen correctly observes to me that the eponymous hero of *Imre*, a short novel by “Xavier Mayne” (Edward Irenaeus Stevenson), privately printed in 1906, has the best claim to be the first representation of a straight-acting gay man. See now the superb scholarly edition of *Imre* by James J. Gifford (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003).
 21. I derive this information from a public lecture by George Chauncey at a conference in Oslo, “Homosexuality 2000,” in August 2000; a Norwegian translation appears in *Kvinneforskning* 3–4 (2000): 56–71. Here is John Richardson speaking about the impression made on him by the poet James Schuyler in the summer of 1949: “With his short haircut, tight blue jeans, and white T-shirt, he epitomized the fresh American sailor-boy look that would soon become mandatory for young men everywhere”: John Richardson, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice: Picasso, Provence, and Douglas Cooper* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 62. See also the opening photospread of a San Francisco leather bar in Paul Welch and Ernest Havemann, “Homosexuality in America,” *Life Magazine*, 56.26 (June 26, 1964): 66–80. For additional background, see Gayle S. Rubin, “The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960–1990” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1994).
 22. The term “effete” is featured in Robert K. Martin’s unpublished memoir of gay life at Wesleyan University in the early 1960s, “Scenes of Gay Life at Wesleyan before Stonewall,” delivered as a lecture at the conference “Homosexuality 2000” in Oslo; a Norwegian translation appears in *Kvinneforskning* 3–4 (2000): 27–39.

This tension between feminine and masculine models of male homosexuality replicates the ideological and political conflicts that took place in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century between Magnus Hirschfeld's Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, which viewed homosexuality as a natural abnormality according to the transgender model formulated originally by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* ("Community of the Special") founded by Adolf Brand and Benedikt Friedländer, which promoted male homosexuality as an intensified form of manliness. The two sects were influential and were both allied with broader social movements, but they did not give rise to popular, subcultural styles of gay male department.

23. Brenda D. Townes, William D. Ferguson, and Sandra Gillam, "Differences in Psychological Sex, Adjustment, and Familial Influences among Homosexual and Nonhomosexual Populations," *Journal of Homosexuality* 1.3 (1976): 261–272; Joseph Harry, "On the Validity of Typologies of Gay Males," *Journal of Homosexuality* 2.2 (Winter 1976–1977): 143–152; Michael W. Ross, Lesley J. Rogers, and Helen McCulloch, "Stigma, Sex, and Society: A New Look at Gender Differentiation and Sexual Variation," *Journal of Homosexuality* 3.4 (Summer 1978): 315–330; Gary J. McDonald and Robert J. Moore, "Sex-Role Self-Concepts of Homosexual Men and Their Attitudes toward Both Women and Male Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4.1 (Fall 1978): 3–14; Michael W. Ross, "Femininity, Masculinity, and Sexual Orientation: Some Cross-Cultural Comparisons," *Journal of Homosexuality* 9.1 (1983): 27–36.
24. See Foucault's interview with Jean Le Bitoux, "Le gay savoir," in *Entretiens sur la question gay* (Béziers: H&O, 2005), 45–72, esp. 58–63; in English as "The Gay Science," trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (Spring 2011): 385–403.
25. Paul Myers, "Façade," *Gay News: Europe's Largest Circulation Newspaper for Homosexuals* 66 (March 13–16, 1975): 16. I should point out that the author is instructing the reader not about how to be butch but about how to pass for straight. It is tempting to construe the entire article as ironic, and thus as a protest *against* gay masculinity, but that would not diminish its historical value as a witness to changing gay male gender styles. (I am deeply grateful to Jason Prior for uncovering this article in the course of his own research, for sharing it with me, and for allowing me to cite it.)
26. Clark Henley, *The Butch Manual: The Current Drag and How To Do It* (New York: New American Library, 1984; orig. publ. New York: Sea Horse Press, 1982), 13. An updated version of this guide, containing a similar mixture of satire and how-to advice for the ACT UP generation, was provided in 1990 by Michelangelo Signorile and photographer Michael Wakefield in a cover story entitled "The New Clone vs. the Old Clone," for New York's *Outweek* magazine. See Michelangelo Signorile, "Clone Wars," *Outweek* 74 (November 28, 1990): 39–45; to which should be added a couple of important corrections and supplements

- by Richard Hunter, Michael Tresser, James Lynch, and John Maresca in the Letters section of *Outweek* 76 (December 12, 1990): 5.
27. For those who know French, a brilliant satirical perspective on this transformation is provided by the song “Viril,” by P. Philippe and M. Cywie, performed in 1981 by Jean Guidoni, of which a video is available at www.dailymotion.com/video/xt37x_guidoni-81-viril_music (accessed January 11, 2009). Thanks to Rostom Mesli for directing my attention to this performance.
 28. Frances Fitzgerald, *Cities on the Hill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 34; also 54: “Now ‘the Castroids,’ as they sometimes called themselves, were dressing with the care of Edwardian dandies—only the look was cowboy or bush pilot: tight blue jeans, preferably Levi’s with button flies, plaid shirts, leather vests or bomber jackets, and boots”; 62–63: “There was the clone style proper: short hair, clipped mustache, blue jeans, and bomber jacket.” For more details, see Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (New York: New York University Press, 1998), esp. 60, for an anatomy of the canonical butch types: “Western, Leather, Military, Laborer, Hood, Athlete, Woodsman, Sleaze, Uniforms.” For a contemporary appreciation of the “Castro Street Clone,” see Edmund White, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (New York: Dutton, 1980), 45–46.
 29. Echols, “Homo Superiors,” 123.
 30. See Dr. Charles Silverstein and Edmund White, *The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle* (New York: Crown, 1977), 185: “Since the advent of feminism and gay liberation, ‘role-playing’ has taken on a decidedly negative aura. . . . To the gay liberationist role-playing conjures up a picture of two men living out a grotesque parody of heterosexual married life”; 186: “The disadvantages of role-playing are manifold and increasingly obvious”; 187: “In the late sixties, the birth of modern feminism and gay liberation called for the abolition of all role-playing.”
 31. See Echols, “Homo Superiors,” 121 and 127, quoting the protagonist of Edmund White’s 1997 novel *The Farewell Symphony*, which is set in the 1970s.
 32. Silverstein and White, *Joy of Gay Sex*, 10–11.
 33. Edmund White, “The Gay Philosopher” (1969), *The Burning Library: Essays*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Knopf, 1994), 3–19 (quotation on p. 18).
 34. Silverstein and White, *Joy of Gay Sex*, 10–11.
 35. Robert Ferro, *The Blue Star* (New York: Dutton, 1985), 64; cf. 121: “we did everything equally to each other.”
 36. Mark Merlis, *An Arrow’s Flight* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), 14.
 37. See Damon Ross Young, “Pain Porn,” in *Porn Archives*, ed. Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
 38. Pansy Division, *Undressed* (Lookout! Records, 1993), track 1.
 39. “The clone’s performance of butch as a kind of self-conscious dress-up, even a

- form of drag, distinguishes his brand of machismo from its more earnest and tyrannical straight counterpart. . . . Even as the gay clone mimed heterosexual masculinity, he helped to reveal that ‘so-called original’ as ‘illusory’ and contingent, as its own brand of (humorless) performance”: Richard Meyer, “Warhol’s Clones,” in *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*, ed. Monica Dorenkamp and Richard Henke (New York: Routledge, 1995), 92–122 (quotation on p. 112), quoting Judith Butler’s classic essay, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13–31, rpt. in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307–320. See also Sue-Ellen Case, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” *Discourse* 11 (Winter 1988–1989): 55–73, rpt. in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 294–306. For opposing views, see Esther Newton, “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen: Lesbian Power and Representation in Gay Male Cherry Grove,” in Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 63–89, 270–276; and Biddy Martin, “Sexualities without Genders, and Other Queer Utopias,” *diacritics*, 24.2–3 (Summer/Fall 1994): 104–121, rpt. in Biddy Martin, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 71–94.
40. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp, *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222 (quotation on p. 208).
 41. On this point, see the detailed discussion in Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first publ. 1972), 23–25, 31–33, and, especially, 103–104.
 42. On the requirement that male homosexuality be legible, and on the contradictions and paradoxes to which that requirement gives rise, see the classic study by Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
 43. Rogers Brubaker, “The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany, and the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24 (July 2001): 531–548, cited and discussed in Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006), x–xi. Yoshino goes on to offer a judicious critique of the politics of assimilation and its implicit refusal to address continuing practices of discrimination.
 44. Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), ix–x.
 45. *Ibid.*, 14. Compare Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 30: “I’m gay, but I’m no sissy’ . . . is the watchword of the majority of gay men these days.”
 46. I quote the opening sentence of a classic essay by Michael Warner, “Introduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii–xxxi (quotation on p. vii); an

- earlier version of this essay, minus the opening sentence, had appeared as “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3–17. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
47. It is an eloquent sign of the times that Brett Farmer, introducing his brave and original study of gay men’s distinctive relation to the movies, has to spend pages justifying his project against the anticipated objection on the part of queer theorists that it is illegitimately essentialist. See Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 6–15.
 48. Barry D. Adam, “How Might We Create a Collectivity That We Would Want To Belong To?” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 301–311 (quotation on p. 306). By way of support, Adam cites an earlier essay of his: “Love and Sex in Constructing Identity among Men Who Have Sex with Men,” *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 5.4 (2000): 325–339.
 49. Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*; Clum, *Something for the Boys*; Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988); David Nimmons, *The Soul beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002).
 50. Yoshino, *Covering*, 22.
 51. In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* on March 26, 2006, Orlando Patterson inveighed against “a deep-seated dogma that has prevailed in social science and policy circles since the mid-1960s: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group’s cultural attributes—its distinctive attitudes, values and predispositions, and the resulting behavior of its members.” He went on to welcome recent historical, political, intellectual developments that “have made it impossible to ignore the effects of culture” on the shape of Black life in the United States, though by this he meant only the factors internal to Black society that might account for underachievement and poverty. This appeal to the “effects of culture” might well explain why so many people remain wary of “any explanation that invokes a group’s cultural attributes.”
 52. In capitalizing the terms “Black” and “White,” I’m following an orthographic practice in cultural studies intended to signal that these color terms are not descriptors, but designations of ethnic identities.
 53. Ten months later, in an appearance on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show* on October 22, 2008, Obama said, “Michelle may be a better dancer than me, but I’m convinced I’m a better dancer than John McCain.” See youtube.com/watch?v=88ogljJcGo (accessed October 27, 2008).
 54. Baratunde Thurston, a Black comedian and blogger, has announced a new book called *How To Be Black* as forthcoming from HarperCollins in February 2012; see his website, baratunde.com (accessed August 9, 2011). Compare Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC:

Duke University Press, 2004), who takes a rather different approach to the question from my own, though I believe we share some of the same concerns.

55. See Dyer, “Judy Garland and Gay Men.”

3. Gay Identity and Its Discontents

1. The following paragraphs summarize a more detailed argument which I laid out in an earlier book, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007; rev. ed., 2009), esp. 1–10.
2. The one exception, the one kind of inquiry into gay male subjectivity that has reclaimed a certain legitimacy, is research into gay men’s motives for engaging in risky sex in the context of HIV/AIDS; see Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*
3. “Covering” is the word that Kenji Yoshino borrows from Erving Goffman in order to refer to a self-protective practice on the part of members of devalued social groups that consists in downplaying or deemphasizing their cultural particularities, especially particularities that are obtrusive and likely to provoke hostility or discomfort in “normal” people. “Covering,” as Yoshino defines it, is therefore distinct from “passing,” insofar as it does not involve deception, denial, or a refusal to identify; on the contrary, “covering” occurs when an individual openly avows and acknowledges her stigmatized identity but then chooses not to insist on it and plays down any stereotypical trait that symbolizes it, veiling that trait discreetly instead of “flaunting it” or “shoving it in our faces.” See Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006), esp. 17–19.

“Covering” in this sense is continuous with “closeting,” as that term is commonly employed in queer studies; see, generally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Yoshino considers the closet to be operative only in the case of “passing,” even though he freely admits that passing and covering can shade into each another. Following Sedgwick, I give the concept of the closet greater scope in the analysis that follows (in this chapter and the next two).

4. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 31.
5. Yoshino, *Covering*, offers a powerful critique of the politics of assimilation, one that is in many respects congenial to the argument I am trying to make here and that provides additional support for it. At the same time, Yoshino retreats from the implications of that critique and, dramatizing the very phenomenon of “covering” that he claims to expose and to denounce, embraces a politics of assimilation himself by endorsing what he calls a “universal” quest for authenticity (27, 184–196). He says, for example, “It may be the explosion of diversity in [the United States] that will finally make us realize what we have in common” (192); and “Told carefully, the gay story becomes a story about us all” (27). But

what if it didn't become such a story? What if it turned out to be a story about gay people—a story *just* about gay people? Would that make it less interesting, less valuable, less worth telling? Yoshino's own example shows how a universalist model of identity politics paradoxically functions to erase difference and promote assimilation.

For another typical instance of sexual despecification as a universalizing strategy whose effect is to erase gayness, see John Lahr's review of Matthew Bourne's all-male version of *Swan Lake* in the *New Yorker* (October 19, 1998): the male duets, Lahr wrote, are "not really about gay sex but about sexuality itself." The review is cited, quoted, and aptly criticized in John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), 208–209, on precisely these grounds.

6. Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 84.
7. For a critique of "homonormativity," see Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).
8. See, now, Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
9. Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*. See also Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–319, revised and updated in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.
10. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 15.
11. See David M. Halperin, "Gay Identity and Its Discontents," *Photofile* 61 (December 2000): 31–36, somewhat expanded as Halperin, "Identité et désenchantement," trans. Paul Lagneau-Ymonet, in *L'infréquentable Michel Foucault: Renouveaux de la pensée critique*, ed. Didier Eribon (Paris: EPEL, 2001), 73–87; Spanish translation by Graciela Graham in *El infréquentable Michel Foucault: Renovación del pensamiento crítico*, ed. Eribon (Buenos Aires: Letra Viva/EDELP, 2004), 105–120.
12. I am invoking the celebrated formula that Douglas Crimp proposed in "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 3–18. Crimp, even at the time, argued that the AIDS activist movement was in danger of repressing its own emotional needs in its drive to political action. See, now, the detailed exploration of AIDS activist feeling in Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
13. On the difference between emotions that are politically good and those that are politically bad, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis,*

Assimilation, and Hidden Grief (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), both discussed in Love, *Feeling Backward*, 12–14, with considerable pertinence to the issues reviewed here.

14. For an early brilliant critique of this gay tendency to distinguish between good and bad emotions, see Lee Edelman, “The Mirror and the Tank: ‘AIDS,’ Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism,” *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 93–117, 256–260. See also Paul Morrison, “End Pleasure,” *The Explanation for Everything: Essays on Sexual Subjectivity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 54–81, 181–184.
15. In this context, some writers stand out for their bravery. See Leo Bersani’s praise of sex in general, and of gay men’s sexual culture in particular, for being “anti-communal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving”: “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp = *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222 (quotation on p. 215). See also Lee Edelman’s praise of gay male narcissism and passivity in “The Mirror and the Tank.”
16. See, for example, Douglas Crimp, “Mario Montez, For Shame,” in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57–70. Crimp calls his project “Queer before Gay.” It was anticipated in certain respects, as Crimp himself acknowledges, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993): 1–16. The work of Crimp and of Sedgwick has been reprinted in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 49–75, which is a compendium of some recent attempts to move queer politics and queer theory beyond gay pride.

4. Homosexuality’s Closet

1. Only after drafting an early version of the following paragraphs in 2001 (see David M. Halperin, “Homosexuality’s Closet,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41.1 [Winter 2002]: 21–54, esp. 26–29) did I come across a similar analysis by John Clum of a different interview with David Daniels in a 1998 issue of the *New Yorker*: see John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 34–35. While Clum and I are both interested in the way Daniels publicly presents his sexual and gender identity, and while we are both critical of how the liberal print media normalize him, we derive rather different lessons from the interviews we examine.

For Tommasini’s openness as a gay man, see his biography of Virgil Thomson, starting with the Acknowledgments. Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: Norton, 1997), xii: “Many thanks to my partner, Ben McCommon, for helping me get through the rough times.” (By contrast, Tommasini does not identify himself as a gay man in his *New York Times* article.)

I am indebted to Nadine Hubbs for this reference, for her incisive criticism of this section of my book, and for opening up to me the world of queer musicology, whose impact is easy to discern in much of what follows.

2. David Daniels, with Martin Katz (piano), *Serenade*, Virgin Classics, no. 5454002 (1999). An earlier recording of European countertenors presents itself in a much more explicitly camp style; see Pascal Bertin, Andreas Scholl, Dominique Visse, *Les Trois Contre-ténors*, Harmonia Mundi, no. 901552 (April 1995).
3. For some pioneering efforts to open up the musicality/sexuality nexus as a topic for future research in a queer mode, see Philip Brett, “Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet,” and Suzanne G. Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight,” both in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9–26 and 67–84.
4. See D. A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990): 114–133, reprinted in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 119–141, for a classic account of the operations of homosexual implication in discourses governed by the regime of the closet. Miller clearly establishes that such operations originate in the shadow kingdom of *connotation*, whose mode of signification is particularly characteristic of the closet. For a brilliant analysis of some journalistic instances, provided by the *New York Times* and *Life* magazine in the early 1960s, see Lee Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy; or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet,” *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 148–170, 263–267.

5. What’s Gaye Than Gay?

1. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 17.
2. Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; orig. publ. 1964), 3–14, esp. 6–10 (quotation on p. 7).
3. For a compelling demonstration of how the psychoanalytic destabilization of heterosexual identity conduces, paradoxically but ineluctably, to the consolidation of heterosexual privilege, see Paul Morrison, *The Explanation for Everything: Essays on Sexual Subjectivity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
4. For a couple of eloquent examples, see Christopher Guest’s film *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), and Neil Patrick Harris’s opening number at the 2011 Tony Awards “Broadway: It’s Not Just for Gays Any More,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6S5caRGpK4 (accessed June 17, 2011). The Broadway musical still functions so ubiquitously as a signifier of male homosexuality in popular culture—for instance, in TV shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Glee*—that it would be impossible to cite all the occurrences of what has now become an obvious commonplace, a truth univer-

- sally acknowledged. John M. Clum catalogues a number of examples throughout the course of his richly detailed survey, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), esp. 28, 36–38; all further page references to this book will be incorporated in the text.
5. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 36–37, cites the example of two students who spontaneously perform “a perfect imitation of Ethel Merman doing ‘You Can’t Get a Man with a Gun.’” He goes on to comment, “This, too, is gay culture, the maintaining of a flamboyant tradition of musical theater and musical divas these kids have never experienced first hand, but somehow know.”
 6. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 16. All further page references to this book will be incorporated in the text. Unless otherwise noted, all italics that appear in quoted extracts from this book are Miller’s own.
 7. Compare Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 34: “Stereotypes often contain a grain of truth even though we are forbidden to say so in polite society.”
 8. On the limited temporality of the Broadway musical, see Frank Rich’s cover story on Stephen Sondheim, “Conversations with Sondheim,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 2000, 38–43, 60–61, 88–89, which appeared under the headline, “‘You Can’t Bring It Back. It’s Gone.’” Clum, *Something for the Boys*, does a good job of describing the historical specificity of different varieties of musical theater and the reasons for its decline as a cultural form.
 9. The embarrassing emotional consequences for the post-Stonewall gay subject of these enduring realities of pre-Stonewall experience are well brought out by Love, *Feeling Backward*, 20, in the course of her own commentary on Miller: “There is something uncanny, of course, about the appearance of such [adolescent] feelings [in the adult, post-Stonewall man] after the fact and out of context. . . . The appearance of such feelings outside of their proper historical context, in subjects whose only experience of gay identity is of the post-Stonewall variety, is still more disturbing. The circulation of pre-Stonewall forms of life and structures of feeling throughout the post-Stonewall world suggests a historical continuity even more complex, incorrigible, and fatal than that of individual character. The evidence is written in the subjectivities of queer men and women who grew up after Stonewall who are as intimately familiar with the structures of feeling Miller describes as with the rhetoric of pride that was meant to displace it. Such continuities suggest that direct experience of the pre-Stonewall moment is not solely responsible for a range of feelings that we today designate as pre-Stonewall, feelings that are all the more shameful given the ‘tolerance’ of the contemporary moment.”
 10. Compare the similar account of the solitary, sentimental appeal of opera provided by Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 46–83, esp. 76–80.
 11. For a typical instance of such phobic disavowal combined with an effort at dis-

- engaged tolerance (in regard to Judy Garland), see Michael Joseph Gross, “The Queen Is Dead,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 2000, 62–70. For a similar impulse by a gay male critic to disavow the queeniness of grand opera and to rescue it for a dignified gay identity and a “healthy” gay sexuality, see Sam Abel, “Opera and Homoerotic Desire,” *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 58–75.
12. I refer here to the passage from Proust which Miller has selected as his book’s epigraph: “That bad music is played, is sung more often and more passionately than good, is why it has also gradually become more infused with men’s dreams and tears. Treat it therefore with respect. Its place, insignificant in the history of art, is immense in the sentimental history of social groups.” Miller is quoting, somewhat freely, the following passage: Marcel Proust, “Eloge de la mauvaise musique,” *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, ed. Thierry Laget (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 183.
 13. Barry D. Adam, “How Might We Create a Collectivity That We Would Want to Belong To?” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 301–311 (quotation on p. 305; italics added). Compare Al LaValley, “The Great Escape,” *American Film* (April 1985): 28–34, 70–71; LaValley speaks of the “utopian and alternate world” that gay men find in Hollywood movies and in aesthetic experience in general (29).
 14. See Miller, *Place for Us*, 3: the Broadway musical’s “frankly interruptive mode-shifting” between book and lyrics “had the same miraculous effect on [proto-gay boys in the 1950s] as on every character, no matter how frustrated in ambition or devastated by a broken heart, who felt a song coming on: that of sending the whole world packing.” Compare Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 5–6.
 15. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 13, speaking specifically of old-time, unmiked female singers in Broadway musicals, “belters” like Ethel Merman, and “the grand gesture that went with the big noise.”
 16. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 5–7, goes on to make an interesting argument that the queer pleasure of opera consists in the transcending of the body through music, whereas Broadway musicals feature glamorous performers with lithe bodies flamboyantly decked out in gorgeous clothes: in musical theater, Clum says, the musical triumphs over mortality.
 17. On Clum’s view, the Broadway musical therefore confirms the truth that “every gay man learns by puberty—everything involved with gender and sex is role-playing one way or another. That’s what unites gay men” (23).

6. The Queen Is Not Dead

1. On the enduring gay appeal of *The Golden Girls*, see Charles Grandee, “House of Dames,” *New York Times Magazine, Part Two: Home Design, Spring 2002*, April 14, 2002, 52ff.
2. “One might have expected Stonewall to make [Hollywood] star cults outmoded

- among gays,” wrote Al LaValley as long ago as 1985, “yet neither gay openness nor the new machismo has completely abolished the cults.” Al LaValley, “The Great Escape,” *American Film* (April 1985), 71.
3. I allude to the classic work by Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963).
 4. Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2010), 147.
 5. See www.out.com/slideshows/?slideshow_title=Lady-Gagas-Born-This-Way-Love-It-or-Leave-It&theID=1#Top (accessed June 6, 2011).
 6. Katie Zezima, “Lady Gaga Goes Political in Maine,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2010.
 7. Lyrics available online at www.metrolyrics.com/born-this-way-lyrics-lady-gaga.html (accessed June 6, 2011).
 8. Mark Simpson, “Bored This Way: Gaga Lays a Giant Egg,” www.out.com/slideshows/?slideshow_title=Lady-Gagas-Born-This-Way-Love-It-or-Leave-It&theID=3#Top (accessed June 6, 2011).
 9. Compare Mark Simpson, “That Lady Gaga Backlash Is So Tired Already,” *Out Magazine*, September 24, 2010: “When was the last time pop music mattered? When was the last time you cared? Until Lady Gaga came along, just a couple years ago, pop seemed thoroughly pooped. Some nice tunes and haircuts here and there and some really excellent financial institution ad soundtracks, but really, who thought pop could ever trouble us again as a total art form? Gaga has single-handedly resurrected pop. Or at least she’s made it seem like it’s alive. Maybe it’s a kind of galvanic motion—those pop promos sometimes look like Helmut Newton zombie flicks—but boy, this is shocking fun.”
 10. Logan Scherer, personal communication, June 5, 2011.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. Clum, in *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), suggests that “show queens predominated at a moment in gay history when the closet was still an operative principle for gay men” (27; and *passim*).
 13. Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 37, 34, as quoted and cited by Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 22, 34.
 14. This is Andrew Sullivan, “The End of Gay Culture,” *New Republic*, October 24, 2005, www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=cac6ca08-7df8-4cdd-93cc-1d20cd8b7a70 (accessed July 13, 2009), quoting Michael Walzer.
 15. Sullivan, “End of Gay Culture.”
 16. For a canonical representation of the classic gay male night out, see Howard Cruse, “Billy Goes Out” (1979?), in Cruse, *Dancin’ Nekkid with the Angels: Comic Strips and Stories for Grownups* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1987), 66–72. For an example of the dissatisfactions with official gay culture, see the remarks by the transgender performance artist Glenn Maria to Smith Galtney, “Let the Gays

- Begin: Six City Culture Makers Attempt to Answer Our Burning—Possibly Flaming—Questions,” *Time Out New York* 661 (May 29–June 4, 2008): 18–21: “I don’t have Logo, but I once got a gift bag filled with movies from Here! TV. They were so bad! I thought the idea of putting us on TV was to see something you might relate to” (20).
17. See David Caron, “Shame on Me, or the Naked Truth about Me and Marlene Dietrich,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 117–131.
 18. On Puig and Hollywood cinema, see Marc Howard Siegel, “A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), esp. 55–57. Siegel also discusses gay filmmaker Matthias Müller’s 1990 short film *Home Stories*, which similarly assembles a collage of diva moments from classic Hollywood cinema: see “Gossip of Images,” 64–69, recapitulating Siegel’s earlier analysis in “That Warm Night in the Park,” *The Memo Book: Films, Videos and Installations by Matthias Müller*, ed. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2005), 208–217.
 19. Alan Sinfield, “‘The Moment of Submission’: Neil Bartlett in Conversation,” *Modern Drama* 39 (1996): 211–221 (quotation on p. 218).
 20. Another notable exception is Richard Dyer, especially “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 141–194; and Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002). See also Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and the essays collected in Ellis Hanson, ed., *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
 21. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 17.

7. Culture and Genre

1. Compare Raymonde Carroll, *Evidences invisibles: Américains et français au quotidien* (Paris: Seuil, 1987); in English as *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
2. Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 24–25. My understanding of genre has been decisively shaped by Chambers, though it is far less precise, consistent, and systematic than his.
3. For a review of critical-theoretical writing on the pragmatics of genre, see Ross Chambers, “Describing Genre,” *Paragraph* 16.3 (1993): 293–306. The understanding of the pragmatics of genre contained in this body of work derives from the thought of the sociolinguist M. A. K. Halliday (see, especially, *Language as Social*

Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning [Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978]); it is distinct from the influential views of Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151–167, who also lobbies for a pragmatic and ethnomethodological approach to genre, but whose treatment of genre is largely confined to the sphere of rhetoric, and to rhetorical action, and rarely extends to social interaction, even though she does refer to Halliday and occurs prominently in her definition of genre to “situation” and “social context.”

In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 4, Lauren Berlant proposes to treat femininity as a genre “like an aesthetic one,” insofar as femininity can be seen as “a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances.” That is a similarly social but somewhat less pragmatic understanding of genre from mine.

4. Chambers, *Untimely Interventions*, 25, explaining Halliday’s notions of “*field*, *tenor*, and *register* as the areas of appropriateness that genres regulate.”
5. Chambers, “Describing Genre,” 296, summarizing the work of Anne Freedman, speaks of genre as embedded in “ceremonial or ritual, regulatory ‘settings,’ which control the regularities of practice that make social interactions possible.”
6. Hence, according to John Frow, genres are not principally “a matter of the categorization of texts” but “a matter of the textual categorization and mobilization of information about the world”; see Frow, “‘Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need’: Genre Theory Today,” *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1626–1634 (quotation on pp. 1632–1633). This formulation, however, still privileges textuality over pragmatics, insofar as it continues to treat genres as forms of discourse rather than as forms of (discursively mediated) action or interaction.
7. Compare June Howard’s account of sentimentality as a genre in “What Is Sentimentality?” *Publishing the Family* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), esp. 213–245, 298–302. Ross Chambers goes further and, drawing on Anne Freedman’s work, speaks of genre as “the phenomenon whereby the discursive construction of *subject* positions is articulated with the historical and social production of *collective* discursive practices” (“Describing Genre,” 294; italics in original). That formulation opens up new possibilities for describing how gay subjectivity is actually constituted, and it points the way to a discursive, non-psychological science of gay male subjectivity. That is not the project I am attempting here—I am neither so ambitious nor so rigorous—but I hope that my formal and discursive analysis of gay male cultural practices might at least contribute to it.
8. Compare Chambers, “Describing Genre,” 304: “But the first task for cultural studies, then, if it is to draw inspiration from Freedman’s analytic practice, would be to examine the constitution of generic ‘fields’ and the nature of the

- field they themselves constitute—a field that might well prove to be synonymous with, but considerably more precise, than whatever it is that is designated by that obscure ‘mana’-word, *culture*, itself.”
9. For some striking examples, see Nicholas Graham, “U.S. Soldiers in Afghanistan Remake Lady Gaga’s ‘Telephone’ Music Video” and “U.S. Soldiers Remake Kesha’s ‘Blah Blah Blah’ Video into ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Spoof,” *Huffington Post* (April 29–30, 2010; and May 12, 2010), www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/29/telephone---the-afghanist_n_557123.html and www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/12/us-soldiers-remake-keshas_n_573831.html (accessed May 14, 2010). See also the commentary by Mark Simpson, “Why Straight Soldiers Can’t Stop Acting Gay on Video,” posted on marksimpson.com (accessed May 14, 2010).
 10. Maeve Reston, “Newt Gingrich, ‘Dancing Queen,’” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2011, available online at articles.latimes.com/2011/may/19/news/la-pn-newt-gingrich-dancing-queen-20110519 (accessed June 4, 2011).
 11. For an early effort in one of these directions, see Charles I. Nero, “Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature,” in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill (Boston: Alyson, 1991), 229–252. Compare José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
 12. For some examples, see David M. Halperin, *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Halperin “Is There a History of Sexuality?” *History and Theory* 28.3 (October 1989): 257–274.
 13. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first publ. 1972), 109.
 14. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Part 2: *Pere-stroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996), 97.
 15. Adrian Kiernander, “‘Theatre without the Stink of Art’: An Interview with Neil Bartlett,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.2 (1994): 221–236 (quotation on p. 234).
 16. Kestutis Nakas, e-mail message to Chad Allen Thomas (September 3, 2008), quoted by Thomas in “Performing Queer Shakespeare” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2009), ch. 1.
 17. Editorial statement, *Diseased Pariah News* 1 (1990): 1.
 18. T.S. [Tom Shearer], “Welcome to Our Brave New World!” *Diseased Pariah News* 1 (1990): 2. Italics and ellipsis in original.
 19. Scott Alan Rayter, “He Who Laughs Last: Comic Representations of AIDS” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2002). Rayter argues that gay male writers and artists, such as Tony Kushner and John Greyson, reject the customary “reliance on a tragic model” in framing their responses to HIV/AIDS (18), refusing

to take for granted the normal assumption, apparent in a film like *Philadelphia*, that tragedy is the most “appropriate and suitable” vehicle for representing AIDS (58–66). Instead, “gay playwrights often use comic styles and modes . . . to denaturalize these conventions of the ‘realistic problem play’” (56–57). This rejection of the tragic, according to Rayter, is designed to frustrate the audience’s desire for closure, by “heightening anxiety, through humour and laughter, while rejecting any easy catharsis” (150). But the result is not a complete embrace of the comic; rather, the writers and filmmakers Rayter examines self-consciously question the use of the comic even as they exploit it, remaining ambivalent about their use of the comic form and incorporating that ambivalence into the work itself. “If humour has a place in AIDS representation . . . it will always be a contested site—one where competing factions use, take up, and respond to that humour in a plethora of ways” (52).

Rayter is careful to distinguish among camp, “black humour” (which he claims works by encouraging the audience not to laugh, but to “recoil” [74]), and sarcasm (39). David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 88–115, is particularly critical of camp for the purposes of AIDS activist interventions, though he makes a partial exception for *AIDS! The Musical!* On the latter, see also the account by John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 267–268; Clum provides a good discussion of *Zero Patience*, as well (274–276).

20. A reproduction of David McDiarmid’s artwork can be viewed on the National Gallery of Victoria’s website: www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngvart/20080828/index.html (accessed September 19, 2008).
21. On David McDiarmid’s activist art, see C. Moore Hardy, “Lesbian Erotica and Impossible Images,” and Ted Gott, “Sex and the Single T-Cell: The Taboo of HIV-Positive Sexuality in Australian Art and Culture,” *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*, ed. Jill Julius Matthews (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1997), 127–138 and 139–156. It should be noted that McDiarmid’s title, “Moody Bitch Dies of AIDS,” invokes the words of a sign that Peter Tully himself would carry when he dressed up as his alter ego, “Judy Free”: “Moody Bitch seeks a kind considerate guy for Love Hate relationship.” See the film by Tony Ayres, *Sadness: A Monologue by William Yang* (1999).
22. On the last two artists, see Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 111–187, 212–221. On Kara Walker, see Arlene R. Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *PMLA* 123.5 (October 2008): 1649–1672, esp. 1670: “Though Walker is not gay, her work is profoundly queer, and queer-of-color theory has produced a conceptual matrix that illuminates her artistic formation and practice.”
23. See Isaac Julien, “Confessions of a Snow Queen: Notes on the Making of *The*

Attendant,” in *Critically Queer*, ed. Isaac Julien and Jon Savage = *Critical Quarterly* 36.1 (Spring 1994): 120–126. My interpretation of the film is much indebted to the excellent study by Christina Sharpe, “Isaac Julien’s *The Attendant* and the Sodomasochism of Everyday Black Life,” *Monstrous Intimacies*, 111–152, 212–214.

24. “One reveler [in the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade] dressed as Osama bin Laden led a group of dancing ‘Binlettes,’ who sported pink sequins and improvised ‘miniburkas,’ which only covered the head. Osama’s right-hand man, who identified himself as ‘Greenie,’ said the bearded leader was here to terrorize the intolerant. ‘It’s about bringing back the gayness for Osama: Express the flesh!’ Greenie said. ‘He’s been in a cave for a long time. Bill Clinton couldn’t do it, George Bush couldn’t do it, Barack Obama doesn’t want to do it . . . but he’s come out today for the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras here in Sydney.” Quoted from an unsigned article, “Bin Laden Parodied in Sydney Gay Mardi Gras,” *Japan Times*, March 1, 2010, 3.

8. The Passion of the Crawford

1. Justin Ocean, “Viva la Diva!” *The Out Traveler* (Spring 2008): 26.
2. David Denby, “Escape Artist: The Case for Joan Crawford,” *New Yorker*, January 3, 2011, 65–69 (quotation on p. 65).
3. Craig G. Harris, “Hope against Hope,” in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill (Boston: Alyson, 1991), 148–154 (quotation on pp. 148–149).
4. See, for example, www.commonplacebook.com/jokes/gay_jokes/100_best_things.shtml (accessed October 20, 2008).
5. This combination of glamour and abjection may recall the similar “combination of strength and suffering” that Richard Dyer identified as a source of Judy Garland’s gay appeal; see Dyer, “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 141–194, esp. 149.
6. The distinguished gay critic, novelist, and cultural historian Ethan Mordden goes out of his way to mention this line and to highlight its particularly horrifying violence. See Ethan Mordden, *Movie Star: A Look at the Women Who Made Hollywood* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1983), 88.
7. One exception is Sam Staggs, who in his dazzling book-length commentary on *All about Eve*, makes an effort to explain its gay appeal; see Sam Staggs, *All about “All about Eve”: The Complete Behind-the-Scenes Story of the Bitchiest Film Ever Made* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001; first publ. 2000), 241–246, though the entire book can be taken as an effort at explanation. See also Sam Staggs, *Close-Up on Sunset Boulevard: Billy Wilder, Norma Desmond, and the Dark Hollywood Dream* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002). Another exception, and a most distinguished one, is Richard Dyer, “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” as well as Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002). And see Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

- 2000); Farmer deserves a lot of credit for taking on this topic and for giving it his best shot, but he is inevitably hampered by his psychoanalytic method, which leads him to substitute theoretical commonplaces and deductive applications of Lacanian dogma for what should have been detailed, original readings of the films he analyzes.
8. Mordden, *Movie Star*, 84.
 9. Christina Crawford, *Mommie Dearest: A True Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1978).
 10. Adam H. Graham, Matthew Link, and Benjamin Ryan, “The Best Gay-Owned Spas in the U.S.,” *The Out Traveler* (Spring 2008): 22–23 (quotation on p. 22).
 11. The first of Epperson’s shows was reviewed by Ben Brantley in the *New York Times* on February 10, 1998; the second, by Charles Isherwood in the *New York Times* on May 7, 2005. See John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 138–139.
 12. I have consulted the Amazon website a number of times, most recently on September 23, 2008.
 13. Compare Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first publ. 1972), 56: “Camp style represents all that is most unique in the homosexual subculture.” For some attempts at a systematic, pragmatic account of “camp style” and its relation to “subculture,” see Keith Harvey, “Describing Camp Talk: Language/Pragmatics/Politics,” *Language and Literature* 9.3 (2000): 240–260; also, Harvey, “Camp Talk and Citationality: A Queer Take on ‘Authentic’ and ‘Represented’ Utterance,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 1145–1165; and Ross Chambers, “‘Isn’t There a Poem about This, Mr. de Mille?’ On Quotation, Camp and Colonial Distancing,” *Australian Literary Studies* 23.4 (October 2008): 377–391. Chambers defines camp as a “genre-quoting genre” of a type that often offers “convenient rallying points for affiliations of an unofficial, non-national, non-familial, non-state-sanctioned kind, such as define friendship and communitarian groups” (p. 381). That is why, in Chambers’s view, camp is not a cultural practice, properly speaking, but a subcultural one: it has to be understood in a secondary relation to the existing genres it cites.
 14. With this example, we say good-bye for the moment to Joan Crawford, without having completed the close reading of the scenes of mother-daughter conflict in *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest* with which we began. But this detour, though necessary, is only temporary: we’ll return to those scenes in Part Four, when we’ll be in a better position to understand their gay male appeal.
 15. The tradition began not on July 4, in fact, but on July 12, 1976—date of the first “invasion” of the Pines by lesbians and gay men, wearing drag, from the neighboring community of Cherry Grove. According to local legend, that colorful eruption aimed to protest the refusal by the owner of the Motel at the Pines to serve a popular Italian American drag queen from Cherry Grove. For the historical background, see Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in*

- America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 268–271, 344–346. The rest of my information about the Italian widows also comes from Esther Newton, specifically from a lecture and slide show entitled, “Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen: Lesbian Power and Representation in Gay Male Cherry Grove,” delivered on February 7, 2000, at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. An extended version of that talk, which unfortunately does not include the slides showing the Italian widows, has been published in Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 63–89, 270–276.
16. Esther Newton, personal communication, February 4, 2009.
 17. Newton, *Mother Camp*, III. Newton adds: “By accepting his homosexuality and flaunting it, the camp undercuts all homosexuals who won’t accept the stigmatized identity.” Compare Edmund White, who in “The Gay Philosopher” (1969) speaks of “the famous mordant gay humor, which always attempts to cancel the sting of any jibe by making it funny”; White, *The Burning Library: Essays*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Knopf, 1994), 3–19 (quotation on p. 8).
 18. Those needing to refresh their memories of AIDS discourse in the 1980s may consult Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism = October 43* (Winter 1987).
 19. For the definitive study of gay men’s combined social empowerment and disempowerment and its consequences for gay male subjectivity and culture, see Earl Jackson, Jr., *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
 20. This analysis of the meaning of the Italian widows’ drag is not intended to obscure the reality of male privilege or to deny the power imbalances between gay men and lesbians in the society of Cherry Grove and the Pines on Fire Island; for the details, see Newton, “Dick(less) Tracy.” Those material realities underlie the drag performance and generate its conditions of possibility, but they do not constitute or determine its meaning, which is the interpretive point at issue here.

9. Suffering in Quotation Marks

1. See Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first publ. 1972), 109: “Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. . . . When the camp cannot laugh, he dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity.”
2. *Ibid.*, 109.
3. I follow here the brilliant observations in Scott Alan Rayter, “He Who Laughs Last: Comic Representations of AIDS” (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2002), 7–9. Rayter argues that AIDS humor contradicts Bergson’s eloquent and influential description of comedy.

4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 150–157, esp. 154–156.
5. *Ibid.*, 156.
6. An expansion of this argument can now be found in David Caron, “The Queerness of Group Friendship,” in Caron, *My Father and I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), ch. 5, esp. 198–206. See also Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7, who similarly speaks of camp’s “refusal to get over childhood pleasures.” Compare Susan Sontag’s claim: “The Camp insistence on not being ‘serious,’ on playing, also connects with the homosexual’s desire to remain youthful”; Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 275–292 (quotation on pp. 290–291).
7. For a different point of view, emphasizing the potential power and glamour to be found in abjection, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion (written with Michael Moon),” *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 215–251.
8. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 175.
9. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 35; see, generally, 33–38 for Warner’s full argument. Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 50, sounds a sensible, cautionary note: “A bunch of queens screaming together can be very exclusive for someone who isn’t a queen or feels unable to camp. The very tight togetherness that makes it so good to be one of the queens is just the thing that makes a lot of other gay men feel left out.”
10. See Guy Hocquenghem, *Le Désir homosexuel* (Paris: Fayard, 2000; first publ. 1972), 117. Hocquenghem, unfortunately, was making not a social observation but a theoretical deduction from the challenge posed by male homosexual relations to the oedipal structuring of both the heterosexual family and heterosexual society. For more on Hocquenghem’s thinking, see the special issue of the journal *Chimères* devoted to his work and influence: *Désir Hocquenghem = Chimères* 69 (April 2009).
For a survey of the possibilities for horizontal social relations in a non-gay-specific context, see Michel Maffesoli, *L’Ombre de Dionysos: Contribution à une sociologie de l’orgie* (Paris: LGF / Livre de Poche, 1991; first publ. 1982). And for a somewhat extravagant application of Maffesoli’s thought to gay male life, see Frédéric Vincent, “La Socialité dionysiaque au coeur de la tribu homosexuelle: Une intuition de Michel Maffesoli,” in *L’objet homosexuel: Etudes, constructions, critiques*, ed. Jean-Philippe Cazier (Mons, Belgium: Editions Sils Maria, 2009), 161–168.
11. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 280. For Sontag’s elaboration of this point about camp as the “theatricalization of experience,” see pp. 286–287. Sontag’s phrase,

“to perceive Camp in objects and persons,” is somewhat unfortunate. As Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 52, rightly points out, “Camp is far more a question of how you respond to things rather than qualities actually inherent in those things.”

12. See Marc Howard Siegel, “A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), 165–167. Siegel criticizes Sontag for her reductive view of the way gay men appropriate mainstream culture; he interprets her claim that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks” as implying too great an ironic distance between gay male audiences and the objects of their predilection—as if camp signified, “I don’t really mean it.” Siegel wants to argue, instead, “that such ironic quotation is not what is most interesting and productive—or even queer—about [gay men’s] reevaluation of popular culture” (166). Quotation, in Siegel’s view, is simply an acknowledgment that the cultural object in question comes from outside gay male culture itself.

I agree that irony and camp do not exhaust the meaning or content of gay men’s often passionate investment in heterosexual culture, but I also don’t interpret camp’s tendency to see everything in quotation marks as a refusal, a denial, an evasion, or a disavowal of how much gay men mean it when they take up a (despised) artifact of popular culture for queer veneration. Sontag’s emphasis on quotation, role-playing, and theatricalization may not succeed in doing justice to gay male culture’s delirious intoxication with particular objects (and the same could be said about my own analysis), but the practice of camp citationality which she invokes actually constitutes, in my view, a means of combining identification and dis-identification, belief and disbelief, proximity and distance, love and irony.

13. *Ibid.*, 277, 287. Prominent among those who have taken up the task of refuting Sontag’s claim about the apolitical nature of camp are Jack Babuscio, “Camp and the Gay Sensibility,” in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 40–57; Moe Meyer, “Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–22; and Keith Harvey, “Describing Camp Talk: Language/Pragmatics/Politics,” *Language and Literature* 9.3 (2000): 240–260.
14. Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (first publ. 1964), *Against Interpretation*, 3–14; Sontag, “On Style,” (first publ. 1965), *Against Interpretation*, 15–36, esp. 20.
15. Susan Sontag, “On Style,” 15. See, further, Pier Dominguez, “Susan Sontag, Superstar; or, How To Be a Modernist Genius in Post-Modern Culture: Gender, Celebrity and the Public Intellectual” (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 2008).
16. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 288, adding, “Camp is playful, anti-serious.” That is why, for Sontag, “Camp and tragedy are antitheses” (287).
17. Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 52.
18. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 276.
19. Compare Hocquenghem, who remarks in a different context, “Le caractère

apolitique, au sens d'inexistant dans la sphère de la politique révolutionnaire traditionnelle, de la question homosexuelle, est peut-être aussi sa chance" (*Le Désir homosexuel*, 158; "The apolitical character of the gay cause, by which I mean its absence from the sphere of traditional revolutionary politics, is also perhaps its advantage").

20. On the politics of gay description, see David M. Halperin, "The Describable Life of Michel Foucault," in Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 126–185. On "escape from identity" as a strategy for coping with social domination more generally, see Barry D. Adam, *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life* (New York: Elsevier, 1978), 89–93; also, Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
21. See Newton, *Mother Camp*, 108: "The homosexual is stigmatized, but his stigma can be hidden. . . . Therefore, of crucial importance to homosexuals themselves and to non-homosexuals is whether the stigma is displayed so that one is immediately recognizable or is hidden so that he can pass to the world at large as a respectable citizen. The covert half (conceptually, but not necessarily numerically) of the homosexual community is engaged in 'impersonating' respectable citizenry, at least some of the time."
22. Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 59. See also Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility."
23. Newton, *Mother Camp*, 108.
24. For a brilliant and perceptive investigation of the fine points, see Mark Simpson, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994). For an analysis of a specific aspect, see Scott F. Kiesling, "Playing the Straight Man: Displaying and Maintaining Male Heterosexuality in Discourse," in *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*, ed. Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Robert J. Podesva, Sarah J. Roberts, and Andrew Wong (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2002), 249–266, rpt. in *The Language and Sexuality Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (New York: Routledge, 2005), 118–131. For the notion of *habitus*, which accounts powerfully and precisely for the embodiment and reproduction of normative heterosexual masculinities, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72–95, 214–218.
25. Newton, *Mother Camp*, 101. Newton's insight has since been elaborated with subtlety and philosophical rigor in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006; first publ. 1990); and Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
26. On this topic, see the typically prescient observations by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 156. Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 141–194, speaks similarly of "the way that the gay sensibility holds

together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity” (p. 154).

27. Sontag, “On Style,” 18, makes a version of this point by saying, “Our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face.” The problem with this admittedly striking claim is that its contrasting terms are dichotomous from the start: Sontag’s statement is not so much a description of social life as a deliberate paradox. It depends on a play of antitheses which Sontag treats as opposites, thereby effectively *impeding* the possibility of bringing them together. (Compare Dyer’s observation in the previous note about “the way that the gay sensibility holds together qualities that are *elsewhere felt* as antithetical.”) Sontag’s dichotomy is misleading in this context for the very reason that it takes the difference between being and appearing to be *simply* antithetical and thus to be more polarized than it actually is. After all, if in fact a mask really is also a face, then it is no longer just a mask, and our manner of being is not exactly the same as our manner of appearing: our manner of being is rather a manner of constituting our identity by performing it.

It is necessary to rearticulate the issue in these revised terms precisely in order to bridge the polarity between being and appearing, which Sontag wants to do but cannot do because she overstates the differences between them, turning them into metaphysical oppositions. Sontag’s paradox consequently makes it *more* difficult to understand how being and appearing could actually turn out to coincide in the concrete practices of social life.

28. Qualifying her claim that camp is “anti-serious,” Sontag says, “More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (“Notes on ‘Camp,’” 288). Sontag even allows at one point that “there is seriousness in camp” (287). Compare Patrick Paul Garlinger, “All about Agrado; or, The Sincerity of Camp in Almodóvar’s *Todo sobre mi madre*,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 5.1 (February 2004): 97–111. Garlinger argues that camp is in fact compatible with sincerity.
29. Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 49, goes on to say: “Particularly in the past, the fact that gay men could so sharply and brightly make fun of themselves meant that the real awfulness of their situation could be kept at bay—they need not take things too seriously, need not let it get them down.”
30. Dyer, “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” 180, speaks of “the knife edge between camp and hurt, a key register of gay culture.”

10. The Beauty and the Camp

1. For the latest and most distinguished contribution to this debate, see Ross Chambers, “‘Isn’t There a Poem about This, Mr. de Mille?’ On Quotation,

- Camp and Colonial Distancing,” *Australian Literary Studies* 23.4 (October 2008): 377–391. Chambers describes camp as queer but not necessarily gay—a “performance genre” which involves “a collective interaction of performance and audience, somewhat akin to acting,” and offers a “rallying point” for “affiliations of an unofficial, *non*-national, *non*-familial, *non*-state-sanctioned kind” (381); understood in this way, camp becomes an appropriate vehicle for expressing various sorts of cultural and political dissidence beyond the merely (homo)sexual.
2. Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 49. Dyer’s essay was originally published in the *Body Politic* 36 (September 1977).
 3. For an excellent survey of critical writing on camp, see Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). For two very different analyses that indicate the range of possible approaches to camp, see Kim Michasiw, “Camp, Masculinity, Masquerade,” *differences* 6.2–3 (1994): 146–173; and Chambers, “Isn’t There a Poem about This?”
 4. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; first publ. 1972), 56 (emphasis added).
 5. *Ibid.*, III.
 6. Matt Crowley, *The Boys in the Band* (1968), in Stanley Richards, ed., *Best Plays of the Sixties* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 801–900, esp. 844–845.
 7. Compare Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*, 107: “Masculine-feminine juxtapositions are, of course, the most characteristic kind of camp”; and Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 61: camp “does undercut sex roles.”
 8. Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 49.
 9. “In traditional gay male culture, ‘trade’ designates the straight-identified man who, although willing to have sex with gay men (usually in the inserter role), refuses gay identifications and give-away behaviors such as kissing”; Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film, from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 423, n. 27. For a more detailed semantic and historical analysis of the term “trade,” see Gayle S. Rubin, “The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960–1990” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1994), 81–89. For the study of “trade” in a particular context, see Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010).
 10. See, for example, Esther Newton’s 1978 preface to the second edition of *Mother Camp*, esp. p. xiii, where she notes that on the streets of Greenwich Village the “limp wrists and eye makeup” have been replaced by “an interchangeable parade of young men with cropped hair, leather jackets, and well-trimmed moustaches . . . a proliferation of ersatz cowboys, phony lumberjacks, and . . . imitation Hell’s Angels,” adding, “This is playing with shadows, not substance.” For a similar sentiment, see Ethan Mordden, “Interview with the Drag Queen,” *I’ve a*

- Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 1–9. See, further, Richard Dyer, "Dressing the Part," *Culture of Queers*, 63–69, on the commerce between straight and gay male styles.
11. See John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), 8–9.
 12. As one gay man told Martin Levine, "Familiarity for me kills desire. Knowing someone is a turn-off because their personality ruins the fantasy I have of them." Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 93; quoted in Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema, from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009), 138.
 13. I am paraphrasing a brilliant passage from Sartre's commentary on Genet (no translation can do it justice): "La 'méchanceté' bien connue des pédérastes vient en partie de ce qu'ils disposent simultanément de deux systèmes de références: l'enchantement sexuel les transporte dans un climat platonicien; chacun des hommes qu'ils recherchent est l'incarnation passagère d'une Idée; c'est le Marin, le Parachutiste qu'ils veulent saisir à travers le petit gars qui se prête à leur désir. Mais, dès que leur désir est comblé, ils rentrent en eux-mêmes et considèrent leurs amants merveilleux sous l'angle d'un nominalisme cynique. Finies les essences, adieu les archétypes: restent des individus quelconques et interchangeables. 'Mais je ne savais pas,' me dit un jour un pédéraste en me désignant une petite frappe de Montparnasse, 'que ce jeune homme était un *assassin!*' Et le lendemain: 'Adrien? Une lope sans intérêt.'" Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 146–147; compare 349ff.
 14. Tony Kushner, "Notes toward a Theater of the Fabulous," in *Staging Gay Lives*, ed. John Clum (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), vii, as quoted and cited by Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 5.
 15. Summarizing Kushner's career, a *New York Times* critic recently remarked, "Perhaps alone among American playwrights of his generation [Kushner] uses history as a character, letting its power fall on his protagonists as they stumble through their own and others' lives." Andrea Stevens, "Cosmos of Kushner, Spinning Forward," *New York Times*, June 10, 2009.
 16. Compare the discussion in Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 69–71. Herring goes on to argue, however, that Cather's story ultimately "refuse[s] sexual identifications of any kind" (74)—a reading which owes more to Leo Bersani's theory of self-loss than it does to Cather. Jane Nardin, by contrast, probably goes too far in the direction of literalness in her identification of Paul as a fairy or invert: see Nardin, "Homosexual Identities in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case,'" *Literature and History*, 3rd series, 17.2 (Autumn 2008): 31–46.
 17. Willa Cather, "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament," *Coming, Aphrodite! and Other Stories*, ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor (New York: Penguin, 1999), 116–136

- (quotation on p. 116). All further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text. As to Paul's carnation, it is worth remarking that Cather had reviewed Robert Hichens's thinly disguised satire of Oscar Wilde entitled *The Green Carnation* when that book appeared in 1894; see Claude J. Summers, "'A Losing Game in the End': Aestheticism and Homosexuality in Cather's 'Paul's Case,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 36.1 (Spring 1990): 103–119; rpt. with slight alterations as "'A Losing Game in the End': Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case,'" in Summers, *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall, Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 62–77, 224–226.
18. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 43 (translation modified); for the original text, see Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir, Histoire de la sexualité*, 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984; first publ. 1976), 59.
 19. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" in Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 275.
 20. Thanks to Brandon Clements for this hyperbolic but justified remark. For corroboration, see Larry Rubin, "The Homosexual Motif in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 12.2 (Spring 1975): 127–131, apparently the first critical article to deal with this obvious but hitherto unmentioned fact. See also Summers, "Losing Game"; and Nardin, "Homosexual Identities."
 21. "What, then, are the clues with which Cather has been so lavish? These are so numerous that one despairs of setting them all down in a short paper" (Rubin, "Homosexual Motif," 129). For an opposing view, see Loretta Wasserman, "Is Cather's Paul a Case?" *Modern Fiction Studies* 36.1 (Spring 1990): 121–129. Wasserman reads Cather's story without reference to homosexuality, though her powerful interpretation does not invalidate Nardin's historical arguments for seeing an implicit homosexuality in Cather's portrait of Paul (Nardin, "Homosexual Identities").
 22. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 23; the entire passage was quoted in Chapter 5. See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 180, n. 21, who rightly insists, against Scott Herring's interpretation of "Paul's Case" in *Queering the Underground*, on Paul's "intense loneliness and isolation." Rubin, "Homosexual Motif," 130, takes the Yale boy to be "a foil to Paul . . . a red-blooded American youth who is in town over the weekend to relieve his sexual drive" and whose incompatibility with Paul stems from not sharing Paul's sexual and aesthetic interests; that is certainly a plausible reading, but it need not rule out other ones. Compare, for example, the following passage by Denton Welch, an English novelist and painter of the 1940s, who noted in his journal, apropos of a likable soldier who had offered to help him repair a punctured bicycle tire, "I can never be true friends with anyone except distant women—far away. For I wish for communion with the inarticulate and can only fray and fritter with the quick. I

- would tinsel, tinsel all the day if I were so placed. Yet I love myself and my company so much that I would not even ask the soldier to come in for fear of his becoming a regular visitor. I even feel that people pollute my house who come into it"; Michael De-la-Noy, ed., *The Journals of Denton Welch* (New York: Dutton, 1986), II.
23. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), 173.
 24. See Summers, "Losing Game"; also, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Willa Cather and Others," *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 167–176. Her-ring (*Queering the Underground*, 81) draws an interesting parallel between Paul and his namesake, the French poet Paul Verlaine, a favorite of Cather's and another sexual outlaw.
 25. Herman Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)," *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 287–385 (quotation on p. 362). All further page references to this work will be included in the text. This edition of Melville's story reproduces the Reading Text established by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and published by the University of Chicago Press in 1962.
 26. On his blog, in an entry dated October 23, 2008, the director Chris Ward justified his gambit as follows: "It is true that *To the Last Man* is a very violent movie. It is a Western epic, as true to a Hollywood blockbuster as gay porn will ever be. Ben Leon, Tony Dimarco, and I decided that we wanted to make a real Western movie—not some cheesy porno rip-off as has been made in the past. We shot on location in Arizona, used real horses, real guns, hired some real cowboys to be in the cast—in short, we spent lots of time, money, and energy to be as authentic as possible. In this spirit we made the decision to stay true to the Western genre—which requires violence. The Old West was a very violent place—on the ranch where the movie was filmed, there was a graveyard with a memorial to everyone who had died on the property. The monument listed how each person was killed: one man was killed by Indians up at the river; another person had been shot in a drunken fight at a saloon; still another died of injuries from a fist fight; the best one was the guy who died in a 'horse wreck.' No one in the graveyard lived past about 40 years of age. Today Hollywood films are rife with violence—it is part of modern entertainment. *To the Last Man* looks to the examples of the Coen Brothers and Tarantino. It's not a porn movie from the 1990s nor is it *Little Miss Sunshine*. It's a film for the 21st century and it reflects the entertainment values of 2008." See www.chriswardpornblog.com/ (accessed November 13, 2008).
 27. Newton, *Mother Camp*, 105.
 28. On this point, and on Foucault's famous statement that "power is everywhere," see David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29–30.
 29. That is precisely Leo Bersani's objection to camp; see Leo Bersani, "Is the

- Rectum a Grave?” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp = *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222, esp. 208. See also Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. 45–53.
30. Miller, *Place for Us*, 6. Compare his statement on p. 13: “The only socially credible subject is the stoic who, whatever his gender, obeys the gag rule incumbent on being a man.”
 31. Laurent Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.
 32. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

11. Gay Family Romance

1. Sigmund Freud, “Family Romances” (1909; first publ. 1908), trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9: 1906–1908, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 235–242. For a wonderful exploration of this topic with reference to gay men, art collecting, and William Beckford in particular, see Whitney Davis, “Queer Family Romance in Collecting Visual Culture,” in *Queer Bonds*, ed. Damon Young and Joshua J. Weiner = *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17.2–3 (2011): 309–329.
2. Willa Cather, “Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament,” *Coming, Aphrodite! and Other Stories*, ed. Margaret Anne O’Connor (New York: Penguin, 1999), 116–136 (quotation on pp. 131–132; italics added). All further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text.
3. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 398–399; David Sedaris, “Chipped Beef,” in Sedaris, *Naked* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), 1–6. The sentiment is not unique to gay men; for a lesbian equivalent, see Laurie Essig, “Harry Potter’s Secret,” *New York Blade News*, January 7, 2000, 13: “Certainly many of us felt the same rush of excitement when we came out as Harry Potter did when he figured out that he was not the same as his ridiculously ordinary family.”
4. Compare the gay English writer Denton Welch, who, in his journal entry for August 22, 1942, recalls in similar terms his feelings as an eleven-year-old schoolboy: “And now I see myself as I was then, running up to the cold dormitory, hiding myself in the bedclothes, imagining my cubicle transformed with precious stones and woods. Praying, always praying for freedom and loveliness.” See Michael De-la-Noy, ed., *The Journals of Denton Welch* (New York: Dutton, 1986), 6.
5. Denton Welch expresses astonishment at a visitor to his house who “seemed surprised that anyone should love things enough to seek them out and prize them” (*Journals of Denton Welch*, 200).
6. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Ser-

pent's Tail, 1988), 181. All further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text. Unless otherwise noted, all italics that appear in quoted extracts from this book are Bartlett's own.

7. George Haggerty, "Desire and Mourning: The Ideology of the Elegy," in *Ideology and Form in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. David H. Richter (Lubbock: Texas University Press, 1999), 203; quoted by Heather Love, "Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence," *New Formations* 63 (Spring 2008): 52–64 (quotation on p. 52).
8. For additional arguments in favor of this distinction, see Susan Sontag, "On Style," in Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 15–36, esp. 26–27.
9. For a brilliant demonstration, see Dennis Cooper, "Square One," in Cooper, *Wrong: Stories* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), 81–92. For an example, see an undated entry in Denton Welch's journal for the year 1943 (*Journals of Denton Welch*, 63–64):

"Today I have been to Ightham Moat. It was less spoilt than I remember it. I wanted so much to own it and undo all that was done in 1889. The drawing-room could be lovely, with its Chinese wallpaper, if the two blocked windows could be opened, if some of the garish paint could be taken off the Jacobean mantelpiece, if the 'exposed' beams could be covered in again and if the appalling little 1889 fireplace could be swept away. How lovely to have elegant nostalgic tea out of a Georgian silver teapot and urn-shaped milk jug in such a room properly restored and furnished!

"The great hall too needs stripping of its dreary panelling and the old medieval windows opened to air again. Then the courtyard, squalid with weeds and a huge dog kennel, large and elaborate as a Gothic chapel. What a waste!

"I biked out on to the main road where I rode a little way with a dark, wide-shouldered, football-bottomed youth. I could see where his pants stopped, the flannel of his trousers were so thin and meagre. He took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, bent only on getting to the top of the hill. Dark, sulky, good-looking. I guessed that he was probably a little simple minded. Sulky looking people nearly always are."

10. On the differences between the novel and the film, see the informative and astute reading by Robert J. Corber, "Joan Crawford's Padded Shoulders: Female Masculinity in *Mildred Pierce*," *Camera Obscura* 62 = 21.2 (2006): 1–31; expanded in Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 97–126, 203–206. On the production history of the film, see Albert J. LaValley's introduction to the published screenplay, *Mildred Pierce* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 9–53, esp. 21–30, as reported and cited by Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Routledge, 1988), 12–30, esp. 13.

11. Corber, “Crawford’s Padded Shoulders,” 104, citing James C. Robertson, *The Casablanca Man: The Cinema of Michael Curtiz* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 91. Williams, “Feminist Film Theory,” which provides the exact date of the film’s release (p. 14), also usefully complicates and qualifies the standard reading of the film as an allegory of women’s removal from the workplace to the home in the aftermath of the war (esp. 21–28).
12. Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (first publ. 1964), in Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 275–292 (quotation on p. 277); also, Sontag, “On Style,” 27–28.
13. Perhaps that is what explains, at least in part, the antiquarianism of gay male culture, or of a certain version of it: “I am not concerned with dead stones or lifeless furniture,” declared Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, the German collector and author of the celebrated transgender memoir, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau*: “They are embodiments that mirror the history of the men who built them, who lived in them.” See Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, *I Am My Own Woman: The Outlaw Life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, Berlin’s Most Distinguished Transvestite*, trans. Jean Hollander (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1995), 124–125, as quoted by Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 11. The memoir originally appeared in the same year, 1992, as a remarkable documentary film of the same title by the pioneering gay German director Rosa von Praunheim.

Similarly, in his journal Denton Welch remarks, “Yet how I loathe nature lovers! My thoughts are never on nature though I go out to roam for hours in the fields every day. My thoughts always go to history, to what has happened century after century on each spot of earth” (*Journals of Denton Welch*, 5). Later, Welch records a sense of wonder at nature, but he notes that “this feeling, so bandied about, seldom visits me in a form that is not mingled with history” (206).

14. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 277. See also Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 422.
15. It may be worth quoting Sontag at length on this point. The passage of time, she says, can bring out the element of enjoyable and outlandish fantasy in a cultural object: “Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday realities, the fantastic nature of which we don’t perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own. This is why so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*. It’s not a love of the old as such. It’s simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment—or arouses a necessary sympathy. When the theme is important, and contemporary, the failure of a work of art can make us indignant. Time can change that” (“Notes on ‘Camp,’” 285). *Mildred Pierce* is surely more enjoyable now than it was in 1945. For a lengthy set of reflections on gay men’s loving relation to outdated artifacts, see Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*.

16. *Journals of Denton Welch*, 240.
17. *Ibid.*, 286, 291. Sontag also says that “Camp is a solvent of morality” (290).
18. On aesthetics as a gay male utopia, see Al LaValley, “The Great Escape,” *American Film* (April 1985): 28–34, 70–71. On Style as a refuge from the Person, and thus a means of queer escape from a stigmatized identity and a tainted psychology, see D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); also D. A. Miller, *8½ [Otto e mezzo]*, British Film Institute (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 88: “In style, substance loses any such power of pressure, dissolving into a play of movement and light; marks of dishonour, feelings of shame, behaviours of abashment—these suddenly have no more pertinence than the rules of a schoolmarm in the Wild West, or the laws of a nation in a foreign embassy. . . . Style is personality without ‘person.’” On aestheticism as an alternative to psychology and psychoanalysis, see Ellis Hanson, “Wilde’s Exquisite Pain,” in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 101–123; and Hanson, “Confession as Seduction: The Queer Performativity of the Cure in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus im Pelz*,” in *Performance and Performativity in German Cultural Studies*, ed. Andrew Webber (London: Peter Lang, 2003), 41–66.
19. Compare Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 34–35: “In the case of gay men, our seemingly hereditary predisposition for tastefulness and the arts, for belting out show tunes in piano bars and swooning over *La Traviata*, is not an innate character trait but a pragmatic response to the conditions of a hostile environment. We are aesthetes by need, not by nature.”
20. See Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
21. Fran Lebowitz, *Metropolitan Life* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 6; quoted and discussed by Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 34–35.
22. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 290.
23. For a contrary view, see John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), who opposes aestheticism to the pleasure principle and who asserts that among “many affluent folks, gay and straight,” in recent years, “aestheticism” has been “replaced by hedonism,” a hedonism that has taken the specific form of consumerism. “The most displayed gay cultural product is not a play, musical, painting, ballet, or symphony, but underwear” (25). See also Mark Simpson, “Gay Dream Believer: Inside the Gay Underwear Cult,” in *Anti-Gay*, ed. Simpson (London: Freedom Editions, 1996), 1–12; Simpson would probably agree with Clum, and so would Harris (*Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*). It’s a claim worth considering, but it implies a surer distinction between aestheticism and hedonism than I would be prepared to make in the context of gay male culture.
24. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 289. On pp. 288–291, Sontag argues that camp trans-

- lates an aristocracy of taste into a democratic form: it is “dandyism in the age of mass culture” (289).
25. See Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 5–6, for an autobiographical account of his engagement with an old children’s book, *Hans and Peter*, about two boys who “live in unpleasant rooms with disagreeable views” and who “plan their dream house, which they will build when they have grown up,” but who in the meantime discover and fix up “a deserted shack in a wooded field” with a “lovely, verdant view from its window,” to which they invite their parents and other adults. Fellows quotes a number of “preservation-minded gays” who testify to their “penchant for meticulous attention to design detail,” their passionate investment in specific, precise aesthetic elements to which others attach little importance—an attitude neatly summed up by one of them who insists that “all existence is rehearsal for a final performance of perfection” (31).
 26. Although I admire Dianne Chisholm for raising important political questions in her critique of Bartlett’s account of gay men’s relation to their possessions, it will be clear from what I say about Bartlett here that I also have reservations about her reading of him. See Chisholm, “The City of Collective Memory,” *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 101–144, esp. 129–131.

12. Men Act, Women Appear

1. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 71. All further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 8, makes the point succinctly: “The musical doesn’t give us much to identify with among the men on-stage.”
2. See Steven Cohan, “‘Feminizing’ the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 46–69. See also a later chapter by Cohan, “Dancing with Balls: Sissies, Sailors, and the Camp Masculinity of Gene Kelly,” in Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 149–199, 348–349; and Jeffrey Masten, “Behind Gene Kelly,” unpublished manuscript.
3. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 7.
4. John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 47 (italics in original). The whole passage (pp. 45–47) is worth quoting in full, but a few excerpts provide a sense of the basic line of reasoning: “A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies . . . a woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself. . . . If a woman throws a glass on

the floor, this is an example of how she treats her own emotion of anger and so of how she would wish it to be treated by others. If a man does the same, his action is only read as an expression of his anger. . . . One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. . . . The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed, female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” This represents an elaboration, for the art historian, of the final sections of Freud’s essay on narcissism. Paul Morrison, in turn, has taken Berger’s insight in a queer direction; see “Muscles,” in Morrison, *The Explanation for Everything: Essays on Sexual Subjectivity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 113–139, 187–191. I have been deeply influenced by his formulations.

5. That is why sports provide a cover and an alibi for men who would otherwise risk emasculation by dancing in front of an audience; see Maura Keefe, “Men Dancing Athletically,” *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 13.6 (Nov.–Dec. 2006): 15–16.
6. According to the Women’s Sports Foundation, “Since the passage of Title IX, increases in athletic participation for both males and females have occurred at both the high school and collegiate levels. In 1970, only 1 out of every 27 high school girls played varsity sports. Today, that figure is one in 2.5. Female high school participation increased from 294,015 in 1971 to 2,472,043 in 1997. College participation has more than tripled, from 31,000 to 128,208. Both male and female athletic participation made steep increases immediately after the passage of Title IX at the high school level. Men’s and women’s rises in participation have also followed a similar pattern at the collegiate levels. However, male athletes still receive twice the participation opportunities afforded female athletes.” See Women’s Sports Foundation, www.womenssportsfoundation.org/Content/Articles/Issues/Title-IX/T/Title-IX-Q--A.aspx (accessed June 29, 2010).
7. See Keefe, “Men Dancing Athletically.” See, for additional details, Kevin Kopelson, *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 181–185.
8. See www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/d/dennis_rodman.html (accessed February 5, 2009).
9. On David Beckham, see the now-classic analyses by Mark Simpson, “Meet the Metrosexual” (Salon.com, July 22, 2002); “Beckham, the Virus” (Salon.com, June 28, 2003); and “Sporno” (*Out Magazine*, May 2006, and the V&A Fashion and Sport catalogue 2008). All are now collected in Simpson, *Metrosexy: A 21st-Century Self-Love Story* (Marksimpsonist Publications, 2011), 20–29, 84–89. See, generally, David Coad, *The Metrosexual: Gender, Sexuality, and Sport* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008).
10. I owe this insight to KT Lowe, whom I wish to thank for giving me this entire line of reasoning.

11. Compare the brilliant feminist analysis by Rosemary Pringle, “Bitching: Relations between Women in the Office,” *Secretaries Talk: Sexuality, Power and Work* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 231–249.
12. I quote the evocative phrase of Louise Glück, the final words of her poem “Messengers,” in Glück, *The House on Marshland* (New York: Ecco Press, 1975), 10.
13. The incident is recounted in a letter by Edmund White, written two weeks after the event and quoted in Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Stonewall Rebellion: Edmund White Witnesses the Revolution,” *The Advocate* 527 (June 20, 1989): 40. Lee Edelman cites this document in his essay “The Mirror and the Tank: AIDS, Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism,” in Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 93–117, 256–260; he offers the following commentary: “The drag queen striking the cop with her purse to defend the dignity of her narcissism before the punitive gaze of the law remains a potent image of the unexpected ways in which ‘activism’ can find embodiment when the dominant notions of subjectivity are challenged rather than appropriated” (113).

For more details, see David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2004), 148: “The first hostile act outside the club occurred when a police officer shoved one of the transvestites, who turned and smacked the officer over the head with her purse. The cop clubbed her, and a wave of anger passed through the crowd, which immediately showered the police with boos and catcalls, followed by a cry to turn the paddy wagon over” (see also 261). Compare Lucian K. Truscott IV, “The Real Mob at Stonewall,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2009: “The young arrestees paused at the back of the waiting paddy wagon and struck vampy poses, smiling and waving to the crowd.”

14. In fact, Joan Crawford’s gender coding is subtle and subject to both variation and manipulation. For a very useful and careful analysis, see Robert J. Corber, “Joan Crawford’s Padded Shoulders: Female Masculinity in *Mildred Pierce*,” in Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 97–126, 203–206.
15. See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
16. Andrew Sullivan, “The End of Gay Culture,” *New Republic* (October 24, 2005), available online at www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=cac6cao8-7df8-4cdd-93cc-1d2ocd8b7a70 (accessed July 13, 2009).

13. The Sexual Politics of Genre

1. Sam Staggs, *All about “All about Eve”: The Complete Behind-the-Scenes Story of the Bitchiest Film Ever Made* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001; first publ. 2000), 241, understands the gay male response to *All about Eve* in a similar way: “But more than anything, [the movie] is about women in conflict, and gays cheer for

this theme (cf. Scarlett versus Melanie, Baby Jane versus Blanche, Veda and Mildred Pierce, Mommie Dearest and Christina).” He does not expand further on this observation and leaves us to wonder about how to explain the general phenomenon.

2. Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 283. Also 282: “It seems unlikely that much of the traditional opera repertoire could be such satisfying Camp if the melodramatic absurdities of most opera plots had not been taken seriously by their composers.”
3. See, generally, Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
4. See the famous opening of Book 24 (lines 3–22) of Homer’s *Iliad*, in Richmond Lattimore’s translation:

only Achilles

wept still as he remembered his beloved companion, nor did sleep
 who subdues all come over him, but he tossed from one side to the other
 in longing for Patroklos, for his manhood and his great strength
 and all the actions he had seen to the end with him, and the hardships
 he had suffered; the wars of men; hard crossing of the big waters.
 Remembering all these things he let fall the swelling tears, lying
 sometimes along his side, sometimes on his back, and now again
 prone on his face; then he would stand upright, and pace turning
 in distraction along the beach of the sea, nor did dawn rising
 escape him as she brightened across the sea and the beaches.
 Then, when he had yoked running horses under the chariot
 he would fasten Hektor behind the chariot, so as to drag him,
 and draw him three times around the tomb of Menoitios’ fallen
 son [Patroklos], then rest again in his shelter, and throw down the dead man
 and leave him to lie sprawled on his face in the dust. But Apollo
 had pity on him, though he was only a dead man, and guarded
 the body from all ugliness, and hid all of it under the golden
 aegis, so that it might not be torn when Achilles dragged it.
 So Achilles in his standing fury outraged great Hektor.

5. On this point, see James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 104. Redfield’s reading of the *Iliad* has decisively shaped my understanding of the issues.
6. The closest Broadway has gotten to the *Iliad* is *The Golden Apple* (1954), a musical-comedy fantasia based on the Troy saga but set in the state of Washington at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the work of John Latouche (book, lyrics) and Jerome Moross (music), and it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical. For details see Ken Mandelbaum, *Not since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 341–

345. The *Odyssey*, however, was made into a musical of the same title, with book and lyrics by Erich Segal, and with Yul Brynner in the starring role. After touring for a year, it was renamed *Home Sweet Homer* and lasted exactly one Sunday matinee on Broadway (Mandelbaum, 31–32).

Compare, generally, Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 286–287, which presents camp as antagonistic to the high seriousness of great art, such as the *Iliad*. Camp represents, according to Sontag, an alternate aesthetic sensibility.

7. See Paul Morrison, “‘Noble Deeds and the Secret Singularity’: Hamlet and Phèdre,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 18.2 (June and September 1991): 263–288; rpt. in *Reading the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Hart (New York: Garland, 1996), 179–202. See also Michael D. Bristol, *Shakespeare’s America, America’s Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1990).
8. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 283.
9. The genius of Pedro Almodóvar’s queer cinema lies in its simultaneous belief and disbelief in melodrama, in its passionate embrace of the form and its critical disengagement from it. Almodóvar fuses melodrama’s emotional intensities with its self-canceling histrionics, its seriousness with its failures. He thereby conveys the impression of taking melodramatic plots completely literally, while at the same time maintaining an ironic, bemused perspective on them. That combination of headlong devotion and ironic distance, of a loving identification with melodrama and a cool distance from it, both as an artistic form and an emotional posture, is what Daniel Mendelsohn misses, when, in analyzing the work of gay directors such as Almodóvar and Todd Haynes, he posits two kinds of melodrama, and contrasts “camp” or “parodic” with “straight” or “deadly earnest” versions of it, as if they represented alternate and mutually exclusive approaches to the genre; see Mendelsohn, “The Melodramatic Moment,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 23, 2003, 40–43. For a sharp corrective, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 212–216; and, more generally, Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola’s forthcoming book on camp, melodrama, and Latin America in Almodóvar’s films.
10. Compare Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 169: “a fake . . . , when detected, alarmingly reveals that a fake has just as much life, as much validity as the real thing—until detected. It is then revealed as something that has no right to exist. It puts into question authenticity. It even has the power to damage, specifically and effectively, certain specific forms of authentication.”

14. Tragedy into Melodrama

1. Ang Lee’s 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* is often put forward as an exception to this rule and is presented as an example of a gay tragedy. The film itself surely

aspires to that status. But even Heather Love, who tries hard to make a plausible case for the movie as a tragedy, blurs her own focus on questions of genre, first by calling its “tragic view of gayness . . . melodramatic,” and then by shifting her preferred generic designation for the film to pastoral elegy. That indeed seems to be a more apt category than tragedy for the film, and certainly for the short story by Annie Proulx on which the film is based. See Heather Love, “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence,” *New Formations* 63 (Spring 2008): 52–64, esp. 55 and 58ff.

2. Susan Sontag, observing that camp “converts the serious into the frivolous,” argues that camp incarnates the “victory of . . . irony over tragedy” and insists that “Camp and tragedy are antitheses.” See Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 276, 287.
3. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 167: “On 16 November 1897 he wrote: ‘My existence is a scandal.’ . . . The characteristic name for the heroic life of things or people which have no right to exist was invented, along with so many other features of our lives, during the life and times of Mr Oscar Wilde. . . . If you can’t be authentic (and you can’t), if this doesn’t feel like real life (and it doesn’t), then you can be *camp*.”
4. For a brilliant attempt to imagine what a public, but queer, ritual of love might look like, and how it might be founded in the existing social institutions of gay male life, see Neil Bartlett, *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall* (New York: Dutton, 1991; first publ. 1990). For a survey of the actual rituals that real, non-fictional gay people adopt to celebrate their love, compare Ellen Lewin, *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
5. This may be one of the characteristic woes of modernity more generally; see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977).
6. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 100–104.
7. For some testimony to this effect, see Lewin, *Recognizing Ourselves*, esp. 191–192.
8. See Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 273, reporting the reminiscence of Auden’s New York friend John Button, published in September 1974, a year after Auden’s death, in the Boston magazine *Fag Rag*.
9. For example, Proust says that gay men’s “desire would be permanently unsatisfiable if their money did not procure them real men, and if their imagination did not end up having them take for real men the invert to whom they prostitute themselves” (“leur désir serait à jamais inassouissable si l’argent ne leur livrait de vrais hommes, et si l’imagination ne finissait par leur faire prendre pour de vrais hommes les invertis à qui ils se sont prostitués”). Marcel Proust,

- A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3: *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and *La Prisonnière*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Antoine Compagnon, and Pierre-Edmond Robert, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 17.
10. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp = *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222 (quotation on p. 208).
 11. Armistead Maupin, *Tales of the City* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 219. All ellipses are in the original, except for the one after "bathroom cabinet," where I have omitted a bit of the narrative. For further details about the practice of masculinity on the part of gay men of that time and place, see pp. 71–72, where Mona, in order to console her friend Michael for breaking up with Robert the Marine recruiter, remarks: "Christ! You and your Rustic Innocent trip! I'll bet that asshole had a closetful of lumberjack shirts, didn't he? . . . He's down at Toad Hall [a long-extinct cruise bar in the Castro] right now, stomping around in his blue nylon flight jacket, with a thumb hooked in his Levi's and a bottle of Acme beer in his fist."
 12. This is not a piece of wisdom that is limited to gay men, though some of its canonical expressions retain a certain kinship with gay culture. On Plato, see David M. Halperin, "Love's Irony: Six Remarks on Platonic Eros," in *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Thomas Bartscherer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 48–58. On Shakespeare, see Edward A. Snow, "Loves of Comfort and Despair: A Reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 138," *English Literary History* 47.3 (Autumn 1980): 462–483.
 13. In his wonderful essay on gay men's relation to Judy Garland, which serves as one of the chief inspirations for my own project, Richard Dyer has some trenchant and eloquent things to say about gay men's ability to combine passion with irony: see Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 141–194, esp. 154–155.
 14. See Douglas Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!" in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 300–320, esp. 300ff., from whom I have lifted this entire account.
 15. *Ibid.*, 313–318 (quotation on p. 317).
 16. Lisa Maria Hogeland, "Invisible Man and Invisible Women: The Sex/Race Analogy of the 1970s," *Women's History Review* 5.1 (1996): 31–53 (quotation on p. 46); cited in Ellen Samuels, "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse," in *Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies*, ed. Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson = *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1–2 (2003): 233–255 (quotation on p. 234). Hogeland is summarizing here the argument of Tina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman, "Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Issues)," in *Critical White Studies: Looking behind*

the Mirror, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 619–626.

17. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Chapter VI.A.b.38–475.
18. Just how much the Stonewall Riots had to do with the death and funeral of Judy Garland has been a matter of dispute. A lot is made of the coincidence by Stephen Maddison, who reviews some of the controversy: see Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonds in Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 1–12. Compare, however, John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 316; and now David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004), 260–261. Carter makes a very powerful, careful, and convincing historical argument that the rioters at the Stonewall Inn were not in fact spurred to militancy by mourning for Judy Garland.

15. Gay Femininity

1. David Denby, "Escape Artist: The Case for Joan Crawford," *New Yorker*, January 3, 2011, 65–69 (quotation on p. 65).
2. Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 14. Further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text.
3. Will Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).
4. For a detailed exploration of the ways that gender and sexuality mutually construct each other in male childhood, see David Plummer, *One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia, and Modern Manhood* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1999).
5. The reference is to John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), 19.
6. In support of this position, Fellows cites Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Cassell, 1997), 132, which makes an eloquent appeal of a similar kind to students of gay history: "Queer historians need to widen the definition of 'homosexuality' so as to encompass queer culture rather than just queer sex and the laws against it. . . . Queer history is still too much a part of the 'history of sexuality' and needs to be resituated within the history of non-sexual culture and ethnic customs" (Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 267–268n).
7. Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 268, n. 3, gives as his source for this quotation the following reference: Edward Carpenter, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: *Sex* (London: GMP Publishers, 1984), 278. Fellows quotes Carpenter again, approvingly, on pp. 247, 253–254, and 257.
8. Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 275, n. 1, gives as his source for this quotation the fol-

- lowing reference: C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, vol. 9, pt. 1 of *Collected Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 86–87, para. 164.
9. For an account of the Radical Faeries, see Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Arrival at Home: Radical Faerie Configurations of Sexuality and Place,” *GLQ* 15.1 (2008): 67–96. Morgensen provides a useful overview of the movement and a multitude of references to earlier writings related to it.
 10. The best introduction to this revival, which has gained considerable momentum since, is provided by Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
 11. Edmund White, “The Gay Philosopher,” in White, *The Burning Library: Essays*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Knopf, 1994), 3–19 (quotation on p. 5). White indicates that the essay was written and circulated in 1969 but never published until it was collected by Bergman for this anthology. Fellows (*Passion to Preserve*, 260), who quotes and cites this sentence, implies that White *accepted* the third-sex model after “a lifetime of pondering similar phenomena” (in fact, White was no more than twenty-nine when he wrote the essay). White does indeed refute various objections to the idea that homosexuals constitute a “third sex,” but his discussion of this point is subordinated to a larger argument against all theories, or myths, of homosexuality. (“Was it nature or nurture?” he asks skeptically on p. 5.) He concludes: “None of the metaphors I’ve suggested quite fits the homosexual. . . . It’s about time homosexuals evolved metaphors that fit the actual content of their lives” (pp. 18–19).
 12. Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 260–263, vigorously denounces such “effeminophobia,” as he calls it, surveying some of the scholarly literature on it and providing an eloquent account of self-censorship on the part of the gay men he interviewed, some of whom systematically suppressed evidence of their feminine identifications when they came to edit the written transcripts of their earlier conversations with Fellows (261).
 13. For a moving and intelligent popular account of these controversies as they bear on transgender children, see Hanna Rosin, “A Boy’s Life,” *Atlantic* (November 2008), www.theatlantic.com/doc/200811/transgender-children (accessed July 29, 2009). A gay psychoanalyst has since entered the fray, pleading humanely for a less pathologizing treatment of gender-variant boys; see Ken Corbett, *Boys: Rethinking Masculinities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
 14. See Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13–31; rpt. in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307–320.
 15. John Weir, “Queer Guy with a Slob’s Eye,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2003. On the stereotype that gay men “all have impeccable taste,” see Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 21.

16. Jack Malebranche, *Androphilia—A Manifesto: Rejecting the Gay Identity, Reclaiming Masculinity* (Gardena, CA: Scapegoat Publishing, 2007). The book's original title, judging from the publisher's website, was, perhaps more fittingly, *Androphilia: A Homosexual Fetishist's Manifesto*. A follow-up by the same author appeared a couple of years later; see Nathan F. Miller and Jack Donovan (a.k.a. Malebranche), *Blood-Brotherhood and Other Rites of Male Alliance* (Portland, OR: Jack Donovan, 2009); the book proposes blood-brotherhood as an alternative to gay marriage.
17. I am quoting from Malebranche's website: www.jack-donovan.com/androphilia/?page_id=10 (accessed January 4, 2009).
18. See, once more, www.jack-donovan.com/androphilia/ (accessed January 5, 2009): "Jack Donovan is my 'real life' name, and the name I'll be using for my artwork in the future. I always regretted using the Malebranche pseudonym for *Androphilia*—it should have remained an online handle."
19. The notion that anal intercourse, or any kind of bodily "penetration," is incompatible with masculinity and therefore out of keeping with any dignified form of sexual intimacy among men seems to have provided the basis for a number of online gay male communities. See, for example, heroichomosex.org/ (accessed January 4, 2009). The website's motto is "HEROIC HOMOSEX: TO LOVE ANOTHER MAN AS AN EQUAL AND A MAN WITH TOTAL FIDELITY."
20. See g0ys.org/ (accessed January 4, 2009).
21. See www.goys.eu/ (apparently the British version; accessed January 4, 2009), where we find the following commentary.

A personal note

Before, of the many thousands of films I have seen from silent classics to new releases, I could not say I had one clear favorite. *Brokeback* changed that; it is the best film I have ever seen. On getting home after seeing this film for the first time, I searched the Internet, unsettled, looking for I knew not what. I discovered the gay movement. I feel this way despite the fact that the sex acts implied are not what I would do as a gay man.

I do not expect to ever have the privilege of being so totally shaken by a work of art again in my lifetime. You would not be reading this now if it were not for *Brokeback Mountain*.

Tips on watching this film on DVD

- Try not to read the short story or anything on message boards before watching the film for the first time.
- Do not talk to people who may spoil the story, even by joking.
- Do not read the insert of the DVD as the titles of the chapters will spoil the story.

- Treat the DVD as if you were at the cinema; prepare yourself to sit and watch for two hours at a stretch.
- Watch with other people who are really interested and will not talk during the performance, or otherwise view on your own.
- Make sure you are not disturbed. Put the phone on voicemail and the bell out. Turn off your mobile. Unplug the doorbell. Tell people you live with who are not watching that you want two hours for yourself. (Some people watch on laptops while parked in the car to get away from their family for two hours).
- Sit fairly near the screen directly in front of the TV. Turn the lights low or out altogether.
- Have tissues to hand if you know you cry when watching old Hollywood films.
- Use the bathroom before you press play.
- If you are disturbed while watching, rewind a couple of minutes to get back into the story.
- Do not ask questions, just watch it with your heart and let yourself flow with the scenes.
- At the end of the film—you will know when the end is approaching—Ennis makes a phone call to the wife of Jack (played by Michelle Williams). Watch carefully during this scene, because the inset flashbacks explain what “really” happened.
- Pay attention to the shirts.
- Sit through the end credits to listen to the music.
- If you feel you need support after watching this film, go to www.ennisjack.com.

That final website is indeed worth a visit.

22. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 30.
23. E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 352.
24. On this point, see D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9–10.
25. There may be an exception, however, in the case of *Wicked*; see Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 219–235.
26. I find it interesting, in this connection, that Richard Dyer, in the course of an otherwise superb analysis of Judy Garland’s appeal to gay men, avoids the maternal aspects of her persona: when he comes to what he himself acknowledges is her gayest film, *I Could Go On Singing* (1962), he interprets her character’s relation to her adolescent son as an erotic allegory rather than as a maternal melodrama, thereby missing much of the movie’s gay appeal. See Richard Dyer,

“Judy Garland and Gay Men,” *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 141–194.

27. See Stephen Maddison, “All about Women: Pedro Almodóvar and the Heterosexual Dynamic,” *Textual Practice*, 14.2 (2000), 265–284; Leo Bersani and Ulysse Du-toit, “Almodóvar’s Girls’ (*All about My Mother*),” *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 74–123.

16. Gender and Genre

1. Joe Kort reports that a local news show about my class “How To Be Gay” featured an African American woman who remarked, by way of expressing her opposition to the class, “No one had to teach me how to be black.” He goes on quite properly to retort, “How untrue. Her family and culture taught her from the day she was born.” See Joe Kort, *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Find Real Love* (New York: Alyson, 2006), 5–6.
2. For a few hints about this, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 102. See, generally, Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), especially 169–205, on *Now, Voyager*. Compare David M. Halperin, “Deviant Teaching,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 146–167.
3. Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), is consistently hostile to social-constructionist approaches to sexuality and subjectivity, which he regards as entailing an “assimilationist-minded” denial of the existence of gay male culture and of the two-spiritedness of gay male subjectivity; he looks to Camille Paglia for authoritative confirmation of his view (esp. 260–262). Although it is certainly the case that a social-constructionist approach is opposed to the notion that there are “essential differences between gay males and straight males,” as Fellows correctly states (261), it need not carry with it all the unfortunate consequences that Fellows rightly laments. In fact, if the “essential differences” between gay and straight men with which Fellows is concerned are understood to be effects of social processes, it might even be possible to reconcile his views with those of social constructionists, such as myself.
4. “Quaint” is the word Fellows uses to characterize the near-extinct “tradition” of post-Stonewall gay masculinity (*Passion to Preserve*, 280, n. 11), which he describes as follows: “Gay men in the 1970s and 1980s affected a hyperbutch look (denim, leather, flannel, facial hair, stiff wrists) and began to proffer themselves as thoroughly regular guys” (262).
5. For the first quotation, see Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 267, note 2, citing Larry Kramer, “Sex and Sensibility,” *The Advocate* (May 27, 1997), 59, 64–65, 67–69. The

- second quotation (Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 262) is from Kramer's 1985 play, *The Normal Heart*, where it is part of a rant by a character who serves as Kramer's mouthpiece in the drama; Fellows cites the Penguin edition of the play (New York, 1985), 114. For a similar complaint that practitioners of lesbian and gay studies reduce homosexuality to sex, see Lee J. Siegel, "The Gay Science: Queer Theory, Literature, and the Sexualization of Everything," *New Republic*, November 9, 1998, 30–42; rpt. in Lee Siegel, *Falling Upwards: Essays in Defense of the Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 182–214.
6. On Liberace's activity as a restorer of neglected houses, see Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, 31–32, 133–134.
 7. These are aspects of gay men's cultural practices that Fellows, *Passion to Preserve*, brings out very well (esp. 244–246, 249–254).
 8. For the specification of "escape from identity" (or "flight from identity") as a tactic that stigmatized or captive populations typically use to cope with social domination—in this case, homophobia—see Barry D. Adam, *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life* (New York: Elsevier, 1978), 89–93.
 9. For the most systematic, rigorous, and sophisticated theoretical elaboration of the social, psychic, and erotic consequences of the simple fact that gay men are like straight men insofar as they are men, but different from them insofar as they are gay, see Earl Jackson, Jr., *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), especially the first chapter, "Calling the Questions: Gay Male Subjectivity, Representation, and Agency" (pp. 1–52, 267–274). For a brilliant, subtle, and thoroughgoing study of the unique subjectivity and gender positioning of gay men, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).
 10. See, for example, Sam Abel, "Opera and Homoerotic Desire," in *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 58–75.
 11. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), 61.
 12. Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect,'" in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, Janet Woollacott, et al. (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 315–348 (quotation on p. 330), as cited by Ken Tucker and Andrew Treno, "The Culture of Narcissism and the Critical Tradition: An Interpretive Essay," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 25 (1980): 341–355 (quotation on p. 351). See, generally, Hall's discussion of the constitutive role of ideology in "Deviance, Politics, and the Media," in *Deviance and Social Control*, ed. Paul Rock and Mary McIntosh (London: Tavistock, 1974), 261–305; reprinted in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62–90.
 13. See *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 449.
 14. Compare the remark of German filmmaker Matthias Müller, speaking about

- his love of Lana Turner in reference to this poem: “As a homosexual, I have a special relationship to the suffering of his [Douglas Sirk’s] female protagonists in a restrictive, normative society, but I also envy these female characters their privilege of being able to live out their emotions uninhibitedly on the domestic stage, through their large, expansive gestures. In this sense, even though their fates are distant from my own reality, these figures still invite me to identify with them.” Scott MacDonald / Matthias Müller, “A Conversation,” *The Memo Book: Films, Videos, and Installations by Matthias Müller*, ed. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2005), 233, as quoted and cited by Marc Howard Siegel, “A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), 67.
15. Samuel R. Delany, “The Rhetoric of Sex, the Discourse of Desire,” in *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*, ed. Tobin Siebers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 229–272 (quotation on p. 234).
 16. See, for example, Jeffery P. Dennis, “The Boy Who Would Be Queen: Hints and Closets on Children’s Television,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 56.6 (August–September 2009): 738–756.
 17. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17. Wayne Koestenbaum, however, claims that his early fondness for show tunes did in fact cause him anxiety. “Predictive sign: a fondness for musical comedy. I worried, listening to records of *Darling Lili*, *Oklahoma!*, *The Music Man*, *Company*, and *No, No, Nanette*, that I would end up gay.” See Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 11.
 18. The fundamental work on gay men’s language is by William L. Leap, *Word’s Out: Gay Men’s English* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). The project it outlines is a fascinating and important one, but the book itself does not succeed in living up to its promise. See also the important collection by William L. Leap, ed., *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon: Authenticity, Imagination, and Appropriation in Lesbian and Gay Languages* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1995). A brilliant meditation on gay men’s relation to language is provided by Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 77–91. See, as well, Edmund White, “The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality,” in *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 235–246; Bruce Rodgers, *The Queen’s Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972); James W. Chesebro, ed., *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981); Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz, *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Anna Livia and Kira Hall, ed., *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Paul Baker, *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (London: Continuum, 2002); Kathryn Campbell-Kibler,

Robert J. Podesva, Sarah J. Roberts, and Andrew Wong, ed., *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2002); Don Kulick, “Transgender and Language: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for the Future,” *GLQ* 5.4 (1999): 605–622; Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, *Language and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and, for an overview, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, ed., *The Language and Sexuality Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

19. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 19.
20. On the continuing gay appeal of divas, see the double issue of *Camera Obscura* entitled “Fabulous! Divas,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 65 and 67 = 22.2 (2007) and 23.1 (2008); also, the collection by Michael Montlack, ed., *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).
21. Barry D. Adam, “How Might We Create a Collectivity That We Would Want To Belong To?” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 301–311 (quotation on pp. 305–306).
22. On the different historical temporalities of lesbian and gay male sexualities, see David M. Halperin, “The First Homosexuality?” *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 48–80, esp. 78–80, and Valerie Traub, “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, 124–143.

17. The Meaning of Style

1. The basic and pioneering study of this phenomenon is Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; first publ. 1979). Bourdieu examines how taste cultures are created and distributed within social collectivities, such as families, social classes, local communities, ethnic groups, and other social formations that reproduce themselves and their aesthetic standards across the generations through biological reproduction, inheritance, primary socialization, and similar sorts of mainstream social mechanisms—in other words, that reproduce themselves heterosexually. His analysis pertains to tastes that are linked to social class, but it does not apply specifically to the acquisition and transmission of gay taste, or to the kinds of counter-acculturation that are at issue here.
2. Film noir criticism does attempt to capture the meaning of film noir style in general. It is perfectly able to describe how a standard element, like the use of the shadow cast by Venetian blinds, condenses the play with light and shadow that is fundamental to film noir style. Thus, as Damon Young explains, “Whereas traditional cinematography starts with white space and fills it with shapes, film noir starts with black space and lights some parts of it. Objects and people are always disappearing into shadow space. One never knows what is going to

emerge into the realm of visibility—which is never fully available, but always striated by zones of obscurity. The shadows from a Venetian blind perfect this effect of striation, this play with light and shadows (and all the metaphorical meanings that shadows have accrued).” Damon Young, personal communication, June 17, 2011.

Other critics try to go further and offer greater specificity. James Naremore, for example, commenting on a color film, *The Glass Shield* (1994), says it uses “venetian blind shadows” to create “a sense of isolation and fear,” in keeping with the chiaroscuro effects of black-and-white lighting in conventional film noir: see Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 248–249, 189. Robert E. Smith notes that in Anthony Mann’s black-and-white *Raw Deal* (1948), “the moonlight which shines through the Venetian blinds of Marsha Hunt’s bedroom” constitutes an “artful and often poetic approximation of natural light”; see Smith, “Mann in the Dark: The Films Noir of Anthony Mann,” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight Editions, 2006), 189–202 (quotation on p. 191). Most interesting of all is Tom Conley, who associates Venetian blinds with the immobility of the present in film noir: “The present is confining, artificial, cast under dim three-point lighting fragmenting the figure of the characters. The outside is seen across orders of Venetian blinds. Actors stare through their slits, as if disheartened avatars of the nineteenth-century novel and painting, figures whose search for bliss leads to gazes into the absolute nothing of the world outside. They are striated by the shadows of light cutting their bodies into lines.” About *Mildred Pierce*, Conley has this to say: “The lush Californian coast of *Mildred Pierce* (Warner, 1945) is shot in the past tense, in flashbacks that lead forward to the stale odor of acrid coffee and cigarettes in a police station in the early hours of the morning. Outside space or light tends to be evoked but closed off or set apart by narrative immobilized in no-exit situations.” See Conley, “Stages of ‘Film Noir,’” *Theatre Journal* 39.3 (October 1987): 347–363 (quotations on p. 350).

All three writers, in short, imply *something* about the meaning of Venetian blinds in film noir style: the blinds convey isolation and fear (Naremore), artificiality and distance from the natural world (Smith), or the separation of interior space from an outside space imagined as the space of the past, plenitude, sunlight, and nature, with the interior space represented as a space of stasis, of the immobility of “no-exit” situations (Conley). None of these critics, however, attempts to identify the meaning of the fleeting shadow of Venetian blinds as an element of visual style in the specific context of this specific moment in this specific scene in *Mildred Pierce*. Much less do they try to get at what that stylistic element might mean to a specific segment of the audience of the movie, belonging to a specific sexual subculture.

3. D. A. Miller, *8½ [Otto e mezzo]*, British Film Institute (Basingstoke: Palgrave Mac-

- millan, 2008), 74–75; also 86–88. Despite valiant efforts to describe the meaning of Fellini’s visual style, Miller’s account is less satisfying than his elucidation of the meaning of Jane Austen’s literary style: see, for example, his brilliant and sure description of the content of a formal element in the narrative of *Emma* in *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 61–68. For a systematic argument to the effect that style is its own thing, see Myra Jehlen, *Five Fictions in Search of Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), especially the remarks on Flaubert’s style (13–46, 133–143), to which I am deeply indebted.
4. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ch. 2. The passage was complete in the earliest version of the novel: see Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition*, ed. Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 99. Susan Sontag quotes a slightly different formulation, which she attributes to a different source, in the second epigraph to her essay “Against Interpretation,” in Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 3–14 (see p. 3).
 5. My affectionate thanks to Michael Forrey for working out with me the meaning of this shot.
 6. For some testimony by the creators of film noir that indicates how they understood the meaning of their aesthetic, see Robert Porfirio, Alain Silver, and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader 3: Interviews with Filmmakers of the Classic Noir Period* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2002), esp. 42, 125, and 230–231. These statements do indicate how careful and deliberate the filmmakers were in setting up shots and establishing a style, but they are couched in a language so close to the film noir aesthetic itself that they do not yield much information about what the elements of film noir style actually mean.
 7. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).
 8. Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 8.
 9. *Ibid.*, 9.
 10. Susan Sontag, “On Style” (first publ. 1965), in *Against Interpretation*, 15–36 (quotation on p. 20).
 11. Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (first publ. 1964), in *Against Interpretation*, 275–292, esp. 275–276 (quotation on p. 276).
 12. Pier Dominguez, “Susan Sontag, Superstar; or, How To Be a Modernist Genius in Post-Modern Culture: Gender, Celebrity and the Public Intellectual” (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 2008), 16. Dominguez discovered that one of the issues of *Partisan Review* that preceded the issue in which Sontag’s famous essay on camp appeared contained an announcement of her forthcoming contribution under the rubric “Camp as Style.” Whether that was actually a preliminary title or merely a description of the topic of the essay remains unclear, but in either case it is telling.
 13. Sontag, “On Style,” 36 (emphasis added).

14. See John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), xii. Clum compares and contrasts the Broadway musical with baseball in gay/straight terms: "Some of us also love the arcana of musical theater the way other men love baseball statistics" (see also pp. 23, 137).
15. On the camp form of this sort of utterance, see Keith Harvey, "Camp Talk and Citationality: A Queer Take on 'Authentic' and 'Represented' Utterance," *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 1145–1165, esp. 1151–1152.

18. Irony and Misogyny

1. For a very clear and patient elaboration of the distinction, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4–12.
2. Compare John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin's, 2001), 48: "Our enthusiasms may reveal that for all our interest in femininity, we're often not really interested in women."
3. Compare Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–22, esp. 11: "Parody becomes the process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchised advance their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification. Without the process of parody, the marginalized agent has no access to representation, the apparatus of which is controlled by the dominant order. . . . Camp, as specifically queer parody, becomes, then, the only process by which the queer is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility. This piggy-backing upon the dominant order's monopoly on the authority of signification explains why Camp appears, on the one hand, to offer a transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously invokes the specter of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order."
4. See the influential arguments in Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13–31; rpt. in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307–320.
5. On the general question of gay male misogyny, see Richard Dyer's sensible remarks in "Gay Misogyny," in Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 46–48.
6. I want to express my particular gratitude to D. Nathaniel Smith for urging me to think through this issue and for patiently working it out with me.
7. See www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/sy/song92a.html (accessed January 15, 2009).

8. See David Browne, *Goodbye 20th Century: A Biography of Sonic Youth* (New York: Da Capo, 2008), 202, 210: “Pettibon specialized in black-ink drawings that felt like cells taken randomly from comic strips, yet worked on their own. In an article for *Artforum* in 1985, Gordon praised Pettibon’s work as ‘statements unto themselves’ that ‘feed off the simplistic morals of made-for-TV movies, which center around “contemporary” questions.’”
9. Stevie Chick, *Psychic Confusion: The Sonic Youth Story* (London: Omnibus, 2008), 170. See, further, Browne, *Goodbye 20th Century*, 210–211.
10. Chick, *Psychic Confusion*, 173–174.
11. Quoted from LyricsMode.com: www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/s/sonic_youth/androgynous_mind.html (accessed January 15, 2009). Cobain had already asserted that “God is gay” in the closing line of “Stay Away” on *Nevermind* (1991). Another possible source could be the Nirvana song “All Apologies” from the 1993 *In Utero* CD:

What else should I be
 All apologies
 What else could I say
 Everyone is gay
 What else could I write
 I don’t have the right
 What else should I be
 All apologies

I quote again from LyricsMode.com: www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/n/nirvana/all_apologies.html (accessed on January 16, 2009).
12. Quoted from LyricsMode.com: www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/s/sonic_youth/mildred_pierce.html (accessed January 15, 2009). I have checked it for accuracy. There is now a Dutch punk band called Mildred Pierce—inspired, I presume, by the classic SY track.
13. For the background, see Browne, *Goodbye 20th Century*, 220.
14. The YouTube address is www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMgY_x4TigA (accessed August 1, 2009).
15. The comment was posted on the YouTube site for the SY video (see previous note). It is worth quoting in full: “This song has always provoked many theories as to what SY are trying to convey. Sometimes I imagine that they’re channeling Ms. Crawford’s inner turmoil and pain (from beyond the grave, perhaps?) that she so brilliantly used in her portrayal of Mildred Pierce. This tune is equal parts haunting and headbanging, a rare feat that can only be accomplished by the genius of bands like Sonic Youth.”
16. See the May 12, 2004, VH1 interview by C. Bottomley, “Sonic Youth: Medicine for Your Ear,” www.vh1.com/news/articles/1486965/05122004/sonic_youth.jhtml, accessed January 22, 2009. Gordon’s reflections are worth quoting

in full: “I saw her [Mariah Carey] doing a cover of the ’70s disco song, ‘Last Night a DJ Saved My Life.’ I just couldn’t get it out of my head. She was bouncing through this set of gangsta rappers. It was right after her breakdown and she seemed so vulnerable. And she was barely singing! It stuck with me. She and Karen Carpenter [the anorexic subject of Sonic Youth’s “Tunic”] are both about the body. Karen was trying to get rid of hers. Aesthetics have changed a lot since Karen. I’m sure they’re similar A-type personalities—driven perfectionists who just want to please people so much. Karen’s voice showed a lot of vulnerability—more so than Mariah. She made the words she was singing her own. That’s a scary thing to do when you’re standing in a media spotlight. You lose a sense of your identity. It’s a narcissist thing.” Those comments may hint at how Gordon and Coppola related to Joan Crawford’s performance as Mildred Pierce.

17. Browne, *Goodbye 20th Century*, 220.
18. Susan Sontag’s warnings against “deliberate camp” are pertinent in this context. See “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1964), 282: “Camp which knows itself to be Camp (‘camping’) is usually less satisfying. The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious. . . . Genuine Camp . . . does not mean to be funny. . . . It seems unlikely that much of the traditional opera repertoire could be such satisfying Camp if the melodramatic absurdities of most opera plots had not been taken seriously by their composers. . . . Probably, intending to be campy is always harmful.”
19. See Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” esp. 312–316.
20. Douglas Haddow, “Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization,” *Adbusters*, 79 (July 29, 2008), www.adbusters.org/magazine/79/hipster.html (accessed August 1, 2009, at which point 4,167 online comments had been posted to it; they are worth consulting every bit as much as the article itself). Thanks to D. Nathaniel Smith for referring me to this essay.
21. Christian Lorentzen, “Kill the Hipster: Why the Hipster Must Die—A Modest Proposal to Save New York Cool,” *Time Out New York* (May 30–June 5, 2007), available online at newyork.timeout.com/articles/features/4840/why-the-hipster-must-die (accessed August 1, 2009). Lorentzen goes on to write, “Those 18-to-34-year-olds called hipsters have defanged, skinned and consumed the fringe movements of the postwar era—Beat, hippie, punk, even grunge. Hungry for more, and sick with the anxiety of influence, they feed as well from the trough of the uncool, turning white trash chic, and gouging the husks of long-expired subcultures—vaudeville, burlesque, cowboys and pirates.” He accuses them of transforming “gay style” into “metrosexuality.”
22. Charles Ludlam, “Camp,” *Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly: The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam*, ed. Steven Samuels (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1992), 227, as quoted and discussed in Marc Howard Siegel,

- “A Gossip of Images: Hollywood Star Images and Queer Counterpublics” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), 165.
23. Siegel, “Gossip of Images,” 163–167 and passim, emphasizes the importance of “belief” for understanding gay male investments in Hollywood cinema; I am indebted to his argument.
 24. Compare Matt Siegel, “Are Hipsters Stealing Gay Style? Or Something Else?” *Queerty*, May 4, 2009, www.queerty.com/are-hipsters-stealing-gay-style-or-something-else-20090504/ (accessed June 27, 2011): “Hipsters are emulating *queer* style, not *gay* style. To me, ‘queer’ implies a resistance to assimilation which is ironically (and you know how much the hipsters love irony!) the very thing hipsters are doing: assimilating. . . . There is a major difference between hipsters and gays.” Siegel’s column elicited 102 responses at last count, some of which are worth consulting.
 25. Such a privileged position is perfectly appropriate to “a class of individuals that seek to escape their own wealth and privilege by immersing themselves in the aesthetic of the working class” and of other oppressed social groups, according to the unsparing judgment of Haddow (“Hipster”).
 26. See stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2008/02/03/50-irony/ (accessed January 6, 2009); Christian Lander, *Stuff White People Like: The Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions* (New York: Random House, 2008), 63. My information about Lander comes from his author’s note, as well as from an interview he did with Gregory Rodriguez, “White Like Us: A Blogger Explores the Attitudes and Foibles of a New Minority Group,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2008 (www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-rodriguez25feb25,0,1952462.column, accessed January 14, 2009). Many thanks to D. Nathaniel Smith for putting me on to Lander’s article and the interview with him.
 27. Dyer, *Culture of Queers*, 51. Compare Meyer, “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” 1: “Because un-queer appropriations interpret Camp within the context of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality, they no longer qualify as Camp. . . . In other words, the un-queer do not have access to the discourse of Camp, only to derivatives constructed through the act of appropriation.”

19. Judy Garland versus Identity Art

1. *Time Out New York* 661, May 29–June 4, 2008, 16–21. Further page references to this article will be incorporated in the text.
2. David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007; rev. ed. 2009); Halperin, “Small Town Boy: Neil Bartlett Learns How To Be Gay,” *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* 13 (2007–2008): 117–155, reprinted, with revisions, in *Tiresias: Culture, Politics and Critical Theory* 3 (April 2009): 3–35; Halperin, “Be-

- yond Gay Pride” (with Valerie Traub), in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3–40; Halperin, “Introduction: Among Men—History, Sexuality, and the Return of Affect,” in *Love, Sex, Intimacy, and Friendship Between Men, 1550–1800*, ed. Katherine O’Donnell and Michael O’Rourke (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 1–11; Halperin, “Deviant Teaching,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 146–167; Halperin, “Homosexuality’s Closet,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41.1 (Winter 2002): 21–54; Halperin, “Gay Identity and Its Discontents,” *Photofile* (Sydney) 61 (December 2000): 31–36; Halperin, “Des lits d’initiés,” *L’Unebêvue* (Paris) 16 (Autumn 2000): 23–39.
3. Richard Dyer, “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” in Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 141–194 (quotation on p. 149).
 4. See, for example, Derek Jarman, *Derek Jarman’s Garden*, with photographs by Howard Sooley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995); Simon Doonan, *Confessions of a Window Dresser: Tales from the Life of Fashion* (New York: Penguin Studio, 1998); Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Homeboys: Uses of Home by Gay Australian Men,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 7.1 (February 2006): 53–69; Gorman-Murray, “Gay and Lesbian Couples at Home: Identity Work in Domestic Space,” *Home Cultures* 3.2 (2006): 145–168; Greg Louganis, with Eric Marcus, *Breaking the Surface* (New York: Random House, 1995).
 5. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave / St. Martin’s, 2001), 23.
 6. This generational ideology has been recorded, elaborated, amplified, accepted as true, and provided with academic credibility by Ritch C. Savin-Williams, *The New Gay Teenager* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Savin-Williams projects “that the gay adolescent will eventually disappear. Teens who have same-gendered sex and desires won’t vanish. But they will not need to identify as gay” (21).
 7. Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 28.
 8. Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006), xi, 17–19.
 9. Scott James, “Celebration of Gay Pride Masks Community in Transition,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2011, A27A.
 10. Bre DeGrant, “Why I Don’t Celebrate Gay Pride,” Salon.com, June 27, 2011, www.salon.com/life/feature/2011/06/27/out_not_proud_open2011/index.html (accessed June 27, 2011).
 11. James, “Celebration of Gay Pride.”
 12. Quoted in June Thomas, “The Gay Bar: Its New Competition,” Slate.com, June 30, 2011, www.slate.com/id/2297608 (accessed July 12, 2011).
 13. I am quoting from the web-based version of *Time Out New York* (TONY): newyork.timeout.com/things-to-do/this-week-in-new-york/22619/poll-which

- is-gayer?package=80456 (accessed July 1, 2011). The print version contains a boiled-down equivalent by Erin McHugh called “Queer Factor” (21), whose two columns make *TONY*’s preferences clear: “Gay” (*Brokeback Mountain*, Truman Capote) and “Gayer” (*Sex and the City*, Herman Melville).
14. Available only on the web-based version of *TONY*: newyork.timeout.com/things-to-do/this-week-in-new-york/22683/top-ten-moments-in-nyc-gay-culture?package=80456 (accessed July 1, 2011).

20. Culture versus Subculture

1. For discussions of Jamie O’Neill’s homosexualizing of Irish identity and Irishing of gay male love, see my review of his novel in the *London Review of Books* 25.10 (May 22, 2003): 32–33; as well as Jodie Medd, “‘Patterns of the Possible’: National Imaginings and Queer Historical (Meta)Fictions in Jamie O’Neill’s *At Swim, Two Boys*,” *GLQ* 13.1 (2006): 1–31, which offers several useful and welcome correctives to the somewhat over-hasty critique of O’Neill in my review.
2. For an extraordinary example of an early effort to create a new, alternative, identitarian, “counterpublic” gay discourse of love, see Michael Denny, *Lovers: A Story of Two Men* (New York: Avon, 1979).
3. Consider British pop singer Holly Johnson’s 1994 dance hit “Legendary Children (All of Them Queer).” I reproduce the lyrics below.

Michelangelo . . . Leonardo da Vinci
 William Shakespeare . . . Nijinsky
 Alexander the Great . . . Tchaikovsky
 Bernstein . . . Mahler . . . Liberace

Oh come let us adore them
 Those legendary children
 You know you can’t ignore them
 Those legendary children

Add your name to this hall of fame
 The answer is clear
 They’re All Of Them Queer
 Add your name to this hall of fame
 Stand up and cheer
 They’re All of Them Queer

Andy Warhol . . . Johnny Ray
 William Burroughs . . . Jean Genet
 Isherwood . . . Wilde . . . Capote . . . Auden
 Jean Cocteau . . . Joe Orton

You know you can't ignore them
 Those legendary children
 Oh come let us adore them
 Those legendary children

Add your name to this hall of fame
 The answer is clear
 They're All of Them Queer
 Add your name to this hall of fame
 Stand up and cheer
 They're All of Them Queer

Be careful not to bore them
 Those legendary children
 You know you can't ignore them
 Those legendary children

Mapplethorpe . . . Crisp . . . Keith Haring
 Derek Jarman . . . Candy Darling
 Hartman . . . Sommerville . . . in the house
 Diaghilev . . . Nureyev . . . Michael Mouse

Little Richard . . . George O'Dowd.
 Divine . . . Cole Porter . . . Say it loud!
 Holly . . . Wolfgang . . . Plenty Handbag
 Brenda Yardley . . . What a fag!

(If only being gay guaranteed that you would be a genius. And how did Mahler and Mozart get onto the list, anyway?)

Compare the following claim by Ned Weeks, the hero of Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* (1985) and fictional alter ego of the playwright himself: "I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Byron, E. M. Forster, Lorca, Auden, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Maynard Keynes, Dag Hammarskjöld . . ." See Larry Kramer, "*The Normal Heart*" and "*The Destiny of Me*": *Two Plays by Larry Kramer* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 109.

4. See Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
5. Smith Galtney, "Let the Gays Begin: Six City Culture Makers Attempt to Answer Our Burning—Possibly Flaming—Questions," *Time Out New York* 661 (May 29–June 4, 2008): 18–21 (quotation on pp. 20–21).
6. Barry D. Adam, *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life* (New

York: Elsevier, 1978), 92 (on the “flight from identity,” more generally termed “escape from identity,” 89–93) and 106–114 (on “in-group hostility”).

21. Queer Forever

1. For the origins of these developments, see Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
2. June Thomas, “The Gay Bar: Is It Dying?” Slate.com, June 27, 2011, www.slate.com/id/2297604/ (accessed July 12, 2011).
3. Compare, for a later period, the testimony of Guillaume Dustan, *Dans ma chambre* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996), 75.
4. I am summarizing a history that has been partially documented for San Francisco in great detail by Gayle S. Rubin, “Elegy for the Valley of Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco, 1981–1996,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, ed. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 101–144, esp. 107–123; also, Rubin, “The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather, 1962–1997,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), 247–272, esp. 259–267.
5. Patrick S. Sullivan and Richard J. Wolitski, “HIV Infection among Gay and Bisexual Men,” in *Unequal Opportunity: Health Disparities Affecting Gay and Bisexual Men in the United States*, ed. Richard J. Wolitski, Ron Stall, and Ronald O. Valdeserri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 220–247.
6. “As of December 31, 2010, a total of 19,341 deaths have occurred among San Francisco AIDS cases since the beginning of the epidemic,” of whom 17,444 are estimated to be among men who had sex with men. See San Francisco Department of Public Health, *HIV/AIDS Epidemiology Annual Report*, 2010, p. 23, Table 5.1.
7. On Boston’s South End, see Sylvie Tissot, *De bons voisins: Enquête dans un quartier de la bourgeoisie progressiste* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2011).
8. For an analysis, see Gary J. Gates, *Same-Sex Couples: U.S. Census and the American Community Survey* (Los Angeles: Williams Institute, n.d.), services.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/pdf/CensusPresentation_LGBT.pdf (accessed August 30, 2011); Sabrina Tavernise, “New Numbers, and Geography, for Gay Couples,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2011, A1.
9. For an early account of this process, describing how Dianne Feinstein and wealthy developers managed to break the stranglehold of gay power over City Hall in San Francisco after the assassination of Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone in 1978, see Frances Fitzgerald, “The Castro,” in Fitzgerald, *Cities on the Hill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 25–119.

10. As June Thomas also points out, it is not only the Internet that has undermined the traditional commercial gay infrastructure. A number of new face-to-face forms of gay socializing have also emerged. “When it comes to nightlife, gay revelers have more options than ever. Gay men have the circuit party scene—lavish multiday, multivenue annual events, such as the Palm Springs and Miami white parties—where the emphasis is on grand spectacle and production values that exceed anything that would be possible at a neighborhood bar. In some cities, groups use the Web to organize ‘guerrilla gay bars,’ a sort of flaming flash mob in which homosexuals descend unannounced on a straight bar and turn it gay for one night only. And in most cities, freelance promoters produce regular ‘parties’ at straight venues as an alternative to the ‘gay every day’ bar scene. The trend took off in the 1980s, when the community’s desire for variety outpaced the supply of gay venues, and accelerated after 2000, when it became easier to publicize events via email.” Thomas, “The Gay Bar: Its New Competition,” June 30, 2011, www.slate.com/id/2297608 (accessed July 12, 2011).
11. Thomas, “Gay Bar: Is It Dying?”
12. June Thomas, “The Gay Bar: Can It Survive?” *Slate.com*, July 1, 2011, www.slate.com/id/2297609 (accessed July 12, 2011).
13. Thomas, “Gay Bar: Its New Competition.”
14. Thomas, “Gay Bar: Is It Dying?”
15. There are, of course, many exceptions to this trend; see, for example, Amanda Sommers, “Not Playing House the Way Mom and Dad Do: Same-Sex Commitment without Marriage” (M.A. thesis, Smith School for Social Work, 2010).
16. Maureen Dowd, “A Gay Commander in Chief: Ready or Not?” *New York Times*, December 18, 2010, WK9.
17. Patrick Califia-Rice, “Family Values,” *Village Voice*, 45.25 (June 27, 2000): 46–48 (quotation on p. 45). All further references to this article will be included in the text.
18. Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993).
19. Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (New York: Knopf, 1995).
20. Associated Press, “NY Legalizes Gay Marriage 42 Years after Stonewall,” June 25, 2011, www.bostonherald.com/news/national/northeast/view.bg?articleid=1347820&format=&page=2&listingType=natne#articleFull (accessed July 8, 2011).
21. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 37–38.
22. *Ibid.*, 39.
23. *Ibid.*, 38.
24. For the original formulation of “heteronormativity,” see Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3–17.

25. Ibid., 8.
26. Ibid., 6. I have directly borrowed a number of Warner's formulations.
27. Ibid., 9. See, further, Damon Young's forthcoming essay, "The Living End, or Love without a Future."
28. Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," 6.
29. Frank Bidart, "The Second Hour of the Night," in Bidart, *Desire* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 27–59 (quotation on p. 53).
30. Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," 6.
31. See, generally, Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
32. Edmund White, "The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality," in *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 235–246 (quotation on p. 246).
33. Susan Sontag, "On Style," *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; first publ. 1965), 15–36 (quotation on p. 36).
34. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 146: "Ils disposent simultanément de deux systèmes de références." I am taking Sartre's statement in a different and more general direction from the one he intended; for the context, see Chapter 10, where the entire quotation appears in note 13.
35. Many thanks to Edward Baron Turk for helping me to articulate this formulation.

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I have occasionally needed to quote some postings from bulletin boards on the Web in order to support my arguments. I made every effort to contact the authors of such material, but I did not succeed, and in many cases the individuals who wrote the texts I have cited were not identifiable—either because their real names and addresses were withheld or because their postings were anonymous. I would have liked to thank them. So let me express my gratitude here to everyone whose material I have used and who contributed significantly, in this way, to the argument of my book.



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The epigraph to the book comes from Albert T. Mollegen, *Christianity and Modern Man: The Crisis of Secularism* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 30. The quotation purports to be a paraphrase of Saint Augustine, though nothing in the writings of Augustine exactly cor-

responds to it. I am grateful to the late Bill Clebsch for citing the phrase to me and to Mark Jordan for identifying its source.



Finally, I want to express my deep appreciation to Wouter Vandenbrink. As soon as I saw his brilliant photographic series “gayboy walking (after Eadweard Muybridge),” in an open-air installation in Amsterdam, I knew I wanted it for the cover of my book. Wouter generously, graciously, and immediately gave me his permission to reproduce it. (I should point out that the series is linear in the original—one long set of horizontal panels.) I am also grateful to Wouter’s model, Roy Seerden, for agreeing to allow me to use his image to illustrate the argument at the core of this book—namely, that social forms are things in themselves.

What I particularly love about this photographic series is its camp essentialism—its invocation of time-lapse photography to fix the motion of a gay male body in its social and formal particularity, defying the spectator’s anxieties (or certainties) about stereotypes. I also love its daring, ironic, if somewhat more distant citation of the ghastly genre of Victorian medical photography, which documented the physical symptoms of masturbators, hysterics, and other perverted personalities, so that psychiatric experts could diagnose their conditions by recognizing, inscribed on their very bodies, the signs of pathology. Here the artist—and, by the way, I have no idea if Wouter Vandenbrink would agree with this interpretation—has taken up that visual technology, with its characteristic blend of clinical objectivity and pornographic curiosity, both to extend it and to defy its pathologizing effects, to celebrate the loving irony with which gay men recognize gayness in one another and scrutinize the appearance of every man they know to be gay for corroborating signs of gayness. The result is to offer us a lyrical and tender vision of a gay male body and of some of the markers that might enable viewers to identify it as gay, without reducing it to that marking or implying that the gestures in which we might read the subject’s gayness necessarily define either it

or him. All this is condensed in the artist's witty homage to Eadweard Muybridge and to the origins of time-lapse photography itself.

My last reason for choosing this image was to see if reviewers of this book would be able to get beyond it, to do anything more than read the body of the boy on its cover for its most obvious features—its nudity; its gender style; its Whiteness, youthfulness, slenderness, and relative hairlessness—and then go on to make the standard complaints about its lack of representativity, its privileges, defects, and exclusions, its irresponsible projection of a falsely universal gayness. As if any single body could possibly represent all gay men, any more than any one book could describe all of gay male culture; as if such a complaint were the only thing or the chief thing to say about such an image; as if the entire critical enterprise necessarily ended with such observations, instead of beginning from them. As always, I want most of all to discover what gay male studies, what queer theory, what queer cultural studies, what sexuality studies, what gender studies, and what queer social critique have to tell us now.

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