



THE END OF THE HOMO SEXUAL?

Bestselling author
of the groundbreaking
classic *Homosexual:
Oppression & Liberation*

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**T H E E N D
O F T H E
H O M O S E X U A L ?**

D E N N I S A L T M A N

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*In memory of Anthony Smith (1959–2012),
who died before he could read the final draft.*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1975 I was invited by a student group to speak about homosexuality at the Townsville campus of James Cook University. The local paper reported my talk, which led to hostile questions being asked in the state parliament, where I was referred to as ‘a bare-footed practising homosexual’, and an attack upon me by Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Thirty-five years later I was invited by the vice-chancellor of Central Queensland University to Rockhampton to give a similar talk, chaired by federal Liberal MP Warren Entsch. This time the local paper editorialised its support for the event, and I was a guest on both local radio stations.

My invitation to central Queensland followed a Morgan poll that claimed the area was the most homophobic in Australia, with far greater numbers willing to term homosexuality ‘immoral’ than was the case in inner-urban areas. (While that survey suggested the least homophobic areas of Australia were the two territories and Western Australia, other data disagreed, although rural areas, particularly in Queensland and Tasmania, do seem considerably more homophobic than inner cities.) Interestingly, the local gay and lesbian folk I met in Rockhampton seemed less convinced that this was the case, and were well aware of the distinctions between how people might answer hypothetical questions and how they might actually behave.

Flying north from Brisbane, I was tempted to believe I was entering a different country; the men in the departure lounge – one with a T-shirt proclaiming ‘Jesus Saves’, others with surfer gear and heavy tatts – would not have been a common sight back at Tullamarine. But walking around Rockhampton with its slightly stuffy and old-fashioned downtown area, reinforced my sense that Australia is a remarkably homogenous country, and that apparently different attitudes between regions are more likely to reflect economic status and demography, not some particular essential difference between state cultures.

This was in fact my fourth visit to provincial Queensland to address gay issues. After my first foray to Townsville, I flew to Cairns in 1988 to speak at the public meeting that led to the formation of the Queensland Association for Gay Law Reform. By then, the National Party government was disintegrating under allegations of corruption; within two years of the founding of QAGLR, the incoming Labor government would decriminalise homosexual activity.¹ The Cairns meeting was chaired by the local state Labor MP, and was notable for a speech by local identity Ted Kelk, who spoke of the ‘cold anger’ he had experienced whilst hiding his identity until he could retire from his job as a high-school principal. And at the end of 1993 I first visited Rockhampton for a conference at the university entitled ‘Voices of a Margin’, which brought together speakers from all the predictable indicators of disadvantage.²

Seventeen years later, Rockhampton appeared to have changed little. However, *The Boy From C*

was playing at the town's theatre – an interesting reminder that Australia's two most successful musicals (the other being *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) are, as they used to say, as camp as a row of tents. What had changed was the assumption of a kind of normality around homosexuality, so that the vice-chancellor could joke publicly about his wife's attraction to the men pictured in a Queensland gay calendar. It was inconceivable that a vice-chancellor would have felt sufficiently relaxed about sexuality to make such comments twenty years earlier. Of course, prejudice and hostility remain: a week after I was in Rockhampton, the visiting American author Armistead Maupin encountered blatant homophobia in a restaurant in Alice Springs, when a barman told him the toilets were 'reserved for real men'. Tourism Central Australia was quick to apologise, and the Melbourne Age followed up with an apologetic editorial.³

Anyone over fifty in Australia has lived through extraordinary changes in how we imagine the basic rules of sex and gender. We remember the first time we saw women bank tellers, heard a woman's voice announce that she was our pilot for a flight, watched the first woman read the news on television. A majority of women are now in the paid workforce; in 1966 they made up twenty-nine per cent. When I was growing up in Hobart it was vaguely shocking to hear of an unmarried heterosexual couple living together, and women in hats and gloves rode together in the back of the trams (now long since disappeared). As I look back, it seems to me that some of the unmarried female teachers at my school were almost certainly lesbians, although even they would have been shocked had the word been uttered.

In 1955 Princess Margaret had been forced to repudiate marrying a divorced man. Since then, three of Queen Elizabeth II's four children have divorced, and the current heir to the throne is married to a woman with whom he obviously had an affair during his previous marriage. Most of my female schoolmates who went to university were on teachers' scholarships, and would be expected to resign from the department if they married, which not infrequently happened because of unplanned pregnancies. Abortions were illegal but were often performed under appalling conditions; the occasional girl was known to have suddenly made a trip 'to Melbourne' in search of one.

Homosexuals were invisible, at best referred to in guilty jokes that I generally failed to understand. Barry Humphries wrote of this period that 'Pooftahs were happily confined to the small hermetic world of ballet and window dressing',⁴ but this was a snide half-truth. (Not surprisingly, Humphries did not appear to think lesbians were even worth a snide reference.) In the same way, our cities were overwhelmingly racially homogenous: an overt white supremacy was dominant, reinforced through the notorious White Australia Policy and through the legal inequality of Aborigines, and deep prejudice existed against the few non-Caucasians living in Australia. When I was growing up I recalled several Chinese-Australian families, but they were regarded as alien and exotic, even though some had been in the country for a century – far longer than the families of many of my classmates, who treated them with contempt.

During the 1970s, when Australia saw the first public affirmations by gay men and women, homosexuality was regarded with deep suspicion – as a vice, as a crime or, at best, as an illness. Sexual behaviour between men was illegal in all states, and very few women or men publicly acknowledged their homosexuality. Even if the anti-sodomy laws were rarely applied, police

harassment and entrapment, and fear of disclosure to families and employers, maintained a low-level reign of terror sufficient for most homosexuals to spend considerable effort managing constant subterfuge and evasion. The current world, in which there are openly gay politicians, judges and even the occasional sports star, was literally inconceivable. We used to worry about being bashed for walking hand-in-hand. Young queers now worry about wedding planning, even though the threat of violence is still real, and in some areas possibly increasing.

The last decade, in particular, has seen extraordinary progress towards the normalisation of homosexuality across the western world.*

* A disclaimer: While I am uncomfortable with the term 'western world', I use it here not in its Cold War sense but to include those countries in Western Europe, North America and Australasia that share a common affluence, a set of liberal-democratic principles, and a strong rhetorical commitment to civil liberties, even if these are often flaunted in practice.

Legal protection exists in most jurisdictions against discrimination based upon 'sexual orientation' and same-sex partnerships are increasingly acknowledged by civil (if not religious) institutions. Openly homosexual politicians are increasingly evident, and a significant 'pink vote' is now courted during elections. No mainstream television series seems to be without its gay and lesbian characters, and there is a well-established targeting of a gay/lesbian market in travel, real estate and consumer advertising. In 2012 the high-rating television station Channel Nine resuscitated the reality show *Brother*; the winner was openly gay and proposed to his partner on live television.

Those of us old enough to remember the period in which a large-scale gay movement began have lived through a revolution, and it is difficult for us to make sense of it. Change occurs at a number of levels simultaneously, and is often contradictory and uneven. Looking back over four decades, one can trace major shifts in the discourse, representation and regulation of homosexuality – all of which terms are open to multiple meanings. Nor does change occur without cost. Many activists find that, as they age, they feel a nostalgia for a remembered past, which seems increasingly preferable to the present. Gore Vidal, of whom I have written elsewhere, wrote a novel that identifies the 'golden age' as the decade following World War II, but in effect he is writing about his youth, which is where most of us locate that period.

The changing Australian attitudes reflect a much larger global story, where new images of the sexes and possibilities for activism circulate increasingly rapidly. The American influence has been particularly significant, and through its media the US has shaped how most of us imagine the world. Americans have been role models and reference points for changing images of sex and gender from Marilyn Monroe and James Dean through to the characters of *Glee* and *Sex in the City*. Our generation lived through a major shift in emphasis from British attitudes and culture to an increasing embrace of that of the United States, a change that paralleled the steady increase of non-British immigration to Australia.⁵ At the same time, the realities of globalisation, in all its diverse meanings, mean that even local stories have to be told through an awareness of the wider world.

Of course, for me it is difficult to disentangle what has changed in the larger world from the realities of my own ageing. As soon as one relies upon personal observation, one has to recognise the extent to which these observations are distorted as well as enhanced by the personal. A friend wrote several years ago on Facebook:

I'll be in New York this weekend, and it turns out to be the Black Party. That used to get me as excited as when I was a little boy about to open presents on Christmas Eve. Now the person who could get excited about either seems impossibly remote, barely half-remembered, from another lifetime.

Another friend, browsing recently through a gay bookshop, remarked that *The Joy of Gay Sex* seemed to have been replaced by *The Joy of Cooking*, although it is worth noting that *The Joy of Gay Sex* originally published in 1977, has been reissued and revised several times by writers drawn from my generation.

For much of my adult life I have travelled frequently to the United States, and my sense of gay community and identity has been shaped as much by that experience as by the much longer periods which I have lived in Australia. The dogged anti-Communist crusader of the 1960s and 1970s Frank Knopfelmacher once called me an agent of US cultural imperialism. In a sense, he was right: my time in the States influenced me enormously. At the time that people like Knopfelmacher were defending America's war in Vietnam, opponents of that war like me were drawing equally on the United States for intellectual and cultural inspiration. The growth of gay assertion in most western countries owes a great deal to the States, and this impact continues through popular culture and increasing travel. One of the major gay discos in Sydney during the 1970s had a large mural of San Francisco, as if to symbolise the freedom that awaited us at the end of the rainbow.

I became a gay activist by accident, largely as a result of living in New York in 1971, when the gay liberation movement was starting. Inspired by the new movement – and determined to become a 'writer' – I developed an outline for a book on gay liberation. After a number of futile attempts to find a publisher, I met Harris Dienstfrey, whose small publishing house, long since vanished, was prepared to take a gamble, and *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* found a home. Thanks to a lukewarm review in *Time* magazine, and a more enthusiastic one by Martin Duberman in *The New York Times*, the book survived its first publication by an obscure publisher to become a mass-market paperback, and it was subsequently translated into several languages.

In Australia, Richard Walsh, then managing Angus & Robertson, acquired the book and published it in 1972. *Homosexual* has a continuing life: in 2011 I went to Japan to give several lectures to mark its publication there, and in early 2012 a two-day conference in Melbourne commemorated its fortieth anniversary.⁶ What struck me most at the conference was how the experiences I had lived through were increasingly being seen as historical events to be researched by a growing number of lesbian and gay activists. The last chapter of *Homosexual* had been entitled 'The End of the Homosexual?', hence the title for this book.

To make sense of change requires us to focus on a number of arenas simultaneously. As change occurs, it creates new possibilities but it can also reinforce old patterns – which may be why so many young people today regard 'hippies' with distaste. In a familiar cycle, yesterday's radicalism becomes tomorrow's nostalgia. So it is with sexuality. The changes over the past forty years have not replaced one mode of being homosexual as much as they have added new ones. The world of hustlers, drag queens and self-denial described in John Rechy's 1965 novel *City of Night* can still be found alongside well-dressed professional women and men at gay business fundraisers. The simultaneous existence of old-fashioned 'queens' and edgy transsexual 'queers' illustrates Raymond Williams's

discussion of ‘residual and emergent cultures’,⁷ whereby new forms don’t necessarily displace much as they complement existing modes. Drawing on the Italian Antonio Gramsci to develop a cultural reading of Marxism, Williams stressed that while certain cultural forms are dominant, they coexist with varieties of ‘experiences, meanings and values’ that grow out of previous social formations, while others develop either as alternatives to or in active opposition to what is taken for granted by most people.

It is not hard to sit in a clearly gay urban space and see both the past and the future of gay life; what was once shocking is now taken for granted. A casual passer-by on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood, for example, can watch go-go dancers clad in the most revealing of briefs, while young pierced and tattooed queers walk by, largely disinterested. Rather like individuals, all cultures have complex and multiple identities, and change often means the incorporation rather than the replacement of old forms. During my most recent visits to that strip – one of the few remaining clearly gay zones in the United States – I saw three generations of queer life, from an elegant lesbian couple walking their matching dogs, to young guys, uneasily still in their teens, half-cruising for money and opportunity. ‘Ghettos’ function as sites for both nostalgia and initiation, and if places like West Hollywood, the Castro and Chelsea have traditionally functioned as spaces to which young queers come from rural and small-town America, they are now increasingly playing this role internationally.

Major changes in the understanding of homosexuality reflect larger social and cultural shifts. One example: it is likely that the invention and spread of the internet has changed patterns of sexual behaviour as widely as did the contraceptive pill forty years ago. In both cases the changes were neither foreseen nor intended, and in both cases the impact of new technologies was partly dependent on political and ideological forces. My own real discovery of the ‘gay world’ – a term popularised by a 1968 book⁸ – came in the mid-1960s in New York City, and my story straddles a number of countries, above all the United States, where I have lived for about eight years of my life at various points. There are many ways of making sense of this story, and this book does so by drawing heavily on my own experiences of the past four decades, and on the very considerable secondary literature that is now available. Writing this book is as much an exploration of the traps and uncertainties of memory as it is of recorded social and political history.

Memory has suddenly become a major topic in queer circles: in 2012 thousands of people signed up to websites for ‘lost gay’ Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland and so on, while in Brussels a special colloquium was organised to remember the ‘homosexual militancy’ of the 1950s. In some ways, these moves grew out of a number of celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in 2009. A raid in June 1969 on the Stonewall Inn, a well-known homosexual bar in Greenwich Village, New York, provoked a number of patrons and passers-by to fight back against the police, triggering several nights of riots that have since been mythologised as the founding event of the contemporary gay movement.⁹ Much has been made of the coincidence that the riots took place on the eve of Judy Garland’s funeral, and Garland’s character in *The Wizard of Oz* probably gave rise to the euphemism ‘friends of Dorothy’ to describe homosexual men. In 1988 Edmund White declared Stonewall to be ‘the turning point of our lives’;¹⁰ certainly the years between 1969 and 1972 represented a major

tipping point in homosexual awareness and assertion across the western world.

Books from the early period of the gay movement are now being reissued, and 'vintage' (that is pre-AIDS) pornography is now widely dispersed through the internet, and in some cases has become collectable. Even so, there are still very few ways in which young people discovering their homosexuality have the means to learn much of the history of their sexuality, and of the ways in which homosexuals have been regarded historically.

Maybe there is something about forty years, which marks the coming to adulthood of a third generation since Stonewall; whatever the reason, I find myself talking increasingly with far younger people, for whom my memories help make sense of their history. Intergenerational friendships have their own particular challenges, involving as they do implicit assumptions about motives and hierarchy; older men, in particular, are assumed to want sex, while younger women and men are usually thought to be cultivating their elders for financial or career advancement. One of the greatest pleasures in writing this book has been the discovery that we learn from each other, and often in ways that seem counter-intuitive. (I recognise this is a somewhat more optimistic view of intergenerational friendships than that of the Australian sociologist Peter Robinson, as reported a few years ago in his study of how male gay worlds were changing.¹¹)

Maybe, too, there is a desire amongst younger queers to find an equivalent to the family-tree version of history that is so strong in ethnic communities. This is expressed beautifully by performance artist Tim Miller's account of his own sexual ancestry:

... in my history of tongues, I had sex with David Roman, who had sex with Allen Ginsberg, who had sex with Neal Cassidy. Who had sex with Gavin Arthur, who had sex with Edward Carpenter, who had sex with Walt Whitman: Daddy of our American tongue.¹²

There is something revealing about the very title of the anthology from which this quote comes, *Who's Yer Daddy* – which recalls Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, an art installation of the 1970s which assumed a table set for thirty-nine historical and mythical women, and which for a time was a cult work among many lesbians.

As we age, there is an inevitable move towards both nostalgia for the past and uncertainty about the present, and I realise I was already experiencing this when I wrote my only novel, *The Comfort Men*, back in 1993. That book ends as the narrator sits in a café on Oxford Street, Sydney's most famous gay strip, watching a passing young man who reminds him of his earlier self, and reflects:

I am touched by feelings of surprising tenderness for his apparent fragility. Young men of his generation rarely strike me in this way; usually I am irritated by their assurance and their sleekness, their sense that all history began when they had their first orgasm. But they have inherited the world we built, and they in turn are continuing to change and develop the world in which we shall grow old.¹³

PART ONE

HOMOSEXUALITY BEFORE THE GAY MOVEMENT

In the 1930s and 1940s ... these monstrous practices, denounced by biblical and traditional common laws alike, were considered not only social but also political crimes against community standards, crimes that had to be obliterated whenever detected. People who had fallen so low as to engage in them must either be cured for their own good, forcibly if necessary, or be put away for the protection of society.

Harry Hay, founder of the Mattachine Society ('Birth of a Consciousness', *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, Winter 1995)

WHAT HAS CHANGED? WHAT REMAINS THE SAME?

Homosexuality has long been a touchstone for anxieties and conflict around sexuality. It is not surprising that Freud began his seminal *Three Essays on Sexuality* by discussing ‘inversion’, which he saw as part of the human condition: ‘Psychoanalytic research ... has found that all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice, and have in fact made one in their unconscious.’ Freud was, of course, writing of a particular time and place, but his observations about the fluidity of human sexuality are borne out by considerable anthropological and historical evidence. It is unfortunate that Freud’s openness to sexual realities has been overlaid by the prejudices of psychoanalysts who came after him, so that he is often associated with judgmental views on homosexuality that are far removed from his own.

Freud’s theories have been badly misunderstood, but they were matched by empirical evidence. The post-World War II panics around homosexuality that spread across most of the English-speaking world were in part triggered by the most provocative finding of Kinsey’s 1948 study of male sexuality: a claim that thirty-seven per cent of American men had experienced homosexual activity leading to orgasm. The figure was almost certainly exaggerated, as was the later claim that homosexuals constituted ten per cent of the population, but the myth of the ‘ten per cent’ still shows up in some popular journalism.² What was important about this, and about Kinsey’s subsequent study of female sexuality, was that it revealed that a large number of people had experienced either homosexual activity or attraction without adopting an identity based upon it.

Homosexuality, but particularly male homosexuality, has troubled western societies for a very long time, as is clear from the long history of legal and religious sanctions against the ‘unmentionable crime’. Today it appears that the focus of anxiety has shifted from Anglo-American societies to many parts of the non-western world, where nationalist and religious mobilisation against homosexuality – which is often defined as a western colonial import – is common. Ironically, earlier ‘western’ views of sexuality stressed the exotic and oriental nature of homosexuality, which was depicted as a vice particularly common in the tropics. As Rudi Bleys has argued, rising hostility to homosexuality as a sign of unwanted western influence is seen under a number of apparently different conditions:

The repression of homosexuality in post-colonial discourse on ethnic, cultural and/or national identity, moreover, can be noticed at many levels from some forms of popular music to official policies defining male-to-male sexuality as ‘alien’ to one’s own culture, and it has gained particular agency in the wake of decolonization (most countries), modernization (Japan, Central Asian countries, Iraq), communism (China, Cuba, Mozambique), or fundamentalism (Iran).³

Perhaps the clearest example is the extent to which laws against sodomy, imposed by the British Empire in the name of morality, remain in most of its former colonies, although they have long been repudiated in the imperial centre. When nationalist leaders invoke tradition, culture and religion on grounds for not accepting homosexuality, they are often drawing on nineteenth-century colonial law bolstered by missionary activity.

Over the past decade there has been a marked increase in hostility and persecution directed

homosexuals in many former British colonies, particularly in Africa but also in the Caribbean and Malaysia, fuelled both by religious fervour – as often Christian as Muslim – and by a desire to define homosexuality as a sign of western imperialist decadence. Examples such as the framing of Malaysia's deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, for sodomy in 1999 (and again ten years later), the quite extraordinary vitriol directed at gay organising in a number of African countries, and the homophobic hatred expressed in much of Jamaican reggae all suggest the troubling salience of homosexuality in contemporary politics.⁴ Attempts to include sexuality within the commitment to human rights expressed by the Commonwealth have so far been unsuccessful.

The Case of Australia

The shifts in attitudes toward homosexuality are among the most dramatic of all changes in Australian mores over the past four decades, but they were shaped by larger social and cultural changes that are reflected in our now very different attitudes towards race, gender and national identity. Australia today is a very different country to the one in which homosexual activism first emerged, and the story of our changing views about sexuality is part of a larger story about how Australia itself has changed.

There is a particular Australian story of growing acceptance of homosexuality, one to which the actions of individual activists, and of other political and cultural developments, is central. A number of factors came together in Australia to make rapid shifts in attitudes to homosexuality possible. In many ways, the invention of a new style of gay/lesbian community and identity was as much a product of the changes Donald Horne identified in his book *The Time of Hope* as of overseas influences and local activism. Horne wrote of the period between 1966 and 1972 as being a period when 'some of the established common sense was being upset'⁵ and new ideas and mores were challenging basic assumptions about society. Horne ends *The Time of Hope* by asking what had changed.

Almost thirty years later, Raewyn Connell – herself a participant in the radical politics of the period, and Australia's best known sociologist of gender – addressed the same question as she reflected on the 'new left' of the 1960s. Like Horne, she sees the period as one in which large numbers of new ideas and possibilities emerged; she describes the new left as 'a collective midwife ... a kind of social and cultural catalyst – not a world historical force in its own right but something that helped larger and slower processes along'.⁶

For me, the crucial element of the era Horne called 'the time of hope' and Connell 'a startling assertion of vivid life' was the sense of reimagining the world that was expressed through a plethora of social and cultural movements, ranging from 'black power' groups to new forms of theatre and music. This might be the place to acknowledge that both 'community' and 'identity' are slippery concepts, and even though I use them consistently, it is with an awareness that they can be simultaneously liberatory and restrictive, setting arbitrary restraints on how an individual might perceive her or his life.

It is common to dismiss the sixties as inconsequential in Australian life, no more than a faint echo of overseas events. For some, the real shift came in the supplanting of Britain as the most significant cultural influence within Australia, in favour of the United States. Julie Stephens, for example, has argued that the best way to understand the impact of the decade is to view it through the American

experience.⁷ But as Horne asserted, there were specific Australian resonances to the general cultural upheavals of the period, and these were reflected in the ways in which Australia moved from a rigid exclusionary immigration policy to accepting immigrants from across the world – and, in time, to an official adoption of multiculturalism.

Of course, the flowering of Australian theatre and film that we associate with this period was not necessarily particularly supportive of homosexuality. In fact, there was an ocker aggression to much of the cultural effusion of the time, as in the 1972 film *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, which was seen at the time as deeply, even frighteningly, homophobic.⁸ The ostensibly counter-cultural worlds of our inner cities often echoed dominant attitudes towards sex and gender, in which lesbians remained invisible and homosexual men were conflated with drag queens. Indeed, the popularity of drag shows in the 1960s paved the way for two of Australia's most famous theatrical productions: the long career of Dame Edna Everage and the film *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. While other countries have similar traditions, in few has drag been so central a part of theatrical life; I was amused when the San Francisco author Aaron Shurin began his discussion of drag in San Francisco by noting that 'the boys from Down Under perfected the art of drag names'.⁹

The strength of much of gay and lesbian history is that it tells history from the bottom up, drawing on the experiences of those involved. Its weakness is that it often fails to recognise the extent to which these particular voices are in turn shaped by larger social and cultural changes, both within the country and from beyond. Sexual cultures are increasingly shaped by global forces, and, because of our shared language, Australians are open to British and particularly to American influence. The emergence of women's liberation groups in Australia from 1969 onwards owed a great deal to American writers and to journals such as *Off Our Backs*, which, as Anne Summers has written, 'introduced us to a repertoire of new concepts and ideas', even though Australian feminism would quickly develop its own particularities.¹⁰ In a globalising world we often conflate our own experiences with broader influences so that disentangling them becomes problematic.

Two images come to mind. The first is of a Melbourne bookshop, where a group of lesbians sat cheering a repetitive loop of the film clip in which the American comedian Ellen DeGeneres 'came out' publicly on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1997. The other is being with a group of young Filipino gay men – their term – as they talked about their lives; I came to realise they were describing their lives through frames taken from American television and novels. How we imagine and manage our identities is often the product of imported images that we blend with local circumstances to produce versions that feel authentic to us.

But the changes of the past few decades are not merely products of new cultural influences. More accurately, these influences reflect larger shifts in the very nature of western societies, and the growth of what was once called 'post-industrial society', meaning a society in which the emphasis is increasingly on white-collar work, as distinct from manufacturing or primary industries, and on consumption rather than production. In such societies there has been a marked increase in higher education, in women entering and remaining in the workforce, and in personal consumerism, all of which have opened up more space for people to break away from the limited conventional ways in which they can organise their personal and emotional lives. The huge shifts in overall attitudes

sexuality, whereby sex has become commodified and sexual pleasure recognised as an end in itself. have created an environment within which homosexuality has been able to develop as an alternative form of identity and behaviour.

The very creation of the homosexual person – now most commonly known as ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ – is itself only possible within certain sorts of socioeconomic conditions, which allow enough space for people to reject traditional assumptions about the organisation of sex and gender. We tend to forget how recent such identities are, bound up as they are with the development of capitalist consumer society. As John D’Emilio has argued:

In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allowed some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on sexual identity.¹¹

Histories of urban homosexual communities in major western cities have shown how gay or lesbian subcultures have long coexisted with large groups of people who experienced same-sex behaviour and desire without necessarily adopting these as a basis for identity.¹² This remains common in most parts of the world, where family and economic pressures mean that many homosexuals marry someone of the opposite sex and have homosexual relationships and/or sexual encounters on the side.

For those of us old enough to remember the 1960s, or earlier, the changes in being homosexual are enormous. From a time when almost everyone accepted the need to hide their sexual preferences, and often even to enter into sham marriages, we now live in a world in which homosexuality is largely taken for granted as a part of life – so much so that ‘coming out’ publicly often feels redundant.

It may seem as if we have achieved a huge amount, and on balance we have. But while overt hostility is much more muted – except amongst certain people fuelled by religious belief or bigotry – a less overt dismissal of homosexuality as totally valid remains pervasive. One of my colleagues, a woman of deep liberal principles, was initially deeply disturbed when she discovered her thirty-year-old son was gay. And I still read reviews in progressive journals in which the homosexuality of key authors is elided or passed over in what Christopher Isherwood once called ‘annihilation by blandness’. More worryingly, it remains a major struggle to persuade people in international development agencies, most of whom see themselves as progressive and empathetic, to take serious notice of even gross abuses against people because of their sexuality.

Unlike other forms of identity, such as those founded in gender, race or religion, one’s sexuality is formed in opposition to rather than as an extension of one’s family life, so that to recognise one’s homosexuality, to act upon it and then to disclose it are all markers that separate rather than reinforce familial ties. Of course, there are exceptions – there are families who embrace their homosexual children – and there are many people who experience similar breaks in rejecting religion, or indeed adopting new religious beliefs. But for the great majority of homosexuals ‘coming out’ is a complex and often difficult path, which explains the centrality of the theme in queer film and literature. It’s a story with many variations, from a father coming out to his son (as in the film *Beginners*) to a woman discovering her attraction to another just after her wedding (as in *Imagine Me and You*).

In Andrew Haigh's prize-winning film *Weekend* (2011), coming out to parents, friends and co-workers is a constant motif. The New Zealand novelist Witi Ihimaera wrote in his remarkable novel *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*:

When it comes to the crunch, coming out is the greatest of all confessions. Nothing is more difficult to acknowledge. When we become ourselves we reach right back to the time when we were conceived out of our parents' passion. We murder their lives. There can never be any forgiveness.¹³

The writer Robert Dessaix once remarked that the traditional novel is inherently heterosexual – it is 'unconsciously based on ... the generation of meaning through heterosexual coupling and reproduction'¹⁴ – but he failed to note that the equivalent in homosexual writing is the search for identity outside the conventional family. Without understanding the importance of coming out, it is impossible to grasp how events like Sydney's Mardi Gras or gay festivities in towns like Daylesford and Coffs Harbour are still, in some ways, deeply political.

It's hard to recall the cruelty with which homosexuality was routinely treated in the west until just a few decades ago. Imprisonment and 'aversion therapy' (using electrodes) was commonplace enough to scare many men into deep secrecy, while lesbians, though less likely to be imprisoned or punished, were scorned and marginalised. Less than half a century ago a character in a novel by Ruth Rendell (writing as Barbara Vine) set in working-class London could reflect that: 'It would be preferable to have syphilis or be certified as mad than to admit his homosexuality.'¹⁵

The psychic costs of hiding or denying one's sexual desires were considerable; while many people managed to live fulfilling lives in semi-concealment, others experienced lifelong guilt, anxiety and fear of exposure. Graeme Blundell's biography of Graham Kennedy, probably the best known television personality in Australia for several decades, only hints at the loneliness and self-censorship that was required for him to hide what was generally suspected, and what he was forced to disguise through increasingly unconvincing heterosexual performances, including a rumoured engagement with singer Lana Cantrell.¹⁶ Even today there are many young homosexuals who drop out of school or become estranged from their families because they cannot reconcile their sexuality with other parts of their lives.

There is a growing literature that tries to convey the changes that have occurred over two generations, from a time when homosexuality was literally an imprisonable offence to today, when it is increasingly accepted, at least in the west, as a normal part of the human spectrum. When I was growing up homosexuality was hidden, and homosexuals – then referred to, if at all, as 'poofs' and 'dykes' – lived double lives as regimented as those of spies in a Le Carré novel. Perhaps the best depiction of the shifts comes in Alan Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming Pool Library*, which gradually reveals the secrets of an ageing lord, who has moved between his secret homosexual life and 'circles where good manners, lofty savoir-faire and plain callousness conspired to avoid any recognition that homosexuality even existed'.¹⁷

The changes in Australia seem particularly striking because the conventional view was that Australia was particularly hostile to expressions of homosexuality, despite evidence for its existence from the origins of white settlement¹⁸ – and indeed, but amid a very different cultural setting, with

Indigenous Aboriginal cultures. The legacy of the convict system and British prudery created a country in which an emphasis on 'mateship' meant a particularly strong sense of the difference between women and men, and the corresponding 'natural' rules of sexual attraction. The anthropologist Robert Brain, writing some years after the emergence of gay liberation, claimed that Australians 'regard homosexuality with an out and out dread';¹⁹ the historian Geoffrey Bolton writes of 'a very strong tradition of cultural prejudice dating from Australia's convict origins'²⁰ but does not explain the nature of the connection. One of the most striking passages in what is arguably the first great Australian novel, Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1872), describes the flogging to death of a young convict charged with sodomy.

Even so, the importance of policing the boundaries of male bonding, which were the consequence of considerable separation between men and women during early settlement, seems to me more significant. Indeed, the historian Russell Ward, writing in the 1950s, saw within mateship a possible 'sublimated homosexual relationship',²¹ and there were clear examples of such relationships throughout the nineteenth century.²² Even so-called Bohemians, such as the artist Norman Lindsay, were shocked by homosexuality,²³ and as late as 1965 the poet and critic Kenneth Slessor, an enthusiastic member of the then National Literature Board of Review, could write:

I regard homosexuality ... as an anti-social disease which must be recognised ... and accurately described. But I would maintain that society is justified in resorting to censorship if this anti-social practice is presented by the arts in such a way as to make it appear desirable, attractive or condoned.²⁴

It is hard to imagine any comparable literary figure in other western societies making such a claim in the mid-1960s, although it helps explain why books such as James Baldwin's *Another Country*, along with resolutely heterosexual novels such as *Portnoy's Complaint*, were still banned in Australia at the time.

In the same way, Australia lagged behind Britain and Canada in decriminalising homosexuality, even though the 1957 Wolfenden Report in Britain, and the subsequent legal changes ten years later for 'consenting adults in private', were reported in Australia. It appeared, however, that Australian censorism trumped the cultural cringe. Little wonder that many Australian homosexuals felt the need to expatriate themselves, including such figures as the lesbian artist Agnes Noyes Goodsir (1864-1939), who was part of the legendary Parisian art world of the 1920s, and, somewhat later, Robert Helpmann, Donald Friend and Jeffrey Smart. Two of our best homosexual writers – Patrick White and Sumner Locke Elliott – left Australia, and while White returned (of which more later), Elliott remained in New York until his death. In fact, he only 'came out' through his last novel, *Fairyland* (1990), which contains a scathing account of the prejudices and fears faced by the 'poofers' he left behind when he fled to the United States shortly after the end of World War II. Both Friend's diaries and Smart's memoirs – entitled *Not Quite Straight* – speak openly of their sex lives.

The former Greens leader Bob Brown has spoken of how he sought aversion therapy to 'cure' his homosexuality in the 1970s, and as late as 1989 a man was held without bail in Roma, Queensland, on charges of homosexual behaviour (bail being refused on the grounds that he was likely to reoffend). Three years later a Victorian jury released a twenty-three-year-old man who had killed a much older

man with a kitchen knife, and then set fire to his flat, because of alleged sexual advances.

Homosexuals of older generations grew up with a strong sense of self-doubt, sometimes self-loathing, which often caused considerable psychological damage that was carefully disguised or sublimated into other areas of life. Not an inconsiderable number of people went into Catholic orders as a way of escaping the realities of their sexual feelings. Because of the strong stigma against homosexuality, many men and women grew up believing they were unique and spent years trying to understand why they could not respond to what society upheld as 'natural'.

If today's messages about our sexuality are more sophisticated – there is now, after all, powerful opposition to branding homosexuality as a sin, an illness or even a deviance – these negative attitudes persist nonetheless. The push for same-sex marriage is, at least in part, a search to resolve those taboos, and to persuade ourselves, as much as others, that there is no moral or ethical distinction between sexual preferences. Perhaps I might be guilty of the reverse motive: namely, resisting marriage out of some outmoded desire to stress the particularity of homosexuality, much as some older men thought decriminalisation would remove the thrills of being illicit.

Contemporary society is both solidifying sexual identities and breaking them down. On the one hand, there are now the almost obligatory homosexual characters in television shows, especially those coming from the American channel HBO: *Six Feet Under*, *Modern Family*, *The United States of Tara* and *Desperate Housewives* all have overt gay or lesbian characters. A few years ago, the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was hugely successful on the premise that there was a clear divide between two tribes; any sense that the 'straight guy' might be attracted to his gay role models was scrupulously avoided. Proving that imitation can be even tackier than the original, this program inspired several television reality programs called *Playing It Straight*, in which heterosexual women were asked to pick the sexuality of good-looking young men, thus reinforcing the idea that no sexual ambivalence was possible. In more recent television programs, however, there is an increasing number of fixed homosexual identities as well as suggestions that these can be fluid, and that homosexual desire can cut across traditional definitions.

Oddly, Australian television has lagged behind that of both Britain and the United States, despite the early success of *Number 96*, which introduced an openly gay man to a mass television audience in the early 1970s. A few years later came *Prisoner*, set in a women's prison, in which there were considerable lesbian references, although without such a clean-cut role model as Joe Hasham in *Number 96*. Not until the 2010s did shows like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* incorporate regular homosexual characters into their scripts, apparently after viewer demands.

Since the 1990s Australians have been far more influenced by the emergence of openly homosexual characters on American and sometimes British television, even if gay characters in series such as *Melrose Place* and *Will and Grace* were rarely, if ever, allowed to display their sexuality on-screen. A 1994 episode of *Roseanne* that showed a genuinely sexy kiss between two women caused a stir that today seems slightly absurd;²⁶ by 2001, the American remake of the British series *Queer as Folk* was screening on free-to-air television, with graphic scenes of male-to-male – and occasionally lesbian – sex. In *Friends* there was a lesbian wedding as early as 1996, but no homosexual sex.

Popular culture remains caught between normalising and exoticising homosexuality, presenting

as both a separate and distinct culture and as part of everyday life. In the throwaway evening newspaper *mX*, distributed on Melbourne and Sydney public transport, there have been several sets of letters about ‘straight-boy crushes’, while the term ‘bromance’ has entered the vernacular to acknowledge the possibility of very close emotional, if not sexual, bonds between men. In one sense then, we may indeed be approaching ‘the end of the homosexual’, which some gay liberationists saw as the ultimate goal of the movement forty years ago.

Theories and Terminologies

In the last chapter of *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* I predicted that increasing acceptance of sexual diversity would mean a disappearance of identities based upon sexual ‘orientation’. This forecast failed to recognise both the persistence of identity politics and, equally importantly, the growing globalisation of sexual politics. Nor could it have anticipated the AIDS epidemic, which has both decimated and reinvigorated homosexual ‘communities’ across the world. But in its rather utopian view of a greater acceptance of sexual diversity it was accurate.

What today might one mean by ‘the end of the homosexual’? It could, after all, be taken literally to mean that homosexual identity and behaviour vanish, which is presumably the goal of at least some fundamentalists who regard homosexuality as an unambiguous mark of sin. Equally, it could be interpreted narrowly to mean the end of a certain sort of homosexual stereotype, either as victim (as in the 1961 Dirk Bogarde film of that name) or as a figure of fun and ridicule (as in the 1970s British television comedy *Are You Being Served?*), with men always depicted as very effeminate and women as heavily butch (as in the 1968 film *The Killing of Sister George*). Given the current vogue for openly gay/lesbian characters, we might easily forget how recent such characters are in popular culture; until the end of the 1960s they were usually coded, such as the mannish women who appear frequently in Agatha Christie’s novels, or the foppish men played by Edward Everett Horton in 1930s films.²⁷ Vittorio Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet* lovingly uncovered large numbers of examples of such stereotypes and they were common in Australian theatre and stand-up comedy.

More realistically, the phrase might mean the end of seeing homosexuality as a primary marker of identity, so that sexual preference comes to be regarded as largely irrelevant, and thus not the basis for either community or identity. This comes closest to what I imagined forty years ago, although my original views were born of a Freudian utopianism that expected some ongoing polymorphous perversity in which we would all become undifferentiated sexual beings. This was a not uncommon view in the late 1960s, and can be found in some of the writings of Norman O Brown, and, above all, in Gore Vidal’s novel *Myra Breckinridge*, which I have argued elsewhere should be regarded as the founding text of queer theory.²⁸ In what became both a bestseller and the basis for a truly dreadful movie, a woman who is, in fact, a homosexual man revenges her/himself on a heterosexual male student with the aim of symbolically reversing the sex/gender order.

I need to acknowledge a particular relationship with *Myra*. In 1971 a zealous Sydney Airport customs official seized my copy of the book, which became the basis for a Council of Civil Liberties trial aimed at Australia’s draconian censorship laws of the time. Customs won the case – Judge Levinson concluded that there were passages in the book ‘introduced for the sake of dirtiness, and from the su

knowledge that notoriety earned by dirtiness will command for the book a ready sale' – but the laws were soon abolished. Defending Vidal in court led to my long acquaintanceship with him, although it was limited by my position in the literary pantheon. After all, as Vidal once observed, 'in the world of stars no one is a stranger'. I was invited to stay at his villa at Ravello, but not, sadly, at the same time as either Princess Margaret or Mick Jagger.

Gay liberationists looked towards the elimination of rigid gender and sexual roles, which, as J. Johnston argued, 'must inevitably mean the collapse of the heterosexual institution with its role-playing dualities which are defined as domination of one sex over another'.²⁹ The psychiatrist Charlotte Wolff went even further: 'I am convinced that the atom bomb will destroy us all if we do not in time achieve an alternative, that is, a bisexual society', she wrote.³⁰ Few of us took the slogan 'Make Love, Not War' quite so literally.

At the same time, my first book also charted the development of new gay affirmation, and the creation of new spaces, whether lesbian feminist collectives, such as Amazon Acres in northern New South Wales, or the now forgotten fantasy of 'gaying' the underpopulated Alpine County, in northern California. Over the past four decades it has become apparent that greater acceptance does not necessarily mean a declining sense of identity. Indeed, in some ways the two seem to be interrelated, which is a conundrum worth exploring.

A note on terminology: 'gay' was originally recuperated by radicals in the early 1970s to describe both women and men, and, when we remembered, transsexuals. It quickly turned into a term applied only to men, and from an adjective – 'gay power', 'gay liberation' – to a noun: 'gays and lesbians'. In the 1980s other terms were added: bisexual, transgendered, intersexual, queer – the latter seeking to become a new portmanteau word – which also quickly became yet another marker of identity. In this book I alternate between using 'homosexual' and 'queer', taking both as generic terms that cover both women and men, and I recognise that we are often talking of both sexual attraction and self-presentation. It is important to remember that *homo* in the case of 'homosexual' means 'same' rather than 'male'; while many people dislike the word because of its rather clinical sound, others have reclaimed it. While I was writing this book, for instance, large posters appeared around inner Melbourne advertising a party for 'homosexuals and those who love them'.

The debates over terminology hide a larger question: namely, whether we are talking of a discrete minority, defined by sexual practice (and, in some cases, by gender non-conformity), or of a more general fluidity of sex and gender that rejects clear divisions between 'gay' and 'straight'. Some still continue to conflate the fluidity of sexuality with that of gender, so that sexual attraction to one's own sex merges with a desire to repudiate the biological characteristics of gender, in an almost perversely return to older concepts that homosexuality was born of a rejection of one's 'natural' biological sex.

Feminist and gay theorists insisted upon distinct categories of sex and gender, as in Gayle Rubin's seminal 1975 essay 'The Traffic in Women', in which she argued that the 'sex-gender system' is 'the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity'.³¹ This distinction has become both accepted and contested, and theorists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway have questioned some of the assumptions about what is biological and 'given' and what is socially determined;³² even Rubin herself has modified some of her original

positions.³³ Indeed, Butler uses drag to demonstrate her argument that gender is essential, performative, and largely learnt; she has written of her own discovery, as a 'bar dyke', that some men could perform a femininity she didn't want for herself far better than she could.³⁴ The ongoing attraction of 'drag' for both lesbians and gay men suggests that there are links between gender non-conformity and homosexual desires, even if many homosexuals feel uncomfortable in acknowledging them.

One of the problems of confusing sexuality and gender is that it assumes that all 'tomboys' and 'sissies' are inevitably homosexual, which is particularly confusing for those who break the mould, as illustrated by the character of the football coach in *Glee*, an extremely butch woman who likes men. As a character in David Stevens' play *The Sum of Us* (1990), later filmed, put it:

I don't want to live in a world that begins and ends with being gay. I like having all sorts of people around. I like it at work or at the footy when the other blokes rage me about what I am ... And I don't want to live in a world without women ...³⁵

It used to be assumed that there was a clear division between essentialists (who argued for innate characteristics and desires) and constructionists (who saw sexuality and gender as shaped largely by social and historical forces). I thought those terms were now confined to sociology courses, but earlier in 2013 I met a young performance artist in Los Angeles who declared himself to be 'an essentialist' and saw an unbroken line of 'forefathers' stretching back to ancient China and Persia.

I used to think that sexuality was far more fluid than gender, but as Kath Weston has pointed out, 'In an era of gene splicing, cyborgs, plastic surgery, mutant ecologies and transgender political biology now appears more mobile.' She goes on to argue that this also means that: 'Social constructivism, which had symbolized the investment in change of scholars and activists alike, could prove more difficult to subject to conscious intervention than biology.'³⁶ At the same time, there is greater recognition that a minority of people are genuinely intersexed – that is, born with a mix of physical and chromosomal characteristics that fall outside the conventional binary definitions of 'male' and 'female'. Thus, we are moving into a world in which sexual desires may be more impervious to change than physical markers of gender.

At the risk of overgeneralisation, it is probably true that homosexuality is almost always linked to some form of repudiation of the dominant gender order, even though many people who reject that order may not experience homosexual feelings. It is no longer true that homosexuals think of themselves as a 'third sex', as did the German theorist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in the nineteenth century, but the sense of being somehow gender deviant persists, often in new forms, such as the growing number of 'butch' lesbians who are identifying themselves as 'trans-men'. In general usage there is extraordinary confusion; as I write this, the local 'gay and lesbian' newspaper has a story headed 'Study looks at impacts of being gay in school', which assumes that 'compulsory heterosexuality' and its assumptions about 'masculine' and 'feminine' are the same.³⁷ But even those homosexuals who present themselves as conventionally 'feminine' or 'masculine' are likely to feel at times some ambivalence about the restrictions of the gender order, and to see their sexuality as in some way linked to a repudiation of what society expects of 'a man' and 'a woman'.

Sexuality encompasses desire, behaviour and identity, which do not always match. Indeed, many

people who experience homosexual feelings, and often homosexual behaviour, are likely to strongly deny any sense of identity, and may indeed express overt hostility to other homosexuals. It was the recognition of this that led to the coining of the term 'men who have sex with men' – or MSMs – in the 1980s, because of the need to reach such men for HIV prevention.³⁸ A decade later the American media started referring to 'the down low', an expression used to describe African American men who were behaviourally bisexual but refused any homosexual identity. I have always been uncomfortable with this usage, as it seemed to suggest this was a particular characteristic of the black community when it in fact describes a largely universal phenomenon.³⁹ The only truth behind the expression appears to be evidence that African American men are more likely to be behaviourally bisexual than other Americans, which may be related to class and complex social pressures,⁴⁰ while increasing numbers of African American women are publicly identifying as bisexual.

There is ongoing discomfort with the term 'MSM' – which, it is claimed, 'strips gay communities of visibility and relevance'⁴¹ – but it has increasingly come to be used as another form of identity even though it was invented precisely to acknowledge that many men who seek homosexual sex also deny any form of homosexual identity. Indeed, the term 'LGBT' ('lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender' – or sometimes 'LGBTI' (adding 'intersex')) – has lost its connection to the specific meanings of its composite words; one US government official told me he liked the term because it avoided any mention of sex. The ultimate example of the compromise between political correctness and common sense may be the phrase I came across in an American community paper: 'male LGBT'.

There has been more resistance to this term in Australia. In 1993 the Sydney community was bitterly divided over a move within the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby to include a 'bisexual and transgender agenda', which was rejected, and the Lobby has retained the name 'gay and lesbian'. (The Victorian equivalent, however, proclaims that it 'works for and with the whole gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer community'.) Indeed, it is now very difficult to have an honest discussion about what commonalities and differences might exist amongst the various groups that constitute the 'alphabet soup'.

Terminology is a minefield of sensitivities and political correctness: an 'adults-only panto' called *TrAnnie*, written and performed by gay men, and programmed for the Sydney Opera House in 2011, drew fury from trans activists, who complained bitterly about the use of the term in a story about a trans paedophile; they succeeded in having the show's name changed to *Trashley*. The very term 'transgender', which came into popular usage in the 1990s, is enormously charged, and is used to cover a range of different gender and sexual subjectivities.⁴²

My original hypothesis of 'the end of the homosexual' grew out of a radical reading of sexuality that saw human sexuality as fluid and malleable, rather as queer theory would twenty years later. This view runs up against a re-emerging tendency to define homosexuality as an essential characteristic: one either is or is not homosexual, and this division should be recognised as a basis for identity.

While this has not historically been the case for most societies, in the contemporary western world a certain binary essentialism has helped create a powerful group identity based on the ethnic group model.⁴³ The demand to fix and name identities is precisely the reason why terminology becomes so important: both homosexuals and the larger society have a need for a clear-cut taxonomy, in which

sexual minorities can be seen as distinct and therefore as deserving of rights. In pragmatic terms, what Jeffrey Weeks once called 'a necessary fiction' has become the basis for 'LGBT' politics.⁴⁴ While I was writing this book, a colleague received a request from a senior state health officer for 'an estimate of the size of the Gay, Lesbian and bi-sexual population in NSW', as if the terms were completely unproblematic.

More recently, there has been considerable debate about the supposed biological basis for homosexuality, which reinforces the idea of fixed sexual identities that are inborn. In a sense, this is a contemporary scientific riff on the older idea that homosexuals were people caught between two sexes, a view that comes through in the writings of several generations of authors, including that of Virginia Woolf and Patrick White.

White explicitly saw the homosexual as 'part woman and part man', and he claimed that this ambivalence gave the person special insights into human nature. This theme underlies his novel *The Twyburn Affair*. As he wrote in *Flaws in the Glass*: 'Ambivalence has given me insights into human nature, denied, I believe, to those who are unequivocally male or female – or Professor Leon Kramer.'⁴⁵ (Kramer was a pioneering critic of Australian literature but was unsympathetic to White and she and I clashed in the early 1970s when she complained that I was invited to lecture to medical students at the University of New South Wales.) White was generally unsympathetic to the gay movement, seeing sexuality as a 'ludicrous' basis for a political cause.⁴⁶

In the 1990s there was a flood of research claiming to establish the existence of a 'gay gene' drawing on behavioural genetics, neuroendocrinology and psychological theories of sociobiology.⁴⁷ So far no conclusive evidence exists, despite very considerable effort to discover it, and even a biologist as eminent as Richard Dawkins has argued that such a gene exists, though he was unable to demonstrate it. Indeed, we have moved remarkably slowly since Kenneth Walker wrote, over seventy years ago, that: 'There still exists the fundamental difficulty of deciding whether the condition is congenital or acquired. The truth ... is probably that it is both.'⁴⁸

The language of the 1940s grates, but no more so than some current pretensions of scientific research. There have even been claims that one can detect sexual orientation by appearance: in one study 'participants viewed facial photographs of men and women and then categorized each face as gay or straight 60% of the time'.⁴⁹ One researcher has claimed that sexual orientation is based upon 'brain hemisphere domination', but admits he is seeking a biological explanation for political purposes.⁵⁰ Even though such researchers usually acknowledge that the level of certainty they provide is insufficient for everyday life, the assumption that people divide naturally into 'gay' and 'straight' is deeply troubling, given what we know about the ways in which sexual behaviour, fantasies and identities can vary across a lifetime. As Jeffrey Weeks has consistently argued, biology provides 'a set of potentialities, which are transformed and given meaning only in social relationships'.⁵¹

Mainstream advocates of gay and lesbian rights in the United States often use biological arguments to counter the claims of moral conservatives that sexual behaviour is a choice that can be controlled. Many homosexuals like to claim that they are 'born this way', and that choice does not come into it. (The pop icon Lady Gaga even adopted the phrase in a 2011 hit song.) The enthusiasm for a genetic explanation is particularly strange; were such a gene discovered, there would presumably be

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