

of queer appreciation for sexuality and the body that is ironically driven out by their tourism. Similarly, baby gays don't yet have the right cultural knowledge because they haven't picked up a gay habitus yet. Straight women on safari in gay bars are problematic because they don't realize there are different sets of rules.

Of course, I don't mean to imply that gay habitus is uniform. There are subcultures within gay cultures. People flow between these spaces. Someone might be wearing a harness one night, and then put on their best duds to get bottle service with friends at Minibar on another night. A change of venue dictates a change of clothing: it won't do to come in a harness to Minibar. The kind of fine leather shoes that someone wears down in the Hole are much different from those one would wear at Minibar. People can have multiple kinds of cultural knowledge. Habitus is similarly not uniform and unchanging. Different material conditions, different social situations, teach slightly different habitus.

The idea of different habituses brings up another important point: no one is born straight either. If gay habitus is learned, straight habitus is as well. However, gay people first learn straight habitus as well. Let's examine the sexual expectations of straight habitus, as revealed in Gayle Rubin's charmed circle.

Gay men generally grow up in straight families. They grow up internalizing a straight habitus of what a family looks like, family being only another name for sexuality. We learn that a family is monogamous and heterosexual, that it circumscribes sex to only the home, that it limits sex only to procreation, that it barely involves sex at all. When sex does come into the equation, it should not involve toys, it shouldn't be kinky, it shouldn't involve more than two people. These are the lessons that we internalize about sexuality growing up. They form part of the straight habitus, the unconscious rules that our families teach us about how best to conduct our sexuality. These aren't merely cultural lessons. They are a set of judgments that we can learn, and they involve a set of cultural consumptions that are made as a result.

As Boystown transforms into a gay Disneyland, how does gay habitus transform? The habitus these spaces teach changes to be more respectable to value the inner circle, to be closer to the straight habitus that gay men grew up with in their straight families. Boystown, these days, teaches us not to be queer, but to be one of the good gays.

9

One of the Good Gays

DEAR LADY A: *Where are all the good gays? Is it something about me, that they don't want to be with me? I want a serious relationship with a nice guy who is not into multiple partners. I want to get married someday just like everyone else, and maybe even have some kids, but the men I meet are just up for one night stands or meaningless short terms. Even though I like getting meaningless sex on weekends, I'm also getting tired of that scene. I know I want a real relationship that might go somewhere and I don't know why I can't find those kinds of guys. Help me?*

—MANHUNT

"Good gays," I rolled my eyes, reading the letter to Lady A, the sex advice columnist at *Redeye*, a Chicago weekly newspaper, on the Red Line "L" train speeding toward the Belmont station.

Yet many gay men are hoping to be one of the good gays—not one of those shameful queers bent on disappointing their parents. Gay men, like everyone, are full of contradictions. They hook up, but find it shameful. They hate Boystown, but go to "dance."

This is a product of assimilation: taking on a straight sexual morality, which views sex as shameful. The transformation of a minority group such that they become less distinguishable from the majority.

Assimilation for gay men isn't the taking on of new values. Assimilation is the lack of transmission of queer values. The gay habitus taught in Boystown's spaces changes. Without integration into sexy communities, gay men don't become queer. In many ways, they remain culturally straight.

Assimilation of gay men isn't about whether they hook up or not. Assimilation is the set of values they apply to judge whether their sex lives are fun or shameful. For gay men, assimilation looks like trying to find—and

be—one of the good gays. One of the good gays in a monogamous relationship, with middle-class respectability and a couple of kids.

As queer sexual spaces recede from places in Boystown, as the nightlife turns into a gay Disneyland, the queer values of the outside of the charmed circle recede as well. The gay habitus instilled within gay men frequenting these places is no longer sex positive.

If gay men come to Boystown at all, that is. As gay men are more accepted in everyday straight life, maybe they don't need to go to Boystown at all. Maybe they can meet men at work, bring them home to their families, get married, and live like their parents. They like men, but have they become gay or remained straight?

That is assimilation. That is Alexander.

■ ■ ■

Alexander could very well have written that letter to *Redeye*. I met Alexander through a mutual friend, Joel, while out at Cocktail. I was surprised to see Joel, since he didn't live nearby. Apparently, he had come into town for a date with Alexander, whom he had met on OkCupid.

Alexander is lanky, with dark, shaggy, almost stringy hair, not the short style typical among gay men.¹ While he was a few years older than me and—this is important—had been out for nearly as long, he always seemed younger to me, a youthful demeanor that seemed almost naive at times to my jaded eyes. His questions, his uncertainty, his carriage, his habitus read “baby gay” despite his literal and gay age.²

Joel and I hugged. We exchanged a few words, but I left them to get to know one another. I gave Alexander a card to contact me for an interview I never expected a call.

Surprisingly, he did call. I had been in Chicago for less than thirty days at that point. I hadn't even interviewed anyone yet.

My years of interviewing experience couldn't prevent this ethnographic truism: your first interview for a project will be a disaster.

I scoped out the Center on Halsted a week before as an interview location, eyeing a few tucked-away locations within that space. The tables in the main downstairs lobby seemed too exposed for a personal interview. However, I thought I could take Alexander upstairs to the lounge, where comfy chairs and small tables dominated a tiny corridor.

When Alexander arrived, I took him upstairs, settled in, and, right as I popped new batteries in my digital recorder, a member of the center's staff rushed in to tell us that we were out of bounds. It turns out that we were in the senior center, which is only available to elders before 4:30 P.M., after which the center's staff promptly shut it down. We had to leave.

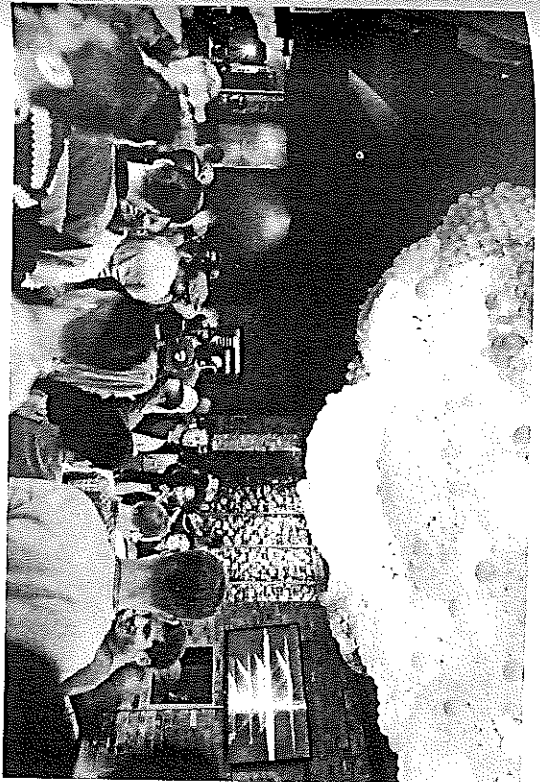


Figure 9.1. Progress Bar, formerly Cocktail Bar and Restaurant

I asked my contacts at the center later, why couldn't we use space clearly set aside for people to lounge? They told me the staff was told to police the space, to reduce the amount of available sitting space for the primarily Black youth to loiter around the center, perhaps forcing them to go to other locations. They were equal opportunity, though, telling us to go downstairs or find a spot in a local coffee shop.

With little choice, Alexander and I walked down Halsted Street to Caribou Coffee, talking along the way about his life. This screwup was a useful opportunity for someone studying Boystown, what's called a “walk along” interview. He discussed moving to Chicago a few years ago. He was now emerging onto the dating scene after losing a significant amount of weight, the reason he would later give for his lack of gay knowledge.³

“This interview brought to you by Caribou Coffee,” Alexander said as we settled into this more exposed location and I switched on the recorder.

“I know! Maybe they'll give me some free coffee for the product placement.” I laughed, not knowing they would be out of business in Chicago by the time I began writing this book.

This being my first interview, I was full of general questions. What did he think of Boystown? How often did he go? Did he have any good stories? These are the kinds of questions that I could follow up on, mining afterward for themes that appeared in later interviews.

Alexander hates Boystown, he told me, because “the gays” are all about

physically, about hooking up. That's not the kind of "scene" that he's interested in. He wants to find a relationship, preferring to flirt with people out at work, rather than jump "immediately" into sex.

This impression of Boystown, as a kind of free-for-all bacchanal, is common among gay men with assimilationist tendencies, just as the impression of Boytown as straightlaced, in both senses, is common among the more queer affected.

"Are there any places you do like?" I asked him.

"I like Siderack. It was more of the, like, just chill guys who were in their late twenties and early thirties type of thing. That's more my scene. But it's just ginormous and I don't really drink that much."

"Okay?" I said, forcing him to explain more by letting the silence draw out. "But it was awesome. I went there with my friend after this party, and she was wearing two layers of Spanx. She looked really good, had this bright red dress and a mink stole, and little lace gloves. She looked fabulous. This really pretty blond," he said, becoming animated.

"And there I was with my pants a size too small and a really bright red shirt that was too big, and I had eye makeup on, my nails were painted. So everyone was kind of like, 'what are they?' So, of course, everyone wanted to talk to us!" he said.

"Exactly, the most people people at the—" I said.

He cut me off in his excitement, "It was awesome! And everyone was making googy eyes at me and it was great. At the time, I was very much not comfortable being at a giant bar, but it was great having my friend there. She gave me this, it was so funny, she gave me this tour where she dragged me around. She just walked up to people and be like 'you're hot, you're hot, no, you're hot.' She'd just walk up to guys who were making out and be like 'Oh my God, you're so hot.'"

We both laughed. I suspect for different reasons.

His friend was doing everything I recommend straight women not do at bars, but in many ways, the roles were reversed. She brought him to a club where she had apparently been before—since she was capable of giving a tour of Siderack—and introduced Alexander to the sexual nature of the spaces. However, Alexander's introduction to Siderack was unlikely to instill habits. He wouldn't learn any of the rules. He wouldn't get a sense of what it meant to be a gay man at Siderack. Instead, he got a good sense of what it was like to be a straight woman at Siderack, interrupting people making out to impose her gaze upon them. Given this experience, it isn't surprising that Alexander thinks of Boystown as just about "physically" without a queer frame to understand the meaning behind that physicality or question the dichotomy of physicality and meaning in the first place.

"So why do you never go then? That sounded like fun." I prompted, leaning back in the wooden chair, scrawling a few notes into my iPad about issues to follow up on, like his friend's presence.

Alexander, however, took our conversation in a different direction. With a flick of his wrist, he dismissed his need for Boystown, echoing the fears of the Northalsted Business Alliance I would hear later. "I don't have a reason or purpose to ever go," he said, "especially because the industry that I'm in I'm always working and socializing and going out to parties, like really, really cool events where there's free wine, amazing catered meals, I don't need to go out. And I'll get on hit there."

Alexander doesn't need to go out to Boystown, with what he sees as meaningless hookups, when he can flirt with men through his job out in the straight world.

Or online. He frequented a number of dating websites catering to both straight and gay singles, like Match.com and OKCupid, which is where Alexander met Joel.

He sighed. "I don't know, I might meet somebody tomorrow, too, so, we'll see!"

"Okay?" I agreed.

"I mean it's so easy. Everyone wants to meet. You know, and whatever else they want, I'm not giving them, so that's too bad," he laughed.

"Oh, so coy," I teased, unintentionally reinforcing a queer habitus of the sexual libertine, rather than a neutral interviewer's agreement with participant's statements.

"Well, I don't know," he picked up on my statement's ethics, changing his mind. "I shouldn't say that because, you know, like Joel drove here and then—hey! It's just like, I'm trying to make it sound like I have these standards, but then there's this guy that drove to see me and then within thirty minutes we're in bed. So it's just, you know."

"So, what was different about that situation then?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't know. We had this great connection, or at least it seemed like it, I don't know. It's working out really well and it is kind of scary because we're basically the same person on a lot of levels. Like, we listen to all the same music. It was really funny, actually, so because that weekend that he came down, the first one, I had all this stuff planned. I was like 'you can come down, but I have all these things to do!' So I just took him to everything, and we ended up going to my friend's barbecue and having a great time," he said.

Despite being about to go on a date with someone else—getting paid that together, his favorite dish—Alexander seemed genuinely animated about going out with Joel.

It seemed that way, too, when I saw them out again together at Cocktail. They were hanging on each other a bit, finishing each other sentences, enjoying the limerence that comes at the beginning of a relationship.

Three weeks later, Alexander and I went to the Dice Dojo, a board game shop in Edgewater, to play a few rounds of Dominion and Small World, since Alexander wasn't big on the club scene in Boystown. Joel and Alexander still seemed to be going strong, although Alexander mentioned going on dates with other people, a fact seemingly at odds with his monogamous attitudes.

I was surprised to receive a number of the frantic text messages two weeks later, just as I had returned from a trip. He "had a lot to talk about." Knowing I taught human sexuality classes, he asked me a number of questions about HIV transmission. He was concerned, almost terrified, about his chances of contracting the virus but wouldn't tell me more about the context. He seemed to calm down once I explained the basics.

I invited him over the next night.

My apartment was sparsely furnished, an austere ethnographer's abode littered with IKEA furniture and old hand-me-down things that I had picked up from friends or thrift stores. As a point of reference, Austin's first reaction to my apartment was, "That's the ugliest couch that I have ever seen." That should give you a sense of the desolateness of the space that Alexander walked into.

I made myself a cocktail and invited him to sit at my computer desk. I sat in a red Queen Anne chair that my cats had nearly destroyed, fabric coming off the side in puffs.

Supposedly, he came over to play a board game. It quickly became apparent he wanted me to ask him what he came to talk about. He was relieved when I finally pulled out the recorder, asking me if I knew any available men. I laughed, "Next time we're out, I can introduce you to a couple. I'm sure."

"Oh, I guess you're just good at keeping secrets then. Well, I'm also good at keeping secrets," he dangled his information in exchange for the names of some potential guys to date.

"Yeah, I am good at keeping secrets. Like the names of the people I interview!" I reminded him with a laugh to cover my discomfort.

"Yeah, like Joel's name I guess," he said.

"So, you told me you had stories?" I prompted.

"Well, so, when I messaged you I was having this really emotional moment," he said.

"Ah, I'm sorry," I said.

"No, it's fine," he said, and then hurriedly, "Now, it is fine, but it wasn't at the time."

He sighed. "It is just that you know that I'm so weird, and it's because, as you know, I'm just starting out on the whole dating scene and I don't know what I should be doing or like when or how. There are steps, and like every person is different and you just never know, and then, you know, you find out, and you know, people are just weird."

He seemed to be dropping down a rabbit hole of uncertainty. He didn't have the vocabulary—to explain. He tried to say that he doesn't know the rules of the game of sex and dating in the gay world. Gay relationships don't always follow the neat trajectory or rules popular culture says straight relationships follow. He hadn't learned a gay habitus.

"Like, what's an example?" I said.

"Like the steps to take. I don't know what constitutes—" he cut himself off and switched directions, finally about to say what he came to say. "So the reason that I liked Joel when I met him was that it just happened. It was natural. Like he was like 'alright, let's do this.' He set boundaries right away. Great! There was no guesswork. It relieved that pressure. It was wonderful, but um—"

Finally the other shoe seemed about to drop. I leaned forward in my chair, setting down my glass to hear what he was building to.

"Well, I just want to ask you. You say that you don't know Joel very well," he said.

"I've hung out with him in social situations, but we haven't hung out by ourselves before, just the two of us." I said.

"Because I'm going to tell you something that's like—it's just weird. I don't mind saying this, because this is what I signed up for," he said, looking straight at the recorder. "This is great because it's like I'm getting free therapy!" he said.

"It's really not," I tried to dissuade him, perhaps unsuccessfully.

"So, so, OK, so," he stuttered. From my point of view, he was uncomfortable, unsure with what he was about to say, a mixture of shame and indignation carrying through in a warble in his voice.

"I like everything about Joel," he lied, whether to me or himself. I wasn't sure.

"Everyone has problems, stop beating around the bush and tell me. What's Joel's problem?" I said.

"He's—he's a whore!" Alexander said.

"Okay," I tried to keep my voice neutral.

"He actually doesn't know how many people he's slept with," he said.

"Okay," the neutrality more difficult, since I, too, didn't know how many people I'd had sex with, having made a commitment to not count at age nineteen when I began identifying as queer. Suddenly, his questions about

HIV the previous day made more sense, even if his chance of seroconversion hadn't changed.

"I mean, he was toying around with it, and told me that his number was fifteen, but turns out that's the number of people—the number of straight guys he's been with!"

I couldn't help but laughing. "Damn!"

"I swear, he must be somewhere in the triple digits, but I'm not actually quite sure. When I found this out, it was quite upsetting. Well, not upsetting, disappointing. Like, oh," he said, drawing out the "oh" and sounding more upset than disappointed.

"Why was it disappointing or upsetting to you?" I asked.

He sighed, loudly, loud enough for me to hear it later on the recording as a breathy wind, despite the recorder sitting well away from him on the table. "Well, you know. That's a good question," he said. "I don't know why. Because, well, my experience has been so different. He got kicked out of his dad's house when they found out he was gay. Him being gay was a huge issue that I never had to deal with. My mom? She wasn't happy about it, but she didn't kick me out of my house!"

Appreciate Alexander's level of self-reflection here. Even as he was expressing ambivalence about slut shaming his former date, he recognized their different experiences, their different values, related to their different histories with being gay. Being gay for Alexander mattered, his coming out was an event, but it doesn't have the trauma he associates with Joel's identity.

"And at the same time, I asked him 'how do you meet these people?' and I saw on his phone that he has every app. Grindr, Adam4Adam, and every single hookup app ever. And that? That was just—" he made a noise of disgust. "Just for me, the concept of going online, and just getting a hookup not only is it something that I wouldn't do, I don't think that's OK."

"Could you tell me why?" I said.

"I think it's gross." He said simply, reaching for his glass of water, and changing the topic of conversation.

Alexander is gay but has straight sexual values. He's internalized the norms of straight society: how to meet people (at work), appropriate numbers of sex partners (few), or when to have sex (in a relationship). He associates violating these rules with disease and death.

Why wouldn't he?

It only comes as a surprise if one thinks gay men are essentially sexually deviant. There is nothing inherent to desiring someone of the same sex

that also means desiring multiple partners, sex clubs, and one-night stands. Those are queer innovations.

Alexander grew up in a straight family. As I discussed in the previous chapter, gay men become gay through culture, located in our nightlife and the communities anchored in these spaces. If he hasn't experienced that culture, if he finds that culture deviant because he subscribes to the values of the inner circle—like say, don't make out with people in a nightclub or don't find a hookup on Grindr—then he hasn't become gay. He dates men. He fucks men. He has a gay identity, but he's not culturally gay. As Nate Silver, gay journalist said, he's "ethnically straight."⁵

Why doesn't he share those values? Alexander has assimilated, and assimilation is a problem of cultural transmission.

Sociologists like me apply theories like assimilation to LGBTQ people, but we seldom examine the differences between sexual minorities and the context in which assimilation, as a concept, was developed.

The concept of assimilation was developed to explain racial groups' transition into the white American mainstream. Sociologists frame assimilation as a problem of generational transmission, from parents to children, from ethnic immigrants to their second-generation children. For racial minorities, those often studied by American sociologists for questions of assimilation, the story often goes: the children of immigrants grow up in a household with one culture, then go out into American culture and learn another. Whether that's white American culture or Black American culture depends on the context and often how that ethnic group's skin color fits into the American racial schema.

For instance, Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou's classic paper discusses the expectations immigrant Sikh families have for their children. They expect their female children to marry at an early age, require that they obtain parental consent to date, and caution them to avoid dancing. These expectations run against such mainstream American expectations, as seen in popular culture, that women delay marriage until after they've completed their education, that they date, then introduce their partners to their family only after they are serious, and enjoy sexualized movement in nightlife and parties. Portes and Zhou saw the successful passing of family norms to second-generation children as evidence that these families were resisting assimilation to the American mainstream. Changing attitudes, in contrast, were signs of assimilation.⁶

In these cases, the dominant culture is on the outside. Assimilation occurs if the next generation accepts these outside values. If they remain in their immigrant enclave, following local community norms, then they have resisted assimilation. For racial and ethnic minorities, assimilation is a struggle against outside generational forces, bent on changing their children.

For sexual minorities, for queers, assimilation is the opposite. Assimilation for gay men happens quietly, because nothing changes at all. The outside force bent on changing the children of straight parents into gay men, with queer sexual values, is gay culture in the gayborhood, instilling a gay habitus through habits and practices of consumption within the bars and clubs. The outside force is the minority group.

Minorities don't have much power of persuasion compared to the majority's stigma. Acceptance, or even mere tolerance, of gay men in their families means they do not require a substitute family, a family of choice they find in the gayborhood, a sexy community where they can find connectedness.

The process of coming out made one gay, in part, because it caused a break not only in identity but in the family as well. Having left one family, gays find a new one, with new expectations, new rules, and new habits.

You have no family. You have no friends when you start out gay. You have to seek these things. You have to become gay. You find sexual kinship with people and adopt a gay habitus by being in gay places and learning the rules. Society's acceptance of gay men doesn't change them into straight men. They remain straight people, but homosexual straight people. In this way, assimilation for gay men is a lack of learning a new culture.

As we often have, let's return to Gayle Rubin's charmed circle. Although Rubin did not explicitly use the charmed circle as a metaphor for assimilation, her charmed circle is a good tool for explaining the changes that assimilation brings. As the barrier to homosexuality disappears, it is not that all queer sexuality is less stigmatized. Instead, gay men are welcomed into the middle of the circle, with the attendant expectations for stigmatizing the outside.

However, that, too, is not entirely true. Assimilation is partially a two-way street, a blending.⁷ It involves the normalization of gay people, and the straightening out of queers, but also lessens the distinctions between straight and gay people such that they are indistinguishable. An assimilationist gay man would say, "Great. The only difference between me and them is the sex/gender of the person we're with." Full assimilation would mean that the groups no longer appear separate. Instead, assimilation of ten looks like some of the groups' traits are coming into the majority and changing their culture as well. Assimilation is the lopsided blending of two groups, one into the other: the majority changing the minority to fit their habitus but taking aspects of that group as well.

■ ■ ■

This is all very abstract. Let's pull it down to the concrete level.

Marriage is a conservative cause. Marriage, even same-sex marriage, is not queer. In America, it may be advocated by the left, but only in the sense

that the American left is still to the left of the right on this issue. The right is so far to the right that even though the left is on the right, they are still only slightly to the left of the right. Right?

As the Against Equality collective discusses in their many books, essays, and speeches, marriage connects one kind of relationship to the state with its allocation of benefits and rights. Same-sex marriage only expands the definition to include, and contain, same-sex couples. Rather than disconcerting rights from the government's preference for one kind of relationship, same-sex marriage entrenches those rights.⁸

In the words of Yasmin Nair, Chicago queer activist: "There are suggestions here that the very specter of gay and lesbian and queer sex might trouble the normality of marriage, but surely no amount of fisting, fucking, fellatio, cummingus [*sic*] or S/M—all of which are regularly and copiously engaged in by straight couples across the political spectrum, even if often covertly—actually shifts the meaning of marriage within the state itself." Nair's point is valid. Fisting won't change the relationship between the rights apportioned by the state, like health care, immigration, or social security. It won't change the legal arrangements required.

That said, marriage does more. Religious conservatives recognize this and have been against using the word "marriage" for these relationships, more willing to accept a second tier of "civil unions" instead. Similarly, gay conservatives—Andrew Sullivan, for instance—have been in favor of marriage, arguing that it will lead gay men to "grow up," a.k.a. assimilate, become straighter.⁹

The word "marriage" applied to gay relationships imports the expectations of straight relationships. Husbands might be expected by friends and family to have children. They might be judged by the same moral standards regarding monogamy or outside partners. Now that they are on the inside of the charmed circle, they will be expected to act like it. People might assume, and rightly so, a certain similarity to their straight families, a more cohesive transmission of other cultural factors down between generations. They might expect them to look a bit more like their parents. They will expect them to be normal.

Marriage legitimates. The backing of the state, along with the expectations of friends and family, says that marriage makes a relationship final, true, and legitimate.

Nair interviewed Matilda Bernstein Sycamore, queer activist and writer of *The End of San Francisco*, about the changes to San Francisco and the queer civil rights movement.¹⁰ Their conversation reflects this line of thought:

YASMIN NAIR: You talked about the nuclear family unit not necessarily being part of this queer radical space. But supporters of gay

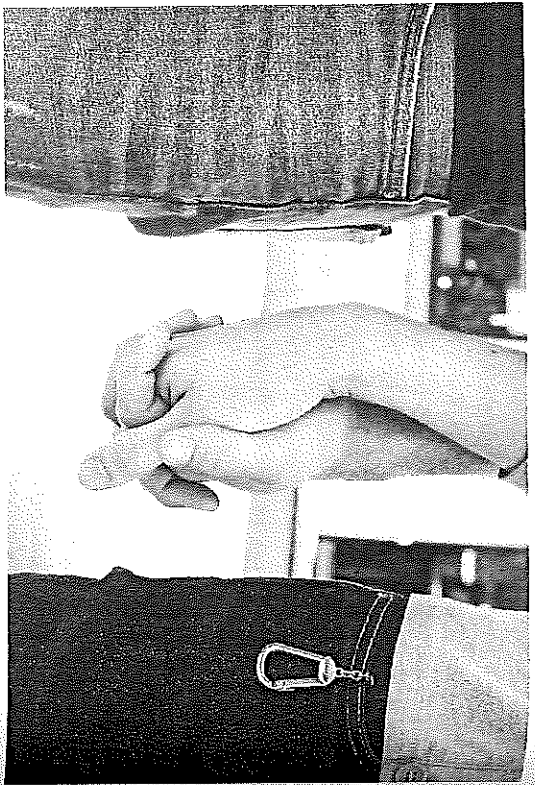


Figure 9.2. Men holding hands in Boystown

marriage, about which you've written critically, would argue that same-sex marriages are different than straight nuclear family units. Couldn't it be argued that these do shift or even end the oppression of marriage because they're structured differently, with different or no gender expectations?

MATTILDA BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE: It's sad to me to see the ways in which gay people are propping up a failed system. If you ask most straight people in the United States whether marriage is working, people will say, "Hell, no." Anyone who has a brain that's working knows that marriage still exists as a site of anti-woman, anti-child, and anti-queer violence, historically and in the present. And I think for many decades, gay people, including mainstream gay people, have created love and lust that are not predicated on state acceptance.

I remember when the whole gay marriage thing exploded in San Francisco and Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, who had been together for more than four decades, were the first people to get officially married. They said, "Finally, it's legitimate." And that was one of the most horrifying things I've ever heard. This was a couple that had been together for over 40 years, and now their relationship was legitimate because of a piece of paper from the state?

The fact that gay people can get married doesn't change marriage. It just makes that failed system stronger.

Should we be so horrified?

While I agree that the fight for marriage has come at the expense of resources toward universal access to benefits like immigration and health care, sometimes these expectations—these rules that come down from our parents and society about how we are to act in a relationship—matter. Legitimacy matters.

Marriage is about divorce.

Marriage changes how one splits up, from the method to the acceptable reasons. From a legal economic standpoint, marriage raises the barriers to exit a relationship. Bureaucratic barriers arise. Cost becomes an issue, in terms of both the money to pay a lawyer and the potential cost in property and income. These barriers make marriage and divorce weighty decisions, the kinds of decisions that you mull over and seldom make lightly. When "partners" break up, you scream and fight—or cry and smolder. Then, you pull the U-Haul up to the apartment building and leave. There is no official negotiation of property, only a talk as you take what is yours and scuzzinize who was the first person to suggest getting the dog. Debt incurred together doesn't even exist. That electric bill coming in the mail is the responsibility of whomever happened to put it in their name. It isn't a decision made lightly, but "partners" have no recourse.

When "husbands" break up, there's an official process. They get a divorce. Those same things happen—the fights, the dog, the electric bill—but they are subject to official negotiation. The possibility of divorce not only makes a marriage more secure, but it also provides peace of mind that you can do things jointly.

Of course, I owe some of this line of thinking to my lawyer-husband, Austin. "Marriage is more like a corporate merger," he likes to joke.

True, I got married for the legal rights. I'm staunchly against the state's apportionment of legal rights to married couples, a kind of discrimination against other relationship types and a penalty on single people. Health care, immigration, security in old age: these are rights that everyone should have, regardless of their relationship status. The government's intervention in this area remains a tie from our current era of "romantic love" marriages to the past "economic unit" style of marriage.

Nevertheless, marriage does give me peace of mind. It provides a cultural framework to show others how important Austin is to me. It provides symbols, like my rings, demonstrating our commitment even when we are in situations that break with traditional notions of married life. No one will be shocked that we are attending a party at Jackhammer's Hole, but open acknowledgment of our relationship challenges the notion that marriages must be monogamous.

Marriage also protects our relationship because there are no rules when you drive off the road. It can be rough going, avoiding obstacles and making our own path.

That's been part of the scary and wonderful part of being queer. Not being allowed to marry forced queers to invent our own rules, opening new relationship possibilities outside of the nuclear family. Yet there are risks. Though the risks may not be any greater than those in married relationships, given the high rate of divorce, they are risks nonetheless.

While not changing the relationship with the state's provision of benefits, same-sex marriage does change what it means to get married, but only if its participants continue to be open about the kinds of activities that they engage in outside of the charmed circle. As Nair points out, straight people do plenty of BDSM and fasting; yet marriage remains the same. However, that's not really true. When those acts remain hidden, divorced from their identity, then what does it matter? When they are openly acknowledged, then the scorn of the inner circle falls on them just as much. Heterosexual people are assumed to be on the inside of the inner circle.

Similarly, for gay people, queer relationship styles and erotic potentials are not removed, distanced, from what it means to be gay.

They are what it means to be gay.

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Or at least they used to be. Perhaps now they more aptly describe what it means to be queer. The sexy communities of queers live divorced from the everyday life of gay people, pushed to the peripheries of Boystown, or out of Boystown altogether.

Today, when someone like Alexander says they are gay, what does that mean? What cultural traits come to mind, if any, when someone comes out to someone else? Because, of course, Alexander does identify as gay. He is a gay man.

But he is not a gay man in terms of where the charmed circle would place him. He is not on the outside. He doesn't want to be. He doesn't want to be involved in the naked intimacy of strangers. He doesn't want a sexy community built out of the remnants of shame, of failed families of birth. He doesn't want to be queer. He wants to be one of the good gays.

Can he ever be? Or, does the existence of the good gays make the rest of us bad?

On a beautiful, cool, June day, I saw proof same-sex marriage could change the expected relationship path for gay men. While the sun was out, the summer hadn't been hot, so it was the perfect day to go to the beach, such as they

are in Chicago. Running along Lake Michigan, the city maintains a number of public beaches to let people lounge on the imported sand. The gays tend to gather at Hollywood Beach—officially, Kathy Osterman Beach—in Edgewater, staking out a section of sand near the pier. On the right summer day, it is like a gay club in the middle of the day, dance music playing from Bluetooth speakers and gay men standing around in as little clothing as law allows.

I had set up my huge beach tent. I inherited my mother's fair Irish skin, which burns in even the slightest patch of sun. I slathered myself head to toe in Banana Boat Kids SPF 50 sunscreen, giving my skin chalky white patches, even more so than usual.

Austin and I were hanging out with some of the poz guys, the group I'd most identify with radical sexuality as having been pushed into a sexy community through viral kinkship and as a result of the stigma given them by the good gays. They were taunting me with their tans by wearing SPF 15 and lounging in direct sunlight on their beach towels. Mark was playing opera at the other beachgoers playing pop a few feet away, a veritable war of gay musical styles.

Our wedding was a few weeks away. I was complaining about last-minute arrangements. Illinois legalized same-sex marriage on June 1, 2014, automatically converting our marriage from New York into a marriage in Illinois. We were finally having a wedding to celebrate.

"So, when are you two getting married?" Sean said to Brandon and Karl, boyfriend of eight years.

The two of them looked at each other, a bit bewildered at the question.

Karl's mouth hung open a little, as he mulled over what words to choose. Then Brandon said, "We aren't?"

Sean seemed surprised at the answer. The expectation was committed couples would, of course, get married once it was legal.

"Oh, I just assumed!" he said.

We all laughed to relieve some of the tension.

"Just because we're getting married doesn't mean they have to," I said.

Then, Karl asked an even more surprising question.

"Are you two planning on having kids? I know you have a dog, but are you those kinds of gays?" he said.

"No," I laughed. "Just, no."

When I asked Brandon about this situation later—over a pot roast when Karl was away on a business trip and his friends were taking turns making sure Brandon didn't starve—he told me his mother had been pressuring his married straight brother for years to have kids. Now his mother was ramping up the pressure on him as well. Why won't he marry his partner? Don't they love each other? Why won't he make her a grandmother?

Luckily, Austin and I shut that down with our own parents. A dog is hard enough to take care of.

Yet even Karl, someone breaking the path of marriage expectations, expected us to fulfill those expectations once we joined the rolls of those married. These are the kind of consequences that scare me when it becomes expected that you need to get married in order to continue to have a relationship—as Sean's question suggested—or when gay couples that do marry are held to those standards—like Karl thought.

These expectations were always at the heart of the marriage movement. Same-sex marriage became an issue because of rising worries about gay men's adolescent culture. Same-sex marriage was supposed to make us grow up and put an end to the "sexual experiment."

■ ■ ■

I've frequently discussed Patrick Moore's history of the "sexual experiment" by gay men in the sixties and seventies. Sexual libertine values flourished along with a dark side of drugs. It was an experiment in creating an alternative community, the kind that I've identified as "sexy community," spaces and networks infused with radical sexuality, connection outside of the nuclear family structure that continues to dominate American life.¹¹

Gay men's sexy communities were in their adolescence. They had yet to be consolidated or synthesized with the rest of their lives.¹² The allure of drugs, alcohol, and the naked intimacy of sexy spaces was too strong for many, who were also experiencing rejection outside of these spaces in the straight world. It was easy to while away one's life when so little awaited outside the enclave. Moreover, sexual spaces were beginning to become stale, isolated from other institutions that also included women: "The wonder of sex palaces and dance clubs must have lessened after two or three years of almost constant attendance in them, after which the men had to consider them not as a novelty but as the central component of the rest of their lives. Because the lives that men lived at the time were so new, there had been no time to integrate the theatrical intensity into a fuller life that also included women and family."¹³

Moore argues that gay life was beginning to come out of this phase. In places like New York City and San Francisco, where sexy communities flourished, pushback against drugs and excess was already happening. Those in the scene for the longest, who were beginning to tire, developed ways of integrating these experiences into the rest of their lives.

If not for AIDS, these elders could have transmitted this knowledge on to the next generation: "An older man who has experienced a period of youthful intensity around sexual experience can tell a young man just entering

the scene that it is possible to come out the other side into a balanced life." They were beginning to imagine integrating their community built beyond shame with mainstream society.

Instead, just as gay male cultures began to pull through the pain and exuberance of adolescence, the sexual experiment was halted by HIV in the eighties.

Moore asks, "Was this performance worth the risk? We cannot know, because the performance was never finished. It was a rehearsal that will be forever judged as opening night. And this, ultimately, is the cultural impact of AIDS."

If it was understood as performance, the experiment was a tragedy. The darkness gathered through a perfect storm of drug addiction and viral decimation. The advent of HIV made integration impossible because it inextricably linked radical gay sexuality and death. The experiment was over. The following passage resonates so deeply, allow me the extended quote:

It was incredibly difficult to reconcile a sense of pride in our sexual culture with the overwhelming grief for loved ones infected with HIV through unprotected gay sex. For all of our bravado and sex-positive messages, we have carried with us a belief that we got what we deserved. For men of my generation there was the double bitterness of living constantly with death without having enjoyed an earlier era when sex was less associated with guilt and shame....

Even though infection rates continue to rise in our young men, exhaustion and the empty promises of seeing ourselves represented in the mass media have lured us, despite American statistical evidence to the contrary, into saying "AIDS is no longer a gay disease." We desperately want to believe that the gathering storm clouds will break elsewhere this time. Inherent in our ability to ignore the continuing influence of AIDS on gay life in American is our systemic effort to strip gay life of all associations with the radical sexuality of the past. If there is no sex, no memory of sex, and no current sign of sexuality, then we can hope that AIDS will pass by our doorway this time.

No less true when I write now than when Moore wrote it ten years ago.

I live a half generation past Moore, carrying with me that double bitterness, but tinged with hope. Gay identity may be accepted, but queer sex is still shameful. Yes, the sexual experiment might have faded under the onslaught of respectability politics, but it has not died a complete death from AIDS. Even as the cold water of assimilation and homonormativity have attempted to douse the flames, embers have lived on, occasionally flickering to life.

Moore sees the sexual experiment as over, the times have passed.¹⁴ The documented in this book the fact that it hasn't died completely and may be coming back to life, sparks of radical queer sexuality rejecting the respectability of the charmed circle, even if just for moments or in certain spaces.

Yet those flickers exist within an overall environment of assimilation, a neighborhood with institutions serving "the good gays." The connection between AIDS and radical sexuality led to a backlash, a turn toward respectability politics. The "safe sex" movement produced a newfound insistence on condoms as the only way to stem the tide of infections but also an insistence on limiting the number of sexual partners. Places thought to be vectors for disease shut down. For instance, San Francisco has no bathhouses because they were closed as locations where HIV was spreading.

Sexual conservatism found new purchase in this environment. The gay and lesbian rights movement became a movement about identity, rather than one about sex. The mainstream LGBT movement started insisting, "We're just like you. We're normal."

Warner asks, "What could be a better way of legitimating oneself than to insist on being seen as normal? The problem, always is that embracing this standard merely throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder of respectability. It does not seem to be possible to think of oneself as normal without thinking that some other kind of person is pathological."¹⁵ That is, if I may interject, it's not possible to think of some as being normal without insisting on a divide between the inside and outside of the charmed circle. To claim the dignity of the inner circle is to insist on the deviance of the outside.

The embrace of the normal is also a prime example of antipolitical politics. The point of being normal is to blend, to have no visible difference and no conflict. Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* claimed that gay politics reduce to only two issues: military service and marriage. Everything else is mere private difference. If you are queer and don't want to enlist or get a marriage license, then politics is not for you. The message, which Sullivan later took to gay audiences in promoting his *Some-See Marriage: Pro and Con*, is that the lesbian and gay movement is essentially over, or will be when gay couples can marry.

Now, we have military service and marriage. Should we, in Sullivan's words, "have a party and close down the gay rights movement for good?" No, because we should question how much assimilation has necessarily occurred and at what cost.

Same-sex marriage is a way for queers to seek safety in straight society. Safety from HIV. Safety from stigma. Safety in being normal.

It is the belief that if we act like straight people, if we get married like them, if we have children like them, and most importantly if we judge sex like they do, "then we can hope that AIDS will pass by our doorway this time." Alexander's shaming of Joel makes sense within this environment. His straight sexual attitudes—his assimilation—conflate "dirty" sex outside the charmed circle with HIV and death. Nothing he did with Joel gave him a chance of transmission, but his fear and his shaming of Joel is intimately connected to Joel being "a slur" that could give him HIV.

Ultimately, though, I am not writing to lambast same-sex marriage as good or bad, or as a tool of hegemony or a pathway to equality, or even to question whether marriage is straightening up queers or whether we are queering the institution.

Instead, my focus is on how the desire for same-sex marriage arose from the terror of HIV/AIDS to seek safety in the bastions of straight society. Today's desire to be one of the good gays is rooted in this history, this fear of death. To be a good gay is to tell the world: I don't want to be different; I deserve life.

That's OK.

But who is left behind? Who do we throw shame on when we clean up and act nice?

Warner suggests that "this message goes over well with a key constituency: middle-class white gay men, many of whom were never happy to be political, anyway."¹⁶

For many, assimilation isn't possible, because the values expressed by the inner circle are middle-class white values. Values requiring money. Values built around punishing those that deviate from the white middle-class norm.

People will be left behind when gays assimilate. Who are those people going to be?



Writing this chapter, I was reminded of how piecemeal assimilation has been.

Sitting in Everybody's Coffee, just north of Boystown in Uptown at Wilson Avenue and Sheridan Road, I was enjoying an Americano, when a man walked by the front window. I turned to look at him pass by, as I did with most people that pass by the front window. Part of the appeal of writing by the window is having a parade of images from which to draw in my daily writing. He didn't disappoint.

Slam! The window rattled from the side of his fist banging against the glass. He stared at me mouthing, "You faggot bitch."

Those words transported me to only two days before, when Austin and I were walking from our apartment north along Sheridan to Crew, a gay sports bar in Uptown. "Oh my god!" Austin exclaimed, showing me that I had a patch of gray hair hidden among the blond along my right temple.

"No!" I wailed. I was growing older. We laughed together. I threw my arm around his shoulder. "Guess you'll find me more attractive now?" I joked.

"Fucking faggots," a man in a goatee with two bags walking south from the Jewel-Osco grocery store spat at us as he passed by going the opposite direction.

Back at Everybody's Coffee, it was as if that the man who slammed the window had said, "How assimilated are you, you faggot bitch?"

Despite the narrative of progress—"We can live anywhere now!"—how fully assimilated are gay and queer peoples in American society? Much has been made of the fantastic strides in legal equality and inclusion within our families of origin. We are married! The movement is over!

Tolerance often feels more like an "I love you anyway" kind of inclusion. Being one of the good gays then takes on additional meaning. It means that we are worthy of love. Straight culture doesn't accept queer people if they act queer, with all the sexually deviant, genderfucking, weird relationships we invented.

It seems even other gay men now don't find you worthy of love, as Alexander did to Joel, when you exist outside the charmed circle. This is assimilation not as acceptance, or a folding in, or blending between two groups, but assimilation as lack of exclusion. Assimilation as the unchanging blind acceptance of the morality handed down from our parents. Assimilation as staying straight.

For some.

The narrative of progress, of "it gets better," should always add "for some." Queer people are expected to relish the fact that it is no longer assumed that we are deviants. No longer being kicked out of our homes. No longer denied housing, health care, or jobs. No longer excluded from society to the point of being driven to suicide, drugs, or drink.

For some. For some. For some. Many still attempt suicide, abuse drugs, become drunks to deal with the pain.

These facts drive queer separatism, the desire to have our own space, to have a Boystown.

Reflecting on what had just happened to me, after the shock of the jarring slam had finished reverberating through me, it also seemed he was saying "Go back to your neighborhood, you faggot bitch."

Uptown is gentrifying. I have no idea whether this man lived in the neighborhood, but these interactions strike me also as a reaction against gentrification

by young professionals sitting in newly opened coffee shops in our leather jackets, skinny jeans, and flannel shirts.

Perhaps, he thought I was staring at him for other reasons, a young white man looking down on a middle-aged Black man in one of the Blackest neighborhoods of the north side. The choice of words reads heterosexist, but the context is subtext. It is almost immaterial that I am a faggot. I read as an outsider, a newcomer. I should get my faggot bitch ass back to Boystown where I belong.

These are the contexts in which gentrification happen. It is hard for me to believe the triumphant progress narrative when it doesn't matter if we are one of the good gays.

We can live anywhere we want, officially. Our relationships are recognized, officially. Yet, how much of that matters? Who does it matter to? This tension is behind the gayborhood impulse, the animating drive of Boystown.

Boystown remains as a destination for gay men, a gay Disneyland of wonder, even amid the assimilationist trend, the desire to blend, because even the good gays are unwelcome outside. No matter how much someone insists they are normal because they will have kids, they will have sex in the home, they will get married, they will be monogamous, and they will be HIV negative, they will still be different.

Assimilation changes Boystown. The good gays may not need to go to Boystown. They might be postgay, but faggot bitches can't go anywhere they want. They go to Boystown. Does Boystown still want them?