

The Myth of the Fag Hag and Dirty Secrets of the Gay Male Subculture



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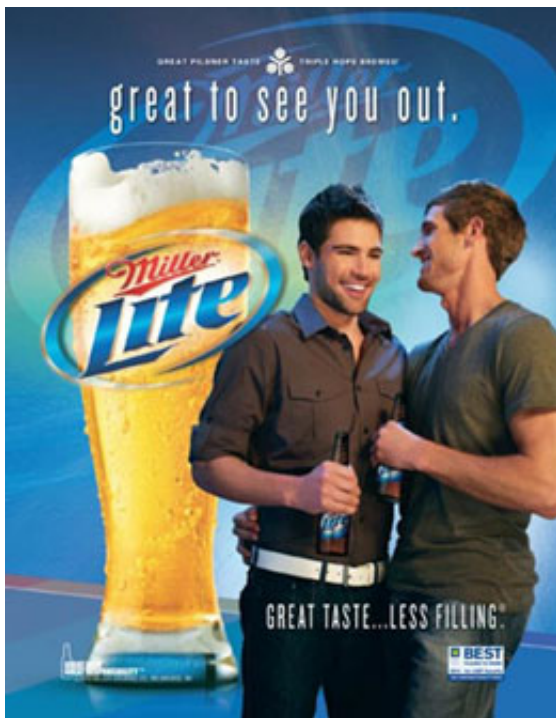
In my mid-twenties, I learned that taking your female friends to a gay bar is like taking a vegetarian to a butcher shop. There is a lot of meat, a lot of prime cuts, and even a little tripe, but nothing they can eat. While there aren't any publicly-posted placards posted to the effect of NO BROADS ALLOWED, the unnecessarily long wait times they have to endure to get drinks—watered-down drinks nonetheless—and the degree of stink-eye they receive from bartenders do a great job of conveying that same general message. Shortly thereafter, I began wearying of gay bars in general. My

friends were largely women and if they weren't being treated respectfully—and not getting decent cocktails, then what's the use of opening a tab?

It's a dirty secret of a subculture of the gay male world about women: That they're essentially unwelcome, unless they come to us as a Real Housewife, a pop diva, or an Tony award winner—or an unassuming fag hag. To anyone just coming out of the closet and hoping to get his bearings in the gay male community, the attitude towards women is simple: They are just objects whose function is to serve gay men. Maybe it happens when gay men get too comfortable in newly-discovered safe spaces—where they get to call the shots as their proudly out new selves. Or maybe it happens through cultural conditioning. Whatever the cause is, it becomes clear: If there isn't any kind of transactional exchange happening, then women lose their value in gay male subcultures.

When we talk about gay male privilege, it's important that as gay men, we understand any of us could've been—or currently are—perpetrators of this culture, simply by being. In my earliest days of being out of the closet—and among women—I've definitely been that jerk in the room that feigned ignorance about female anatomy, that responded with a sneer when a discussion about women's bodies arose; I've been that young gay man that had his collection of divas who wore it better than the rest—pitted them against the collections of other gay guys. When this is your entire world, you misstep, you ride the identity to its outermost limits—and when it stops making sense, you reassess.

I used to have a best friend of over 20 years who had taken to calling his closest girlfriends the b-word and that c-word regularly. He had taken to screaming at them and insulting their bodies. When prodded about his disrespect, he'd dismiss it as humor. "God, can't you take a joke?" would be one of his favorite refrains. I say, "I used to," because sometimes you have to draw a line about who you keep in your life and who you don't. I couldn't stand to be around this kind of language any longer. Because as gay men, we actually have to find ways to empathize with our female friends, not use them as props to boost our own self-worth. It turns out even gay men objectify women—but dismiss such thoughts on the basis of their sexual orientation. Guys, no. "But, I'm gay!" can't be your excuse for anything, not in a world where entire industries now make concerted efforts to court our demographics.



Over the years, I've been honored enough to become best friends with strong, wonderful feminists, who in turn stirred me awake to the fact that everyday brought with it some fresh act of sexism or misogyny. As a larger, brown guy, I rarely have to worry about being followed or sexually assaulted on the street; this was and continues to happen to women in areas like New York City on a regular basis. I think that as gay men, we become so preoccupied with this idea of having to hide our personal lives from coworkers or family members or whatever that we forget that we still enjoy a lot of male privilege that our girlfriends do not.

Somewhere along the way, I also realized that gay men had allowed themselves to fall into a lazy and inexcusable rut of objectifying, demeaning, and dismissing women.

So many of us are only familiar with the idea of male privilege being the province of straight men that we discount how gay men are able to exert dominance and control over women. We may forget this because much of American history has painted gay men as victims—and as gay men, many of us blithely buy into this narrative even if it isn't our own personal history, because it allows us an easy way to assimilate to the larger gay male culture. Only in the last decade has gay male identity become accepted into casual discourse—and normalized into our cultural diet. Before we dive too deep into this, it's careful to delineate that for the purposes of this piece, "gay men" is a subjective, if imprecise lumping of all such men. It's not a static grouping of such men—it's a cluster that even included me for a time.

American subcultures that are unwelcoming of gay culture are now the exception, not the rule. With this shift, however, gay men especially are losing the single differentiator that hitherto marginalized us from our straight brethren. We are beginning to enjoy fundamental privileges women still do not have.

The Advantages of Manhood

So long as we know how to play our cards in the corporate world, we can potentially enjoy a higher salary than our female counterparts, as ours is still a culture that pays women and men unequally. Similarly, so long as we know how to wear our poker faces, we aren't likely to get sexually assaulted as women do. It's not perfect, but privilege *is* privilege.

Last summer, I was dating a guy whose friend kept making a series of rape jokes. He was proud of what he believed was wit so sterling, so sharp that it could seemingly shame even P.G. Wodehouse. It was the kind of palaver that betrayed how little he seemed to interact with the opposite sex, that he would be oblivious to what an actual, real threat sexual violence actually poses to women. Worse yet was the nonchalance of said dating prospect, upon hearing one of his long-time friends spout such jokes—he actually egged him on. It was like being stuck on Neverland with a couple of Lost Boys—it's also the kind of gay male setting where you realize just how people can take their privilege for granted.

From the Daily Kos:

Gay men may desire the same advantages of manhood as heterosexual men, but gay men simply do not occupy the same social status and same social space as straight men. I always cringe when I see a write-up about male power and advantage because as a gay man, I simply am not privileged to those things. It doesn't matter if I am as butch as Clint Eastwood talking about "Halftime in America" or if I am as flitty as Chris Colfer in the role of Kurt Hummel on Glee, I simply cannot be grouped with heterosexual men. Even if we passed every gay rights law imaginable at this instant, it may be decades, if ever, that I would be afforded the cultural advantages of manliness. In a sense, this diary is asking for a qualification when pundits and intellectuals comment on male power and privilege: make sure you say "straight male power and privilege."

This was written in early 2012. Now, almost two years later, the world has become a dramatically different place—not completely different, mind you, but different enough where many gay men are beginning to enjoy some of the same "advantages of manhood" that straight men do.

There are limits and caveats. As gay men, we still have to be calculating; if we live in the right cities, look for work in the right circles, we will be allowed access to the same advantages of manhood as our straight brethren do. If we live in the wrong cities, we will be ostracized and forced to retreat into the closet. Sure, we can't hold our boyfriends' hands in public for fear of getting heckled or assaulted on the street; we can't get married in more than half of the U.S. We may not enjoy many advantages our straight brethren do, but as another writer on the Daily Kos points out, we are still less likely to get profiled against for being overweight when interviewing for jobs, don't have to deal with putting on make up or getting our hair done, and aren't likely to have opinions written off as "women's troubles." There is a world of biases we don't have to deal with that women still do.

Perhaps that single fact is why so many gay men act out—and against women in many cases—is because they can get away with it. Mainstream culture has sanctioned gay misogyny against women as winky, as part of the package of characteristics that "gay people just have." For the uncreative amongst us, misogyny may be a desperate way of reasserting those elusive advantages of manhood.

A few summers ago, I was at an acquaintance's birthday party up in Harlem. Wine was flowing freely, perhaps too freely. I had asked a close friend of mine to come with the understanding that if this party sucked, we could ghost at any time and get a nightcap somewhere more reasonable. She obliged. Apart from a couple women, the guest list was largely gay men.

I was in the middle of a conversation with my friend and a couple other guests at the party. We had been congregating around the punch bowl in the kitchen. The layout of the flat was such that you

had to pass through the kitchen to the bathroom—and the access was narrow. So as one of the guests excused himself to pass behind her on his way to the bathroom, our conversation abruptly stopped when we noticed a look of shock emerge on her face. She said that the guest had smacked her butt.

Later when he returned, I didn't say anything about the incident—hoping he'd rectify the situation or at the least, comment on it and add some kind of context that would explain that kind of behavior. Time rolled onwards. When my friend excused herself to check her voicemails, I asked him to apologize to her upon her return. He agreed, but after some protestation. She came back, he apologized, and we continued bantering. Until we abruptly stopped bantering.

Apparently, he had been quietly stewing. Ten minutes later, he came to a full boil, announcing that he didn't feel he was in the wrong over touching my friend inappropriately without her consent—but that I was in the wrong by requesting an apology from him. I was wrong—and my friend was wrong—because he was gay; because he told us what he did was not an intrusion on personal space, but a "love tap."

Apart from re-stating his sexual orientation, he also added, "I work in theater. That's just how we are with one another." A lot of what-ifs crossed my mind. What if he had been a straight man? The entire party would've turned on him and asked him to apologize, or else leave. What if he decided to grab Idina Menzel's or Patti Lupone's butts at an industry event; would he try the same arguments? Or would he attempt a sincere act of contrition? Would they have a grand old laugh about it or would they back-hand him? His excuses evoked echoes of the same arguments my former best friend used to make. Apparently, my friend needed to lighten up and get a sense of humor about having her body inappropriately touched. Just like that: Victim-blaming.

I excused myself to use the bathroom and when I came back I noticed that my friend and the party guest was absent. My stomach knotted up. Another guest told me that they had gone out to the balcony to talk. I later found out that my friend wanted to use the opportunity to get some air and have a one-on-one discussion as a chance to calmly walk him through why what he did was an unwelcome act. Her efforts were futile; she could barely get a word in edgewise before he steamrolled over her, talking louder and louder to try to prove his point, until she decided it was simply not worth pursuing. Ironically he had been trying to persuade her that I was bullying him before—not aware of what he was doing to her just then.

There's a lot of privilege associated with unapologetically encroaching someone else's personal boundaries like this. But the victim-blaming that ensued was more perverse. Ultimately, the guest had found a way to turn the party environment hostile. When her last-ditch attempt to make him see the error of his ways failed, we both cut our losses and decided to head home, feeling the glare of the guests below burn through us.

The party host, who had been asleep throughout this whole ordeal, sent me a text the next day admonishing me for creating a scene, without asking for the full story. Then he stopped talking to me.

Cultural Proxies As Role Models

I'm not so hard-pressed to figure out when this kind of objectification became de rigeur. I came out around 2004, when TV networks had finally figured out that there was money to be made in pandering to some version of the gay demo. It was the heyday for *Will & Grace*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Sex & the City*. The Scissor Sisters were turning heads with

their eponymous debut album. Rufus Wainwright had managed to graduate into a rock-pop mainstay. Culturally, the U.S. had begun entering a watershed era for acceptance of gay male identity.



However, as gay men and tokens of gay male culture were becoming normalized into the discourse of mainstream popular culture, a prominent gay male persona was becoming idealized: That of the affluencer. This persona was defined by attention to detail, upscale tastes, sartorial sensibilities, casual promiscuity, a penchant for dance pop, and being bitchy. Popular culture was teaching its consumers that to be gay was to be like Will or Jack from *Will & Grace*. Popular culture was teaching newly-out gay men that they could be welcomed into the heteronormative fold so long as they shoehorned themselves into these pre-approved molds of gay male identity. Unsurprisingly, this persona—vetted by mainstream media—allowed a gay men a liberal margin of misogyny, allowing them to write such behavior off as part of their identity. Gay men were allowed to say things like, "I find vaginas so alien" or more reductively, "Ew!" at the mention of female

anatomy because such responses were viewed as hilarious, because the negative implications of such humor wasn't ever really dissected.

It's unfortunate, because many of us don't get the luxury of role models in our formative years. Popular culture steps in as a proxy. When we see a mold of gay male identity be universally recognized as accepted, we want to try it on for size. We want to make it work. After being told in our formative years that there is no place in mainstream society for us, seeing representations of gay male identity in said society means we can finally come of age. We can enjoy a measure of equality. We can be "ourselves."* That is, if "ourselves" falls within the prescriptive limits of the gay male identity that's being commodified, packaged, and replicated by out gay men working in the realm of mass media.

These proxies are troubling though.

For example, in 2010, *Project Runway* judge and fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi grabbed Scarlet Johansson's breasts on the Golden Globes Red Carpet. When she looked visibly mortified, he retorted that he's gay so it's okay. Not so by her count. But when he acts so intrusively with little to no consequences, it sends a message to gay men who are still negotiating their identities and attempting to figure out how to fit into a world that still hasn't found a way to reconcile queer identity completely.

Read on [gawker.com](#)

Over at The Good Men Project, Yolo Akili writes:

At a recent presentation, I asked all of the gay male students in the room to raise their hand if in the past week they touched a woman's body without her consent. After a moment of hesitation, all of the hands of the gay men in the room went up. I then asked the same gay men to raise their hand if in the past week they offered a woman unsolicited advice about how to "improve" her body or her fashion. Once again, after a moment of hesitation, all of the hands in the room went up.

So you have young gay men witnessing Mizrahi's behavior; "I'm gay" gets handed down as an acceptable excuse for gay men to probe and disrespect women's bodies. It's endemic of a gay male culture that would sooner trot out a history of being victimized as an excuse for acting like assholes rather than taking ownership for said behavior, or better yet, correcting that kind of behavior.

Mizrahi is one example. On *Will & Grace*, you could create an entire drinking game around the number of times Jack recoils at the mention of female sexuality or says something about Grace's body; it's meant to be winky and fun, but ends up sounding like a broken misogynistic record. There are memes—like Sassy Gay Friend—which, for all their humor, reinforce the idea that it's okay for gay men to call women "silly bitches" if it serves a comic context.



Both examples highlight the problem with the fag hag construct as well. This idea that there is a 1:1 ratio of newly-out gay men and their best female friend is objectification of the highest order; it serves neither party. It paints a picture of gay male sexuality that necessitates the role of a woman—but furthermore, it paints the picture of women serving men, propping them up. Women end up objectifying gay men as surrogates for girlfriends or pretty plus ones at parties; gay men end up objectifying women as de facto therapists and punching bags, who are expected to make them feel better about themselves, all while weathering a casual deluge of slurs like "slut", "ho", and "bitch." When gay men and women can rise above the gendered nature of their relationship, these destructive tendencies melt away, but it's more likely that these relationships implode.

In Adam Goldman's *The Outs*, we see this 1:1 ratio fail spectacularly as one of the series' most riveting and relatable plots. Mitchell and Oona are presented to us as best friends, but throughout the series' seven-episode run, they grow more and more estranged. Mitchell turns to Oona as a sounding board for his failed relationships, while Oona relies on Mitchell to act as a pretty plus one when she attends an ex-boyfriend's cocktail party. She even commands him to take off his cardigan and "butch up." As far as female friends to gay men go, Oona is wonderfully brash—which is why we're able to see this relationship, premised on objectification, collapse.

Surprising as it is to many, there are also women who aren't as brash or outspoken as Oona. In fact, the idea that female friends to gay men should be crude and loud and messy is in itself an awful stereotype that's perpetuated by gay men as well. As gay men, many of us interpret the silence of female friends we've being insulted as consent. So it allows us to consider that it's appropriate for us to treat the entire gender accordingly. At some point, a

female friend might say, "That's not okay," or they might slap you—but you had it coming. That's all it takes and many of us grow out of this kind of thinking. But others don't.

It's how you end up with countless cliques of gay men whose social lives consist almost exclusively of hanging out with other gay men. How can you learn to be a human if you're just hanging out with clones of yourself?

Barbie Doll Packaging

Perhaps the way gay men act towards women can be summarized by how they regard women as tropes—owing in part to diva worship culture inherent in gay male identity. It's a specific kind of thinking that permits gay men to dehumanize women—viewing them as abstract objects. It's probably also why a blogger like Perez Hilton can so easily build an entire brand off slighting the bodies of female performers and entertainers.

In fact, in 2009, Jezebel's Anna North compiled a partial list of Hilton's descriptions of female celebrities. It would be easy to disregard Hilton's comments as the outbursts of a lone internet loon if there weren't countless gay men who weren't already following his example. Somehow being gay has become a coded way for many men to assume there's no wrongdoing when they talk about women's bodies, when they jokingly use "ho", "slut", or "bitch" as a synonym for "lady" or "woman"—and the spriteness with which they get defensive when called out for this kind of impropriety.



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An advantage of gay manhood in particular is that many of us are complicit in the way female body image is packaged, marketed, and distributed across media. We are complicit in the total objectification of female performers in entertainers by elevating them to goddesses or condemning them as flops. Diva worship is one of the ultimate forms of objectification. Lady Gaga, Christina Aguilera, Selena Gomez, Beyoncé: These are all performers whose handlers and makers cultivate brand identities in order to make them seductive to the gay male aesthetic. It's ironic because these stars are packaged as demigoddesses, but by making them appear to be more-than-human, they are sold to us as products, as something stripped of humanity. Divas are objects; women are not. Divas are nothing more than glorified Barbie dolls. Women are not.

Diva worship has become insidious—a way to reinforce a myth of aspirationalism wherein many gay men indicate to the opposite sex that unless they are worthy of achieving this absurdly lofty status, they are nothing more than interchangeable fag hags.

Think about the language:

"Britney is slaying!"

"Gaga is better than your faves!"

"She looks so fat in that dress!"

"She's so fugly!"

"What a ho."

How gay men speak about female performers contributes to objectification—whether intentionally or otherwise. We sometimes say a performer is "slaying" as a superlative way of saying she's doing something amazingly. This is not a problem. We should always be so upbeat about female performers; the problem occurs when the pendulum swings to the opposite extreme; we say she's a "hot mess" as a superlative way of saying she's doing something poorly. It's always superlative. There is no slang term for her to *just be*. Contrastingly, this kind of language is used rarely-to-never when discussing male pop stars—like Justin Timberlake or Drake,

for example. A large part of that owes to the fact that male pop stars don't fulfill the trope of diva worship how female pop stars do.



We are trained to idolize our pop divas as if they're flesh-and-blood Barbie dolls. To fulfill our duties as fans, we put down other pop divas. These performers stop being women to us through the language we use—they either become goddesses or trash. This is where the nasty language becomes eminent. It all becomes more problematic when this language is applied wholesale to all women, allowing gay men carte blanche to regard women as objects physically.

Facsimiles of Femininity

Gay male culture requests womanhood when it comes in the form of some kind of frothy entertainment commodity—where we are asked not to actually think about the woman herself, but the made-up packaged product before us.

We have even identified what constitutes womanhood, like garish eye make-up, over-the-top fashion, wildly theatrical mannerisms, and so on. We've figured out how to weave these trappings of femininity into spectacular facsimiles of femininity without actually empathizing with these women. It's why Ryan Murphy excels at writing Jessica Lange's glamorous, if morally reprehensible personas on *American Horror Story*. We love Lange as Constance Langdon, Sister Mary Jude, and Fiona Goode, but are never convinced that she's anything more than an enthralling anti-heroine trope.

Popular culture even largely accepts that gay men know enough about women's bodies to design clothes for them. Something problematic that Karl Lagerfeld once said: "The woman is the most perfect doll that I have dressed with delight and admiration."

Well, then.

To that end, it's even universally accepted that gay men can advise women on how to wear their hair or make up, or do a proper runway walk. This is ironic when you realize that many gay men spend little actual time interacting with women or regarding them as human beings. Again, we go back to Lagerfeld's "dolls" comment. Or furthermore, how little real world experience gay men have with women's bodies. After all, we are defined by our desire to have sex with other men, *not* women.

Apart from dictating how women should dress, many gay men themselves shun feminine mannerisms. Gay male culture—as it is currently being packaged and replicated—doesn't want to personify or lend much import to femininity. Sure you have the seemingly effeminate gay mouthpieces of contemporary entertainment culture—but as a consequence of their effemiteness, they're portrayed as virtual eunuchs. The preference in mainstream culture still

skews towards the butch *Brokeback Mountain*-esque portrayal of gay men. Hang out in enough crowds of mostly to all gay men and you find there's a startling, if gradual, rarefication: The "masc-acting str8" guys rise to the top—and set the rules for the game. Many will gravitate away the more feminine men to congregate amongst themselves. Many will pursue the "masc-acting str8" types. Others will likely leave.

"No femmes" is a popular refrain in the world of gay men who date one another; it is a stipulation that frequently appears in tandem with "masc-acting str8." That such discriminatory dating bias is applied within the world of gay courtship is amusing. It's unfortunate, though, as "no femmes" dismisses entire droves of potential friends or dating partners on the basis that their mannerisms, fashion, or cultural tastes verge on the feminine—without actually considering that, hey! these guys might actually be alright. It's also central to the larger impulse for gay men to exercise misogyny.

Essentially, "No femmes" is an outright repudiation of femininity, of qualities that we've been conditioned to believe are more representative of females than males. Like many things in the world of gay men, "No femmes" is the kind of coded language that betrays a much more fundamental fault line in gay male consciousness. Actor/writer Billy Porter, hits the nail on the head:

Flamboyant gay people get more of the attention, but we run the gamut...I think that it's a self-hate issue that's brought on by society. You want to assimilate. The only thing that we want as human beings is to be accepted."

It's telling then that such a large swath of gay men view being feminine as being antithetical to self-empowerment or self-actualization—that they haven't completely come to terms with

their sexuality and view femininity as something that could undercut their masculinity.

What then happens is not only the pro-active perpetuation of misogynistic attitudes, but the rarefication of an increasingly segmented gay community where insecure gay men arch towards an idealized masculine archetype—and shun traces of feminine archetypes that they end up constructing social worlds where everyone looks, dresses, and acts like them—where women increasingly occupy the periphery.

Is It Wholesale Social Idiocy?

Many of our traditional forms of social congregation have outmoded women—like the butcher shop at this essay's outset.



Set foot inside a gay bar and you discover entire artificial meat market-like microcosms which are largely devoid of women. To be a wallflower at any crowded big city gay bar is a phenomenal experiment; it's a vantage point from where you get to observe the politics of how men behave with each other and size each other up in a contrived context where women don't exist.

When you have such wholesale socializing of gay men in a universe where women exist only as grand pop icons in flashy music videos on large television screens hanging above the bar, you have a culture that has become complicit in the social retardation of a sizable chunk of humanity. In these venues, women are abstractions, symbols, but otherwise not encouraged to be actual three-dimensional beings.

The boys-only vibe of most gay bars is unsettling. You have scores of young gay men who are learning from one another, but many of whom spend minimal time with women. They forget how to behave and interact with the opposite sex. If the trend is for many straight men to objectify women by oversexualizing them, for gay men, it's to desexualize them entirely.

Over at *XO Jane*, Kate Conway writes in a piece entitled "Are All Gay Men Secret Misogynists?":

I did have several guy friends in college who flirted with exemplifying certain aspects of it for a while. When I asked one about it recently, he claimed that it just felt most comfortable for him at that stage in his life. He'd just come out of the closet, he was making new friends in the queer community and elsewhere—it was easier, he said, to fall back on a relatively tried-and-true narrative until he felt more comfortable with his situation.

Which makes sense, particularly in terms of college-aged guys. If a young queer man sees a certain behavior that allows him to fit in with peers, it's not surprising that he'd want to emulate it.

We all want to fit in, especially if we spent our adolescence aimless and only got our bearings sometime in our twenties. What's startling is that for many young boys, bullying other queer kids in school is what allowed them to fit in; so for kids who grew up being

bullied to ultimately replicate that same behavior, but to another historically marginalized group showcases an amnesiac tendency of the gay male community—one where we don't hold ourselves accountable, but expect victims to take everything in stride.

When I wearied of the cattle call culture of gay bars, I tried an alternative: Simply hanging out with my friends—whoever they may be—inside sexually-agnostic bars. When we collectively wearied of the cattle call culture of bars in general, we took the party to one of our apartments—and it's there that we began having incisive, extended discussions about humanity, about gender, about the unlikely objectification between straight women and gay men ("It runs both ways, though," remarked one of my friends).

Throughout my twenties, I tried not to be an asshole—but I realized that in those chapters of that particular era of my life spent mostly in the dark corners of gay bars with fairweather friends, I was becoming socially retarded. You can't exist in spaces that promote the interests of one gender above another and not end up with skewed moral values as a result.

"Queer" vs. "Gay"

A thread that runs common here is casual misogyny. When gay men congregate with women, women are frequently expected to shelve their concerns about the way their bodies are being spoken about and handled by gay men. The way gay men might call an invasive encroachment of personal space a "love tap" or men like Mizrahi regard Scarlett Johansson's breasts as punchlines or men admonish other men at gay venues for being "too femme" are just ways in which misogyny is stealthily executed and perpetuated by gay men.

Many of us actually grow up; we actually come to terms with how horrific this behavior is. We start drawing the lines—it's juvenile to excuse misogynistic behavior through sexuality. While many of our

peers retreat further into the bubble—getting older in the world of mostly-male nightlife, diva worship, and the antiquated notion of fag hags—others then look for something more. It ends up affecting the way they connect to the culture from a larger perspective.

I was on a date recently where, absently stirring my martini, I remarked about how I had to "bow out" of the mainstream gay world a few years earlier. It all got too much. I was seeing exes everywhere. The pressure to burn both ends of the candle—and drink to the point of blackout, until my liver cried uncle—had become tedious. The fact that I could never actually carry a conversation with anyone else because (1) the music was turned up so loud we couldn't hear our own voices; or (2) they simply had no yen or ability to carry a conversation couldn't justify how much time and money I was spending at these establishments.

My date turned to me and nodded; it's why, he said, he doesn't really identify with the word "gay" anymore and aligns himself with the "queer" label. It's not the first time I've heard this; I've had a couple friends over the past few years who have also shunned the word "gay" in favor of the term "queer." "Queer," which is a catch-all term for loving other humans in a variety of ways.

"Queer" is a loaded word. It is a word that makes people bristle, owing to its more recent usage as a homophobic slur. It is a word that is perhaps more inclusive than "LGBT"—because it encapsulates and allows for a variety of gender expressions. The word "gay" has become restrictive; "gay" is *Modern Family*, marriage equality, and fashionable, well-exercised men with tons of money and gorgeous houses. "Gay" may have been owned by the community at large before, but now the word has owners who bend it to fit their identities—men like Andy Cohen, Ryan Murphy, Rufus

Wainwright, men who enjoy incredible reach and the ability to shape young gay men. "Gay" is no longer loaded—it's been defanged enough that torch-bearers can now handle it.

Contrastingly, "queer" confounds. It confounds because it works against contemporary society's obsession with gender taxonomy.

From Wikipedia:

The range of what "queer" includes varies. In addition to referring to LGBT-identifying people, it can also encompass: pansexual, pomosexual, intersexual, genderqueer, asexual and autosexual people, and even gender normative heterosexuals whose sexual orientations or activities place them outside the heterosexual-defined mainstream, e.g., BDSM practitioners, or polyamorous persons.

"Queer" is an awesome word; it sets a place at the table for everyone, including the same "gay" identity which itself would shun most who identify as "queer" in the way it's constructed now. What this means is that to identify as "queer" is to be at ease with your own masculinity and femininity that you're not constantly having to fear for your own gender expression. Amazingly, when you're not hating yourself for being a little too femme, you end up respecting women. You end up tut-tutting and even calmly correcting those brethren of yours who identify as "gay" for their "love taps."

Like any kind of privilege, gay male privilege happens and perpetuates when people premise most of their identity and entitlements in life on a biological component of their person. Feminist writer Peggy McIntosh writes in the essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack":

We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work to systematically over empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systematically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

The crux of McIntosh's argument focuses on male and white privilege, but is very applicable to how gay privilege is fomenting and replicating. I can understand how after decades of marginalization the torch-bearers for the gay world have become militant on self-preservation—but this is happening with a fair amount of collateral damage to those inside their ranks and those who have historically supported them.

Self-preservation should not mean expecting young boys and men coming out to shoehorn themselves into a very narrow conceit of gender expression. Self-preservation should not mean issuing prescriptive modes of behavior for people to be. Self-preservation shouldn't come at the expense of other humans.

To identify this kind of privilege—and the discrimination and objectification that stems from it—is a start; the next step is to campaign for change. Unlike straight maleness, gay maleness is a

much more malleable identity. McIntosh writes, "I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege," and also this:

To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

Again, McIntosh's comments about white male privilege can be ported to gay male privilege. As gay men, we are being wholesale conditioned to believe that when we diminish women, it's okay, because we have been victims of oppression ourselves and we're gay and women "understand." To question this justification is to tap into the very "silences and denials" that fuel these attitudes. While the politically correct HRC-, GLAAD-backed appropriation of gay identity means that "Everyone is welcome," it also means that nobody talks about the way gay male privilege—which sometimes overlaps with white privilege in very conspicuous ways—disempowers women, sometimes stridently so.

We are encouraged not to address the ways in which gay men might use abusive language towards, in reference to, or even in front of women. We are encouraged not to do this to such a startling degree that when we do try to act in the interest of decency, we end up getting victim-blamed.

A makeover of the word "gay", of this particular identity, and its unfortunate brand of privilege that trivializes women, would entail adopting a mindset that is less bent on defining identity through

biology, but through shared interests. So that men are bonding not because they both have an inclination to date other men, but because they share the same world views. This takes the stress off focusing on expressions of gender, off sexuality, and emphasizes on actually connecting with humans through shared life experiences.

Break the Pattern

To redesign the current packaging of gay male identity would mean to reorient it around a love-based approach that finds gay men making a place at their table for all kinds of people—not just those they deem relevant to their interests. It would be trying to quash out this "ideal gay persona" of the affluencer; it would mean holding one another accountable as role models for younger gay men.

It would mean for many gay men to understand that while a neighborhood like Chelsea in New York City was once a refuge from heterosexist oppression, it's now become the very maw of a similar kind of privilege its earliest settlers were fleeing—a place that may not discriminate by sexuality, but it discriminates by class and race. To improve the way we relate to the world around us, it would mean for many of us to acknowledge there are communities where we wield a lot of power—and we have the ability to make "gay" mirror "queer"—where we focus less on exclusion, on creating communities of people who look and act just like us, but rather focus on inclusion. It would also mean demanding better behavior—and expecting many gay men to understand that women do not exist to add value to gay men around them and nor do they exist in a parallel universe. Repackaging gay male identity would mean that they understand the importance of language and personal space—and that "It's okay because I'm gay," is no longer an excuse for any kind of lewd behavior.

It may be a slow plod towards equal rights, but it's inevitable. as gay men continue to gain the same rights as their straight kin, it's up to us to remember the history of suffering and marginalization—and that we are in many ways beginning to leapfrog over the very women who tend to be our earliest adopters after we come out of the closet.

We can't pull the ladder up behind us and objectify from on top. It's up to us to do better than the precedent set by the people who made life hard for LGBT individuals in the first place. It's now up to us to make sure if there's someone trying to climb up, we lend a hand and pull them up.

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Open Thread: Ladies, Drama, Leave It Home



Joanna Rothkopf

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It's Jezebel's 10th birthday party tonight (whaddup fifth grade!!!)—and yet we feel we haven't aged a day. Tonight, pour one out for everything we've been through together; for our broken libidos, our declining country run by a fuzzy meat wad-in-chief, your shocking