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The Amazon Trail: On The Dangers of Assimilation

Sometimes I hate hets. Excuse me, my mother tried to teach me never to use the word "hate." Instead she recommended "intensely dislike." Whatever. I try to be this positive, loving, accepting, non-judgmental person, but heterosexuals — we can all name exceptions — and their pervasive culture sometimes sorely try my patience.

I realize that it's not directly their fault that Oscar Wilde Books in New York City, the world's first gay bookstore, may be forced into bankruptcy, just as I realize it is not entirely the fault of George Bush that the U.S. appears to be chomping at the bit to get at Iraq. Blame is easy to assign; responsibility is a much more complex matter. It may be true that some gay writers are putting links to Amazon.com on their websites, and that most readers, myself included, generally will take the easiest, least expensive route to reading a book, but I wonder if our inability to prioritize our purchasing decisions is not deeply rooted in our heterosexist upbringing.

It is so easy to participate in the culture of the majority. Turn on the TV and what do you get: 99.9 percent het programming. Go to the movies and what do you see: 99.9 percent romanticized renditions of het life. Peruse the library shelves and what can you select from: 99.9 percent are books, videotapes and CDs by, for and about people who experience the world very differently than do most people who are reading this column.

When the Oscar Wilde first opened in 1967 I was living in the closet in Connecticut, a new college grad with seven years' experience in quietly haunting libraries, straight bookshops, corner drugstores and newspaper stores in search of gay literature. The thought that there could be one physical space that would house what had taken me years to find was incomprehensible. That there were people in the world brave enough to risk their lives staffing such an emporium of variance just blew me away.

It took a while to work up the courage to visit the Oscar Wilde, but my need for it overcame my fear. The store was not on Christopher Street then. Christopher Street as we now know it wasn't even on Christopher Street. The Stonewall riots had not yet changed the face of the gay universe and no magazine bore the name of that still sleepy street. The Oscar Wilde was some blocks east, a tiny storefront that I found awe-inspiring, comforting and terrifying all at once. I was very nervous, not only that I'd be seen, but that I wouldn't be seen, wouldn't be able to make some connection with other literary warriors. Here I was, surfacing from a life underground — I wanted to shout my existence and muffle myself.

Life has never been the same — for any of us — since the Oscar Wilde took its stand at the portals of gay liberation. I have always associated its opening with the Stonewall Riots — having a gay commercial enterprise in the great-

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est city in the world legitimized us in a way nothing else could in a capitalist country. The founders of that bookstore sold not just books, but courage and strength.

And now the Oscar Wilde may be closing. It's a matter of being careful, as they say in 12 step groups, what you pray for. Back in 1967 I was not alone in wanting acceptance, a safe place in the world. When gay lib came along, although I walked the gay pride route giddy with excitement and a feeling of empowerment, something in me was uneasy. Would normalizing gayness lead to demystifying it? Would being gay be viewed as normal instead of special? Because I have always felt special and, yes, I admit it, superior, to the hets with

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all their privileges and blood ties and mini-me's.

While I, and many like me, came out early enough to have roots in the old secret society kind of gay world, others threw themselves wholeheartedly into the new era. Coming out to family and society now became as much a rite of passage as coming out itself. Sustenance was suddenly available and encouraged in the form of an accessible gay culture that included books and our own politicians, dances and our own church. We became a people, a sometimes romanticized and ennobled tribe. We claimed our place in the sun.

And then we got swallowed up. The lesbi-gay businesses are shutting down one by one. What were we thinking to give non-gays control of our culture by letting them distribute, then sell, then record or film or publish us?

There's a lot of talk about assimilation these days. About how we've made it into the mainstream and have become so complacent that we don't support the very institu-

tions which got us to this place. And it's all true. Many of us don't have to struggle today. For every ten lesbian teachers who play it cool in school, there is one who teaches gay lit to her English classes. Which of them is more invisible? Which of them is most likely to buy a book at the Oscar Wilde? Ironically, neither.

And that's why I, at times, intensely dislike hets. Either way they're still calling the shots. Whether I'm scared and suspicious of them (I'm both) or basking in their acceptance and approval (I want both), I am Other. It is not time to let go of the infrastructure that has given birth to a fearless generation no more than it is time to give up an inch of the bloodied ground we have gained. Some highly visible non-gay people may accept us, but that doesn't mean they've let go of seeing themselves as the norm and gay people as deviant. They may invite us to their parties and give us domestic partner benefits, but that doesn't mean they want their kids to come out. I am so tired of their arrogant chauvinism, their assumption of having the correct sexuality — of their sexual imperialism. I'd almost rather be reviled than tolerated and, in truth, believe

for all their liberal posturing, that deep down I am reviled.

It's hard for a marginalized people to reject the crumbs of safety and privilege tossed by those who haven't let go of an ounce of power. It's hard not to leave icons of struggle like the Oscar Wilde behind. It's hard to resist the seductiveness of the unwitting benevolent despots we call family of birth or straight friends or accepting co-workers. We probably won't. It'll take inevitable het betrayals before we understand that assimilation is just another closet. We can reverse our losses — and our deceptive gains — by taking back our culture before we lose it too. ▼

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