

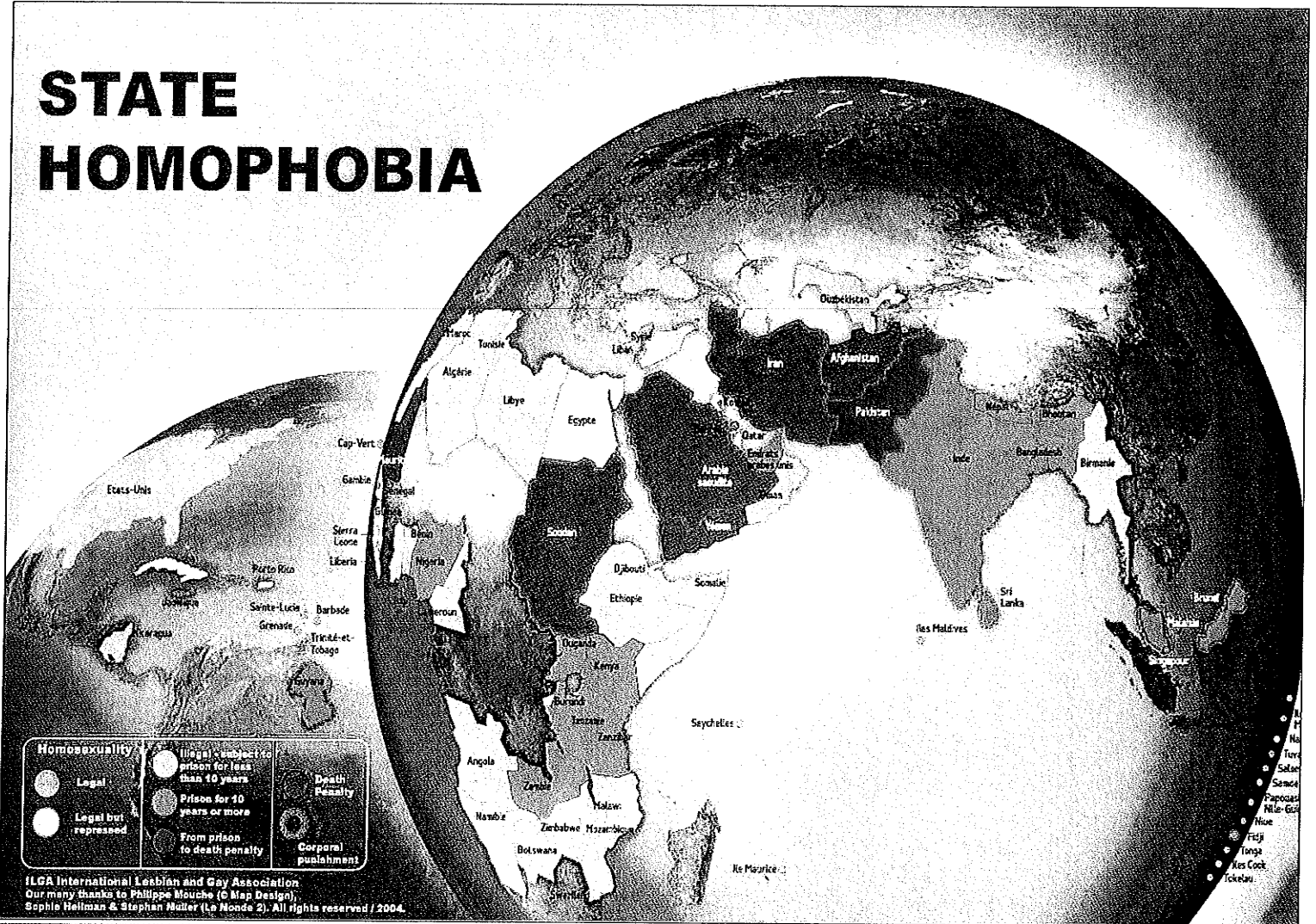
The Gay & Lesbian Review

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MAY-JUNE 2010

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The Reinvention of Heterosexuality

AMIN GHAZIANI

HISTORIAN JONATHAN NED KATZ first published his essay “The Invention of Heterosexuality” in 1990, which he later expanded into an award-winning 1995 book of the same title. The beauty of Katz’s approach was its inversion, so to speak, of popular constructionist arguments about homosexuality. Recall Michel Foucault’s famous declaration that the homosexual as a “species” was “born” in 1870. Or Adrienne Rich’s classic formulations of “lesbian existence” and the “lesbian continuum.” David Halperin discovered an antiquity populated by *molles* (effeminate men) and *tribades* (masculine women), and George Chauncey’s early 20th-century gay New York City was a world that had a place for “trade,” “husbands,” “wolves,” “fairies,” “third-sexers,” and “punks.” And don’t forget Monique Wittig’s quip that “lesbians are not women.”

While others had offered revisionist histories, Katz refocused the narrative from a homo- to a heterosexual one, challenging the assumption that heterosexuality is, in his own words, “unchanging, universal, essential: ahistorical.” In its place he offered an intriguing alternate hypothesis, namely, that heterosexuality is a fairly recent, historically located, and always adapting fabrication. Said differently and borrowing Halperin’s distinction: “sexuality” has a history, even if sex itself—which Halperin describes as a “natural fact, grounded in the functioning of the body”—does not.

In his 162-year time frame, 1820–1982, Katz divides sexual history into seven periods. While his contribution is a thing of beauty, it needs to be ongoing. The argument that heterosexuality is historical means that it has had almost three decades to evolve since Katz’s endpoint. How, then, has heterosexual history unfolded from 1982 to the present?

While attempting to fill in some of the blanks makes for an arousing thought experiment, what I propose here is nothing as systematic and thorough as Katz’s work. Instead, I hope to inspire a renewal of his ideas by considering how heterosexuality has been reinvented since 1982. While Katz focuses on language (the word “heterosexuality” as a rhetorical device), I will hone in on cultural and political pivots around which heterosexuality has continued to be articulated. Let’s first begin with a brief review of Katz’s seven periods, after which I’ll offer my own ideas on how his framework might be extended to the present day.

Before Heterosexuality in the Early Victorian Era (1820–1860). The heterosexual did not have a linguistic existence in the early Victorian era, which was characterized instead by gender-based standards of “true womanhood” and “true manhood.” The defining feature was the realization of a lust-free “true love” within

the constraints of procreative marriage. The primacy of gender gave rise to the “invert,” a mostly medical classification of gender and sexual deviance. While there were some state sodomy laws in place, they proscribed particular acts in which anyone could conceivably engage.

The Late Victorian Era (1860–1892). In a private conversation in 1868, the German sodomy-law reformer Karl Maria Kertbeny first coined the words “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality,” which Katz describes as “the debut of the modern lingo.” Kertbeny first used the word “homosexual” in public a year later in an effort to reform sodomy laws, and he first used the word “heterosexual” in public in 1880 in a defense of homosexuality. Katz regards this as “one of sex history’s grand ironies”: Kertbeny’s coinages were intended to advance the cause of homosexual emancipation.

The First Years of Heterosexuality (1892–1900). The words “heterosexual” and “homosexual” traveled from Germany to the U.S. in 1892 when Chicago doctor James Kiernan read excerpts of his journal article to the city’s medical society. Kiernan used the term “heterosexual” in a very different way than we do today, according to Katz, to refer to people who displayed tendencies toward “psychical hermaphroditism,” or “inclinations to both sexes,” and resorted to “abnormal methods of gratification.” Kiernan’s heterosexuals were essentially bisexuals who masturbated, in modern parlance. Also in 1892, Richard Krafft-Ebing’s influential tome *Psychopathia Sexualis* was translated and published in the U.S. Unlike Kiernan, Krafft-Ebing defined “hetero-sexual” as “erotic feeling for a different sex,” and he defined “homo-sexual” as “erotic feeling for a same sex.” He also included a third category of “psycho-sexual hermaphroditism” to characterize “impulses toward both sexes.”

The Heterosexual Mystique (1900–1930). Due to falling birth rates, rising divorce rates, and other anxieties (such as the flappers of the 1920’s and women entering the workforce), heterosexuality was culturally redefined as “a procreant urge linked inexorably with carnal lust.” The heterosexual mystique, with its innovative emphasis on the erotic, was designed to redress prevailing social ills. As a corrective, the sexes were reified as opposite in nature, and their attraction to one another was presumed to be universal and natural. However, Katz also observes that early feminist declarations of “women’s moral superiority cast suspicions of lust on women’s passionate romantic friendships with women, and asserted the presence of a menacing female monster, ‘the lesbian.’”

The Heterosexual Steps Out (1930–1945). In the fifth season, heterosexuality as a concept emerged from rarified medical circles and diffused into mainstream culture. On April 30, 1930, *The New York Times* printed the word “heterosexual” in its book review section (for André Gide’s *The Immoralist*). The abbreviation “hetero” appeared in Eileen A. Robertson’s 1933 novel *Ordinary Families*. And the 1940 Broadway musical *Pal Joey* included a song titled

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"Zip" that included the following lyrics: "I don't like a deep contralto, or a man whose voice is alto, Zip, I'm a heterosexual." Katz argues that these trends amounted to a "historically new, self-conscious, public proclamation of a heterosexual identity."

Heterosexual Hegemony (1945–1965). By this time, heterosexuality was established as hegemonic, an outcome World War II accelerated with the "cult of domesticity." This model valorized the feminine, stay-at-home mother and the masculine, breadwinning father. With the 1948 publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Alfred Kinsey introduced the radical idea of human sexuality as lying on a scale from zero ("exclusively heterosexual") to six ("exclusively homosexual"), with varying degrees of bisexuality in between. But inadvertently, argues Katz, "that famous continuum of erotic acts and feelings reaffirmed the idea of a sexuality divided between the hetero and the homo."

Heterosexuality Questioned (1965–1982). In Katz's final interval, heterosexuality was questioned by new voices of "anti-establishment counterculturalists, fledgling feminists, and homosexual-rights activists," all of whom "had begun to produce an unprecedented critique of sexual repression in general, of women's sexual repression in particular, of marriage and the family—and of some forms of heterosexuality." The public forum buzzed with challenging ideas such as Christopher Isherwood's "heterosexual dictatorship," Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality," Mary P. Ryan's "heterosexual history," and Lillian Faderman's notion of "heterocentric," an adjective she used "to condemn a world-view that made homosexuals (especially lesbians) invisible." All of this put heterosexuality in distress and on the defensive.

KATZ'S SEVEN STAGES offer several insights: heterosexuality is coextensive with homosexuality; one is always defined and developed against the other. The meaning of each term is a function of specific political, economic, and cultural trends, such as the heavy hand of medical practitioners, the shifting balance between pleasure and procreation, gender roles and relations, economic fluctuations, or the rise of political movements such as the New Left and the women's movement. The historical stretches range in duration from eight to forty years, with an average of 23 years per period. Presumably, the shorter the season, the swifter the rate of change, whereas longer eras enable cultural definitions to penetrate more deeply into the societal fabric. Finally, the absence of alternative terms within and across ages is striking, with hetero- and homosexuality fixed in a seemingly intransigent binary.

But there's no reason to suspect that heterosexual history ended abruptly in 1982. To reinvigorate Katz's approach, I propose three additional periods. The dates I suggest are approximations, the transitions gradual:

HETEROSEXUALITY REAFFIRMED (1983-1990)

On July 3, 1981, the *New York Times* ran this headline: "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." This was the first public mention of what would later become known as AIDS. According to the Gay Men's Health Crisis, 1985 polls showed that 72 percent of Americans favored mandatory HIV testing and 51 percent supported the quarantining of people with AIDS. These attitudes sealed gay peo-

ple's fate as social pariahs for the ensuing decade. On the other hand, heterosexuals had their sexual identity reaffirmed as normal. In 1983, Pat Buchanan slanderously concluded: "The poor homosexuals; they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution." William F. Buckley publicly supported mandatory HIV testing and the forcible tattooing of HIV-positive gay men "on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals." This early association of AIDS with gay men allowed the federal government to ignore the disease. Congressional staffers joked that NIH really stood for "Not Interested in Homosexuals," and it was not until June 1987—six years into the epidemic—that President Reagan used the word "AIDS" for the first time in a public address.

In the final chapter of his book, Katz proposes that AIDS exacerbated "anxiety of the heterosexually inclined," rather than renewed its confidence. His conclusion stems from the titles of two books, a newspaper headline, and an off-off Broadway revue: in 1988 Masters and Johnson's published *Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS*; in 1990, Michael Fumento published *The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS*; in 1989, *New York Newsday* printed a photo of New York City's former mayor with the headline, "Koch: 'I'm Heterosexual'"; and in 1990, an off-off Broadway show opened with the title *Heterosexuals in Crisis*. I don't disagree that these titles point to feelings of angst, but I think if we widen the historical lens, a different picture emerges that suggests a resurgence of heterosexual boldness.

Consider also the Supreme Court's 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which in a 5–4 ruling upheld the state of Georgia's sodomy law, which prohibited both homosexuals and heterosexuals from engaging in "any sexual act involving the sex organs of one person and the mouth or anus of another." Writing for the majority, Justice White declared that "The issue presented is whether the Federal Constitution confers a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy," and concluded that "Georgia's condemnation of 'homosexual sodomy' validly expresses 'majority sentiments about the morality of homosexuality,' indeed a 'presumed belief of a majority of the electorate in Georgia that homosexual sodomy is immoral and unacceptable.'"

The majority and concurring opinions in *Bowers* did not once use the word "heterosexual." In their dissent, however, Justices Blackmun, Brennan, Marshall, and Stevens argued that Georgia displays an "apparent willingness to enforce against homosexuals a law it seems to not have any desire to enforce against heterosexuals." I agree with Janet Halley that this becomes "the salient characteristic of the class" of heterosexuals. Heterosexuality reaffirms itself by remaining silent about itself. If we continued to focus only on the word "heterosexuality," as Katz did for his earlier periods, we would miss this development.

HETEROSEXUAL PANIC ATTACK (1990-1996)

"Something happened in the 1990's, something dramatic and irreversible," reflected historian John D'Emilio. "A group of people long considered a moral menace and an issue previously deemed unmentionable in public discourse were ... discussed in every institution of American society. ... During the 1990s, the world seemed finally to turn and notice the gay people in its midst." The 1990's witnessed a significant increase in front-page coverage of gay issues. Headlines captured the public coming out of Congressman Barney Frank (*Newsweek*, September 25, 1989); debates on

whether homosexuality was born or bred (*Time*, September 9, 1991 and *Newsweek*, February 24, 1992); gays in the military (*Newsweek*, February 1, 1993); and general interest covers such as “The Future of Gay America” that endeavored to get to the bottom of public opinion (*Newsweek*, March 12, 1990). The *New York Times* now allowed that gays were now “The People Next Door.”

An *Entertainment Weekly* cover story (September 8, 1995) noted that “the Gay 90’s” was a time of when “pop culture loosened its straightjacket,” a time when “the gay stream flows freely into the mainstream.” But all this free-flowing interpenetration prompted heterosexuals into a new crisis, which they managed through a series of boundary-hardening maneuvers. Clinton’s “compromise” on the military that produced “Don’t ask, don’t tell” is one such example. The brutal murder of 22-year-old Allen Schindler by his two Navy shipmates in 1992 is another. While a nervous military tried to conceal the murder by attributing it to a “difference of opinion,” horrid details leaked out that exposed the cover-up.

Another feature of this period was the religious Right’s “Special Rights” campaign. While the Right has long denigrated gay people, they tested a new approach in this period by warning against providing preferential treatment to lesbians and gay men. Discrimination against gays, their argument went, was not the same as that against other minorities, since gay people choose this “lifestyle.” This rhetoric helped seal the passage of Colorado’s Amendment 2, a constitutional provision that nullified all existing protections and banned future anti-discrimination measures. (The Amendment was later struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court.)

Hetero angst arguably climaxed on September 21, 1996, with the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act. DOMA, itself defensively “protecting” the (heterosexual) institution of marriage from putative homosexual threat, defined marriage as “a legal union of one man and one woman as husband and wife” and specified that spouse “refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or wife.” In a commentary titled, “The Marriage Fight Is Setting Us Back,” D’Emilio piercingly observed: “The battle to win marriage equality through the courts has done something that no other campaign or issue in our movement has done: it has created a vast body of new anti-gay law.”

HETEROGENEOUS HETEROSEXUALITY (1996-PRESENT)

A 1995 *New York Times* story headline pronounced, “Gay or Straight? Hard to Tell.” Writer David Colman noted:

As gay men grow more comfortable shrugging off gay-identified clothing and Schwarzeneggerian fitness standards, straight men are more at ease flaunting a degree of muscle tone seldom seen outside of a *Men’s Health* cover shoot. And they are adopting looks—muscle shirts, fitted jeans, sandals and shoulder bags—that as recently as a year or two ago might have read as, well, gay. ... What’s happening is that many men have migrated to a middle ground where the cues traditionally used to pigeonhole sexual orientation—hair, clothing, voice, body language—are more and more ambiguous. Call it what you will: “gay vague” will do. But the poles are melting fast.

The current period is defined by a renaissance of ways to be heterosexual, especially in relation to homosexuality. And the trend extends beyond words and pictures. So homoflexible is today’s hetero world that a straight man can be in a relationship with an-

other man without being gay. In a 2002 *Instinct* magazine story titled, “Standing Straight,” Samuel Reiss teases: “Two guys in a relationship. Gay, right? Wrong! These three male couples explain what it’s like to be together when one is a homo and the other insists that, under any other circumstances, he is a bona fide breeder boy.” Reiss recounts cool and comfortable heterosexual men who casually state, “I’m just a heterosexual in a male relationship.” Four years later in 2006, *Advocate* magazine ran a story titled “Seeking Straight.” Writer Frankie Edozien alleged, “There is greater acceptance of pansexual behavior among straight men. ... Men who are self-identified as straight are more willing to explore their homosexual side. It’s less of a taboo.”

And who can forget the rise of the “metrosexual”? Mark Simpson purportedly coined the word on November 15, 1994, in *The Independent*, a national newspaper in the United Kingdom. The “metrosexual man,” says Simpson, is “the single young man with a high disposable income, living or working in the city (because that’s where all the best shops are), [and] is perhaps the most promising consumer market of the decade.” The word gained traction after Simpson reused it in a 2002 Salon.com article where he elaborated, “He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but *this* is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference.” In 2003, *The New York Times* was the first American newspaper to print the word in a story titled “Metrosexuals Come Out.” The article defined metrosexuals as “straight urban men willing, even eager, to embrace their feminine side. ... Having others question their sexuality is all part of the game.” The conceit of metrosexuality—that pleasure tops sexual object choice and that gender inversion is irrelevant in the determination of sexual identity—is bold.

After metrosexuality came “bromance,” a recombination of “brother” and “romance” to designate a close but not sexual relationship between two heterosexual men. Dave Carnie is credited with coining the term in his magazine *Big Brother*. Mainstream American journalists had been wrestling with questions of homosocial intimacy for a while. On April 10, 2005, the *New York Times* ran a story inquisitively titled, “What do you call two straight men having dinner?” The answer: a “man-date,” defined as “two heterosexual men socializing without the crutch of business or sports. It is two guys meeting for the kind of outing a straight man might reasonably arrange with a woman.” On October 26, 2006, *USA Today* characterized the same phenomenon as a “male-ationship” or a “bromance,” generated by widespread changes in “the whole culture of masculinity.” Just as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* popularized “metrosexual,” MTV’s reality show *Bromance* popularized this buzzword when it aired in December 2008.

Today’s sexual landscape is crowded with new terms: gay vague, metrosexual, bromance, mandate, and male-ationship, but also menaissance, gay for pay, down low, dude sex, and countless others, all of which enable a critical reconsideration of heterosexuality (and homosexuality). While the earlier periods implied a zero-sum game—if heterosexuality was up, homosexuality was down, and vice versa—today’s climate has moved toward a sexual equilibrium. But expanding Katz’s framework raises new questions: Is heterosexual history gender-inflected? Where are the equivalent words for women? ≡

Thanks to Jonathan Ned Katz for his comments on an earlier draft.