

From All Angles: Homo-faux-bia

Hugh Coyle

(Note: This series intends to look at controversial questions from a number of various perspectives, sometimes seriously, sometimes not so seriously. Several grains of salt are recommended before reading.)

It sounds like a mind-bender or some sort of Zen koan: When is "out" in? A lot of anti-gay media types have been asking that question lately in response to a new fad that's sweeping through the nation's schools.

When I first heard about it a few months ago, I didn't believe it. I thought it was some stupid story cooked up by conservative columnists to raise the flags once again and sound the usual alarms. Young people, they were saying, were starting to equate being gay with being "cool" and "with it," and more than a few were identifying themselves as homosexual just to rebel against their parents and oppressive societal standards.

Then this summer, a friend of mine was telling me about "Theodore" (not his real name), a gay co-worker of hers. Theodore was "out" with a vengeance: earrings, funky hair, wild clothes, campy laugh, the full swish and sway. He even begged her to let him borrow some of her dresses so that he could attend an upcoming party in drag. Weeks later, she happened to run into Theodore and his girlfriend walking arm in arm through the downtown shopping area.

For people like Theodore, being gay means assuming an affectation. It's a fashion statement, not a way of life. You can pass for gay if you walk the walk and talk the talk, just like gay people pass for straight all the time by dressing ultra-conservatively and trading fag jokes with their friends. Everyone knows that wearing jeans and cowboy boots doesn't make someone an instant ranch hand, however. In fact, some people take such actions to be as insulting as blackface was to African-Americans in the early half of the century. It may look like lots of fun, but in the end, the joke's on us.

"Acting" gay like some of these kids do reinforces all the old stereotypes about what it supposedly means to be gay: the limp wrist, the wispy voice, the traipse across the dance floor to the nearest powder room. It assumes a sort of orthodoxy to the one and only lifestyle of lesbigay peoples. If you're a lesbian, you start wearing flannel shirts and pants, you cut your hair short (except under the arms), and you ride around town on your Harley with your girlfriend wrapped around your waist on your way to the latest pro-choice rally.

But not every gay man bursts into a rousing Broadway medley when coming out of the closet, and not all of us take those first tentative steps in heels, either. Likewise, the road to open lesbianism does not necessarily involve cigarette addiction or a sudden inability to spell "woman" in the traditional (albeit theoretically questionable) manner. This is the sort of behavior our conservative surrogate "moms" and "dads" warn us about when they spout hateful things about "those people" and "their type." With full irony intended, it's exactly why so many young people are transforming that "don't do" checklist into a rebellious generational identity: it pisses off their parents.

There are those in the gay and lesbian world who welcome these wannabes and see them as allies in creating increased visibility and promoting political causes. Perhaps they are serving to break down cultural stereotypes and neutralize preconceived notions of what it means to be gay and/or lesbian, but they do so by reinforcing those same stereotypes. It may not be as bad as blackface, but pinkface isn't so pretty underneath the surface, either.

Being gay is not necessarily about cultural rebellion. Many of us aren't gay simply because we like to annoy our parents and raise eyebrows at parties. We're gay because we are gay, not because we choose to act gay or live "the gay lifestyle." The young person coming out of the closet because he or she is truly gay or lesbian faces an incredibly difficult array of questions and confusions. A proliferation of pseudo-sissies and demidykes only complicates the matter of understanding one's personal sexual identity. And God help the still-stumbling kid who falls in love with one of these make-pretend pretty boys or bogus biker girls...

Gay and lesbian people know all about acting, and for many of us, the truly liberating thing about coming out of the closet is that we no longer have to act like someone or something that we're not. Watching straight people act like they're gay may very well be amusing for a while, but then again, so is watching gay people act like they're straight.

In the end, it's the whole notion of "acting" which deserves reconsideration. Do we want a society in which people act like they accept gay and lesbian people, or one in which they really do? In that latter, ideal world, there would be no need for acting either way. The concept of the closet would cease to exist, and along with it, the entire notion of being either "out" or "in." ▼

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