

THE MAKING OF A SOUTHERN FAGGOT

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“Being so damn nelly, in my experience, obviated telling anybody that I was queer. My closet came without a door. Grocery store clerks knew. Elderly couples walking past me in the mall knew. Hell, even telemarketers knew. And they didn’t like one bit of it. Attitude or not, as a queer in the South I was destined to be a social pariah.”

My gender has always been markedly different from most boys I’ve known. Even when I was eight, I remember being much more content playing at my friend Becky’s house with her dolls than playing t-ball with the neighborhood boys. At school, I was always the proverbial last kid picked for sports. I didn’t really mind. I hated sports. Nothing scared me more than a small, spherical object hurling towards my face. Of course, I kept all of this to myself. Even then, I knew that others would disapprove of my not-so-masculine preferences.

After faring well academically in elementary school, I decided to ship myself off to an “International Baccalaureate” public middle school program to further my academic pursuits. I was, admittedly, a bit of an overachiever. This accelerated program, almost entirely white, was housed in a neighborhood school where 99% of the students were Black. My mother, who taught science at a nearby public elementary school, dropped me off on her way to work. It took about 30 minutes to drive from our home in the wealthy, predominately white suburbs of South Charlotte to my new school, tucked away in a working class neighborhood just a few minutes from I-77. Strip clubs and long-abandoned drive-in movie theatres peppered our daily commute.

I was a happy-go-lucky little boy, unabashedly feminine in the way that young boys can be when masculinity isn’t yet quite so hegemonic. I would run and jump and skip on my way to class, unaware that this was no longer appropriate for boys in middle school. After a few days of 7th grade, a few of guys came over, laughing, and asked me if I could dance for them again. They were referencing my playful way of skipping and whistling that had become habit. Sheltered in the suburbs, I had no way to comprehend my new environment, clouded by racial tension and a kind of masculinity regimen. Middle school was bad enough as it was; the stark segregation between the school’s programs didn’t help matters.

Not too long after the dancing debacle, I was crouching down at my locker, fiddling with my books and deciding whether or not I needed my protractor, when a class began to file out of the room to my immediate right. As they began to walk past me, I heard some of the guys in the group laughing. I didn’t think anything of it; I had already gotten used to kids laughing at me – which, in middle school, is what you assume anyone is doing when they laugh with your back turned to them. Without warning, one of the guys kicked me square in the back, knocking the wind out of me and slamming my forehead against the metal locker. Shocked, I looked up as the guys were walking away laughing, mumbling something about “Yea, he’s a total fag.” Out of what was I’m sure a combination of both kindness and pity, one of the girls walking behind them stopped to let me know I had something on my back. It was a yellow post-it with “Kick me if you think I’m gay” scribbled on it in black felt-tip ink.

At this time in my young life, I was a confused conservative child who argued with his seventh grade English teacher about abortion – a product of my father’s penchant for Rush Limbaugh. I didn’t actually understand any of the arguments, but I was familiar with the talking points. Similarly, I had heard many people use the word “gay” to describe people, but I had no way to comprehend what that meant. From what I had heard on the radio, it seemed that being “gay” had something to do with having sex with animals, pedophilia, and generally being morally bankrupt. It came as something of a

surprise then, when I found a sticker attached to my back that labeled me as such.

I was quite sure that I wasn't interested in sex with animals or children. I did, however, feel a peculiar attraction to other boys. When I was 12, my mother stumbled across my collection of steamy man-on-man porn pictures that I had spent hours downloading and printing out on our home computer while my parents were out. I kept them stashed in the lining under my cat's pink bed. Needless to say, such a thing is hot when you're alone in your bunk bed, but decidedly not when you see it dangling between your mother's fingertips. The photos were, shall we say, well worn. My personal favorite was a picture of a hot three-way going on in front of a fireplace. All the men were dripping wet with sweat as they fucked each other silly. Now, clutched in my mother's hands, even the sexiest picture looked dirty and shameful.

My exploration of the Internet was not curbed by her unwelcome discovery. Since I had first happened upon them while cruising around Prodigy (one of the first dial-up Internet providers in the US), I had been fascinated by "M4M" (men for men) chatrooms. I was so fascinated, in fact, that I had logged countless hours reading the endless chit-chat that scrolled down the computer monitor. When two of my friends came over to spend the night, I decided to divulge to them my experiences with these strange cyber-rooms filled with mysterious men. Why I thought it prudent to share with them my curiosity, I'm not sure. As if discovering my porn collection wasn't enough for the mother of a 12-year old to try to wrap her head around, dear old mom overheard our entire late-night conversation. When she approached me a few days later to talk about it, I managed to negotiate my way out unscathed by telling her that we should simply cancel the service. Out of sight, out of mind, I hoped. Confronted with the damning nature of my actions, I was just as freaked out as she was.

Luckily, I was not alone in my outsider status in middle school. While no one in my "advanced program for white people" was in such a lowly situation as to give me – the class faggot – the time of day, I found solace in the company of three lovely misfits from the "regular" program. While none

of us was "officially" queer, most of us fit the bill by middle school standards. There was Pablo, the boisterous, decidedly fey Latino boy who adored Annie Lennox ("Oh, ANNIE!"). Then there was Stephen, the quiet, pear-shaped white kid who probably would have passed as a girl if he put on a wig. The informal leader of our little pack, though, was Sherry. Sherry was a stick-thin black girl who, while somewhat quiet and reserved, was terribly amused by our antics.

I didn't know it at the time, but it was through this motley group of players that I first came into my queer sensibilities. You might say that they gave me my first taste of faggotry. I not only learned to like Annie Lennox from Pablo, but to truly *adore* her. Simply "liking" her was not enough; hyperbole and dramatics was requisite. Stephen was perhaps Pablo's theatrical opposite. His countenance was deadpan, never betraying his surreal will to suppress any expression of joy or pleasure. He could not be *bothered*. If any 12 year old could ever be described as jaded, it would have been him. Sherry, meanwhile, wasn't afraid to point out our idiosyncrasies. She one time pulled back the bangs of my unfortunate bowl cut, giggled, and exclaimed in her near-whisper of a voice, "Look what's hiding behind the curtains!"

Perhaps emboldened by the company that I was keeping at lunchtime, my peers became increasingly convinced that I was this thing they called "faggot." Despite my pornographic predilections, I remained skeptical. Moreover, I was terribly confused as to how these people had any idea that I might like to look at boys. How could they possibly know about my desires? Granted, I had feverishly jerked off to pictures of men having all kinds of sex, but that was in the comfort of my own bunk bed. How could the kids at school have any idea what went on under my sheets? Was it my chunky, pre-pubescent body? My free expression of emotion? Something about my gender performance gave my peers license to jump to conclusions about the kind of sex that I liked (or might like, since I hadn't yet had anything close to a sexual encounter). How could they know when I was still so unsure?

Their conviction didn't stop me from trying to sway their opinion. I would find some place deep inside to store it, to vault my queerness away so

that no one would ever find it. For my eyes only. I tried desperately to contain whatever it was that tipped off their gaydar. It never worked. Not long after my humiliating assault in the hallway, about 7 or 8 white boys from my program marched over to me during lunch period, including the guy whose foot left a bruise just above the small of my back. The one in charge, or perhaps the only one of them with the temerity to ask me, demanded to know whether I “spit or swallow.” Although my Internet explorations had certainly revealed to me “alternative” understandings of these words, I was quite sure that these boys must be asking about something else entirely. I had no fucking clue what that might be – but I knew that I had to answer. “Swallow,” I said; it seemed as good an answer as any. They got a good laugh out of that. They *knew*.

I was crushed. In elementary school, my femininity had been embraced by most of those around me as entertaining; I was always the class clown. In this new, foreign environment, it was viewed as alien and pathetic. After a few months of taunting, lonely lunches, and even a rock thrown at my head, I stopped skipping. In fact, I stopped smiling. One of my teachers, who in hindsight I’m pretty sure was gay, pulled me aside and asked me what was the matter. “You used to be this happy go lucky kid, and now...” He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to. How I could I even begin to explain to him my troubles when I couldn’t even put my finger on them?

My only recourse, I figured, was to find other gay men who could tell me what lay ahead. Stephen and Pablo had certainly provided me with a queer foundation, but none of us actually spoke of our homo-desires. The only folks that I heard talking about being gay were the likes of Dr. Laura and Rush Limbaugh and other “Christian” conservatives who blabbered on and on *ad nauseam* about the alleged proclivities of homosexuals. I needed to meet a homo in the flesh. I needed them to tell me what it meant to be gay.

Far too young to go to any bars, the Internet proved to be my only queer resource in North Carolina. It was a few weeks after my fourteenth birthday when I mustered the courage to meet a guy name Goble with whom I had been chatting for several months. He was 19 and had just moved to

Charlotte from a tiny town a few hours away called Forest City. He must have empathized with my teenage angst and confusion. After some negotiation, we arranged for him to pick me up at the grocery store near my house to spend some time hanging out with him and his friends. They were the kind of audacious, working class Southern queens that some would label “white trash” on account of their polyester clothes and fiery temperaments. Most of them had abandoned their painful, isolating family lives in rural North Carolina to move to the big city. They had become each other’s chosen family.

In my years spent in their company, I would learn what being gay was all about – at least, their kind of homo. They introduced me to things like house music and drag. While others might know a kind of “Tom of Finland” gay that’s all about muscles and mustaches, their kind of Southern femme gay was all about *Steel Magnolias* and Cher. It’s the kind of twisted campy existence you might find, say, in the cult film *Sordid Lives* – a kind of audacious, bitter wit borne out of real pain and suffering. It reveled in camp, tragedy, and attitude.

Together, we were *fabulous*. We were the kind of faggots who dropped Skittles into our Zima bottles. The little candy pieces would fizzle and change color as their outside shell dissolved into the drink. We fucking *loved* that shit. Sentences were preceded by “honey” or “sugar” and things we fancied were divided into three categories: “fierce,” “fabulous,” and “divine.” It was a world of polyester built for our own escape, a refuge from the drudgery that was the “real world.”

Keeping all that I was learning outside of school separate from the rest of my life was, at first, manageable. Well aware that my faggotry relegated me far outside the bounds of Southern propriety, I tried my best to lay low as much as possible while in school. As time passed, however, it became more

difficult to conceal my queerness from my peers. It seemed that the more I tried to fit in, the more my peers reminded me of my status as a faggot.

After two traumatic years of middle school, it was clear that the IB program was not for me. I changed tracks to join my peers from elementary school in a high school a few miles away from my house. But middle school had changed me. It has stamped out the boy that my friends in elementary school knew. I stared at the ground when I walked the halls. My face was riddled with acne. I was the portrait of an angsty teenager. Even back in the suburbs, I was an outsider.

At the risk of sounding terribly cliché, I sought solace in the theatre. It was the only place in high school that managed to accommodate all of me. Drama class allowed me to piece together all the pieces of my self into one collective identity. Since middle school carved me up into pieces, I had felt like I was performing different versions of myself depending on who was watching. At home, I did my best to perform as straight and “normal” as the circumstances would allow. I would read from another script at school – that of a quiet, reserved boy who awkwardly meandered through the hallways while staring intently down at the floor. On the weekend, I would play what was perhaps the most accurate reflection of me, the rebellious gay teenager who liked to smoke, drink, and party late into the night. My training in theatre gave me license to experiment with consolidating all of these versions of myself into a new kind of self, someone less compromising for his audience.

Drama class also suddenly opened up a network of peers who didn’t just tolerate my iconoclastic effeminacy, but celebrated it. I had never had friends my own age. Sure, I had folks to eat lunch with or perhaps go to the occasional concert. But it had been many years since I had had a meaningful friendship with anyone at school. Misfits themselves, my friends in the theatre allowed and, indeed, *encouraged* me to put to work all that my gay male friends had taught me in the ways of dramatics.

My newfound home in the theatre gave me the confidence to bring my nellyness out into the open. If I was going to be a faggot no matter what I

did, I figured that I might as well “be all that I could be.” And faggot, I was. In truth, a certain amount of respect came with wearing candied-apple-red vinyl pants and 4-inch platforms without so much as flinching. My outrageous wedge platform heels were, perhaps, a bit intimidating. I was *fierce*. One morning while I was leaning over the counter before school, my mother actually exclaimed “Look at those pants! You could bounce a quarter off that thing!” (I’m still not sure how I was supposed to react to that.) My father was less excited about my style choices, but I somehow managed to make it out the door to school without too much squawking.

My fagalicious wardrobe didn’t necessarily stop kids from talking shit about me, but it certainly gave them pause to do it to my face (“if he’s crazy enough to wear vinyl pants to high school, God only knows what he could be capable of”). I banked on the hope that my attitude would keep people out of my way. To my amazement, my strategy generally worked. The only time I can recall being verbally harassed to my face was when some boy quietly mumbled “That’s right faggot, prance down the stairs” to me while I was heading downstairs to class. I actually thought it was kind of flattering.

I buttressed my social standing with an uncanny drive to succeed academically. At my uber-competitive high school of about 2500 students, academic prowess brought some merit. I studied far more in high school than I ever did in college, and it paid off. During my senior year, my Calculus II teacher pulled me aside and said, off-hand “You know, I used to see you in the halls. You were so loud... I had no idea you were such a good student.” What I think she really wanted to say was, “I had no idea faggots could be so smart.”

Putting myself so blatantly on the edge of acceptability was, however, not exactly without cost. It may have protected me from most name-calling at school, but off-campus my attitude and fledgling self-assuredness did not negate my status as a faggot. Even when I tried my very best to tone it down, *everyone* knew. Being so damn nelly, in my experience, obviated telling anybody that I was queer. My closet came without a door. Grocery store clerks knew. Elderly couples walking past me in the mall knew. Hell, even

telemarketers knew. And they didn't like one bit of it. Attitude or not, as a queer in the South I was destined to be a social pariah.

That's the thing about being a fag in the heterosexist South – it kind of makes you the unintelligible “other.” I clearly read as male, but my limp wrist and dramatic vocal inflection fell far outside the bounds of masculinity. Whether I liked it or not, my mannerisms were something of a slap in the face to the genteel Southern way. I was reminded of this often in the glaring eyes of passersby or the condescending tone of my teachers in school. They desperately wanted to put me in my place, to straightjacket my faggotry.

Far outside of the edge of acceptability, all of the niceties that the South is known for were largely cast aside. Such barefaced sissyphobia and heterosexism radicalized me, just as historically other disenfranchised communities have been mobilized by oppression (e.g. Blacks in the South under lynching, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina). It left an indelible mark on me, fundamentally changing the way that I navigated the world. Femme guys in the South, and other parts of the country, know what I'm talking about. It's that ever-present feeling of impending danger, not terribly different from the fear that many women describe having when walking down the street alone at night. It's my hesitancy to rely and trust others, particularly straight men.

Perhaps a story might better help to illustrate this. For the first year that I attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I found myself living in an expensive private dorm called “Granville Towers.” A prissy fag through-and-through, I was lured in by their included room cleaning services. I never considered that the culture that went with such an elite, exclusionary dorm might not be entirely homo-friendly. My suitemate quickly came to exemplify that culture. He was a handsome, beefy Italian guy in the ROTC who came home violently drunk most evenings to pound his fists against the stall in our shared bathroom while screaming incoherently about some faggot or bitch that had pissed him off that night. Despite his rabid sexism and homophobia, I couldn't shake my attraction for him. He had military cropped

black hair, soft tan skin, and round muscles that I fantasized about grabbing onto while he moved on top of me.

During one of the first weeks of school, I found myself standing next to him in the fluorescent-lit elevator on our trip to the 7th floor. He was shirtless. The rational half of my brain implored me to mind my own business and stare straight ahead, though I was admiring his well-sculpted frame out of the careful corner of my eye. My prostate, however, demanded that I steal a quick glance to my right. Neither I, nor my prostate, was prepared to find him staring right back at me, rubbing his weighty crotch with a sneer on his face. *Fuck*. My eyes immediately dropped down south to his crotch. His athletic running shorts were glistening from the sweat dripping down his chest. *Holy, holy, holy fucking shit*. I jerked my hungry eyes away as fast as possible and concentrated on the elevator door. I knew better than to show any sign of interest. If this were an erotic story, I'd follow him to his room and he'd greedily fuck my face while telling me I was his cock-sucking bitch. He'd probably even spit on my all-too-eager face. But this wasn't someone's fantasy. This was desire laced with real danger. Was it a trap? I wasn't willing to find out. I hurriedly left the elevator and locked myself in my room. I think I must have masturbated twelve times that afternoon.

It wasn't long thereafter that I found out more about this Joe character. I was, as was oft the case, sitting at my desk chatting with folks online, when I heard him yapping on the phone with someone. This wasn't terribly out of the ordinary; Joe was a loud guy, he made his presence known. And then he said the word “drag queen.” My ears perked up. “Dude! I didn't know he was a fucking drag queen.” A few moments of silence. “Yea, whatever. So I guess I had sex with a dude. But, I mean, I didn't know!” I was, at that point, leaning back in my chair with my legs pushed up on the desk; I almost fell backwards as I tried to digest this new information. There was more to Joe, it seemed, than met the eye.

Months later, I was typing away at my computer when my suitemate and a few of his friends came home drunk and angry. Joe stormed into the

bathroom, spewing homophobic verbal diarrhea while banging his fist against the door to my room and rattling its handle. It was locked. My body froze with fear. This was nothing like his usual drunken homecomings. “LET’S FUCKING BREAK INTO THAT FAGGOT’S ROOM! ARE YOU IN THERE, FAGGOT?” Things began to move slowly. I tried to get up but my legs remained defiantly in place. “THIS IS THAT FAGGOT’S SHIT, LET’S PISS ALL OVER IT. YOU HEAR THAT FAGGOT, WE’RE PISSING ALL OVER YOUR FUCKING STUFF?” He hit the door, threatening to break it down.

Apparently my queerness had offended Joe’s sensibilities. I grabbed the scissors at my desk, not knowing what I would do with them if he somehow managed to break in. Stab him? Puh-lease! I had a hard enough time pricking my finger for my at-home HIV tests. But his rage was uncontrollable; his conflicts with his own desire were clearly tearing him apart. Luckily for everyone involved, the door withstood his beating.

I moved out of the private dorm and into University housing the next day. Despite the many people around to see (and hear) his tirade, my attempts to bring honor court charges (bringing charges in a university-run court system) against him were fruitless. I found out later that Joe was himself a member of the honor court. Call me jaded, but somehow I kind of doubt that the investigation was altogether thorough.

Whether or not Joe was “really” gay isn’t particularly important. What is important is how he impacted my life. Joe vividly illustrated to me just how fucked up and explosive this thing called masculinity could be, especially when threatened by my effeminate, queer desire. He cemented what the boys in middle school had tried so hard to tell me. To them, I wasn’t gay. Gay was too proud. I was a measly little faggot. A sissy. A bitch. I was worthless, God damn it. Why couldn’t I get that through my thick skull?

It was only through the company of other faggots in Chapel Hill that I was able to deal with Joe’s jarring attack. I stumbled upon my new posse of homos at the local coffee shop on a particularly slow evening in September. A boy named Andre quietly passed me a note that read in jagged handwriting, “Power House – You *kenom*.” I didn’t “know,” but I was quickly whisked 10 miles away to the Waffle House in Durham with Andre and two of his friends. They had officially invited me into what would soon become my new queer family in Chapel Hill. After a sweaty night of dancing and debauchery at the gay bar, we’d head over to the sleazy 24-hour eatery with a laptop, order greasy food and coffee, and sing songs by Fiona Apple, Whitney Houston, or perhaps even a tune from the musical *Rent*.

At each stage of my young life, I have been blessed with friendship groups of queer men like this who nurture, inspire, and motivate me. While not all of these men have necessarily been a caricature of femininity, we have all dabbled in the art of camp together to create a kind of collective identity. All of us had struggled as outsiders in a culture obsessed with an image of masculinity that we did not resemble. Being in the South only exacerbated this feeling of alienation.

It was this feeling of alienation that facilitated coming into my political consciousness. Growing up in a household rife with “GOP” political commentary (my father would insist on making us listen to conservative talk radio on family road trips) had, early on, familiarized me with the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that is 21st century American politics. I launched my career in activism in high school, when I directed and performed in a Broadway Revue with a group of my theatre friends that raised nearly \$1000 for the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative. In a North Carolina public school, AIDS was the closest I could come to doing anything in the realm of queer activism. It was also something of a slap in the face to my high school, where I was the only openly queer person.

It wasn’t until college, however, that I really began to find an intellectual space to challenge the culture that I had always viewed with suspicion (and, likewise, that had always viewed me with a healthy dose of suspicion).

Though I was lucky enough to have a US History teacher in high school who assigned Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States*, the vast majority of my teachers never asked us critically examine American history or, for that matter, American culture. Not even the local LGBTQ youth group asked these kinds of questions, settling for just making sure we didn't get AIDS or kill ourselves.

My professors in college, on the other hand, demanded that I do so. I was particularly drawn to feminist critiques of culture for the way that they challenged norms of gender. I had a lifetime in training in understanding the grave shortcomings of the gender binary. Women's Studies classes with professors like Sherryl Kleinman, Karen Booth, and Pamela Conover, all gave me new critical tools with which I was able to build a queer political consciousness. We read from authors like Suzanne Pharr, who eloquently made clear the links between homophobia and sexism, and Kate Bornstein, who has with great wit and humor made the case for actively disrupting the notion of the gender binary. Women's Studies was the only academic space at UNC in which I could have these kinds of conversations.

With a foundation in feminist analyses of gender, critically examining how race and class structure our world was made easier. My experiences in the predominately white program in middle school had already primed me to understand the kinds of privileges that came with my white skin and wealth. Feminist critiques of race and class from folks like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins challenged me to more closely examine how my skin color and class had lubricated my movement through life. I was called to ask questions about my life and American culture that I had never before considered.

It was with this understanding of identity that I eagerly founded the Unity Conference at UNC-Chapel Hill during my sophomore year. I wanted to put together a program that would explore where sexuality and gender identity intersected with other kinds of identities like race, class, ability, and age. I searched for speakers who could make those links evident – from the Black lesbian activist Mandy Carter to the wonderfully theatrical activist and performer Nomi Lamm. I also looked for inspiring political thinkers who

could help inspire political action, like former National Gay and Lesbian Task Force director Urvashi Vaid, who keynoted the first conference.

After directing the conference for three years, it became increasingly clear that the political leaders that I sought were almost exclusively woman-identified. During my junior year at UNC, I wrote an editorial for the campus queer magazine, *LAMBDA*, expressing my frustrations in finding queer male mentors. It was appropriately titled “Where the hell are all the feminist queer men?” While feminist women had certainly given me the tools to understand my own life as an effeminate queer man, I was finding few resources from other men who shared my experiences and politics.

At the same time, I found myself more and more disillusioned with the national LGBTQ movement that, it seemed, was less and less interested in radical change. I spent a summer in Boston working for one of those national organizations, hoping to find a movement that made room for all kinds of queer people. Instead, I found myself in big-shot meetings of Boston's major LGBTQ nonprofits that were focused on planning events that highlighted the experiences of those who were more “marketable,” while desperately trying to keep the rest of us out of the photo album.

Sitting in those meetings, I couldn't help but to think that my more effeminate friends and I were likely to be some of the people they were working to make invisible. Hostility towards nelly faggots like me, in my experience, has come from both inside and outside queer communities. Gay men, in particular, seem to be guilty of this kind of gender policing. Too many of the queer men that I've met – both in the South and elsewhere – have hissed and booed at femme guys' alleged gendered dysfunction. They say that our stereotypically homo affect is some combination of awful things like superficiality or immaturity. “Why can't you just be normal, for God's sake?” They want us to keep our faggotry to ourselves, lest we give them all a bad name.

But I can't. And I won't. I spent far too much of my life trying to contain my faggood to satisfy others. If I am loud or eccentrically feminine today, it is because of the years of putting up with a patriarchal, heterosexist

culture that constantly reminded me of my inferiority. Everywhere faggots like me look, we are reminded of just how pathetic or pathological we are: news reports, television shows, music videos, school books, romance novels, stand up comedians, product advertisements, televangelists, politicians, and scientific studies. From time to time, even the people who are allegedly fighting *for* us tell guys like me to butch it up. I have exactly two words for them: Fuck. You.

Guys like me create camp to *survive*. It was our protection from a world that took pleasure in ridiculing us; camp was our multipurpose second skin. It was, for me, a way to try to reclaim some of my eccentric spirit that my peers had crushed in middle school. It lets us make comedy out of tragedy and fools out of idols. It is our own way of making some sense out of a culture that only makes room for nelly boys when we design their houses or when we're needed for psychological studies.

I have come to realize that there are few winners in a world fraught with such manic gender policing. I'm not referring here just to women, who are obviously undervalued and often infantilized in American culture. Straight men, often pegged categorically as the winners under patriarchy, often suffer as well, under the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. While it is true that straight men collectively hold many of the cards, it is easy to forget that as individuals their struggles with gender can be deeply emotionally damaging. Gender, at least as it is currently understood, makes free expression nothing short of impossible – for all of us.

I anticipated – I had hoped – to find a more, shall we say, enlightened politics and community in my move to San Francisco. I was shocked and disappointed to find that queer communities in small towns in the South were often far more politically savvy and radical in their vision for change than many of the people I have met in California. Many of the men I met while living in San Francisco saw little impetus to fight for change, perhaps because they have never really faced the kind of day-to-day animosity that queers face in the South. My worry is now that, as homophobia goes the way of racism and sexism and becomes more nuanced, less blatant, and

disproportionately damaging to those on the bottom, queer people will generally be less inclined towards radical politics that challenge the status quo.

It was truly a sad day when one of the incredibly few queer male feminist mentors and leaders I had found, Eric Rofes, unexpectedly died. He was one of a tiny number of gay male leaders, in my opinion, who spoke progressive values to action. His memorial service in San Francisco was a first for me. With the exception of a cousin I barely knew who died when I was very young, death has kept a distance from my life. Highlighting the stark difference between my own life and Eric's, Amber Hollibaugh closed the service by reading from his harrowing and eloquent account of the utter loss he experienced in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in his book, *Reviving the Tribe*. In a fitting tribute, Sylvester's disco anthem "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" played louder and louder as she read until it was reverberating in the large room.

My anguish over Eric's passing was heightened by a sinking feeling that there would be no other queer man to fill his shoes. Despite the tensions that still exist between the kind of sexual liberation that gay men have spearheaded and the women-driven feminist movement, Eric had managed to straddle both. This was no small feat. In his absence, I worry that queer men might be left with the likes of Andrew Sullivan, Dan Savage, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

I, for one, hope we can do better. The progressive queer male leaders and thinkers of tomorrow may very well be those of us who continue to live as outsiders in American life: men of color, sissies, sex workers, men with disabilities, transgender men, and those of us born in places where homophobia is still a constant, acute threat. For me, it was the experience of growing up nelly in the South that made ignoring the pervasive inequality in America difficult, if not impossible.

It is that outsider status that I cherish so dearly. It grants a certain ability to see what those on the inside cannot. "American by birth, Southern by the grace of God." Despite all of my trials and tribulations, I wouldn't have it any other way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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