

NOT GAY

SEX BETWEEN STRAIGHT WHITE MEN

TEACHER'S GUIDE



A straight white girl can kiss a girl, like it, and still call herself straight—her boyfriend may even encourage her. But can straight white guys experience the same easy sexual fluidity, or would kissing a guy just mean that they are really gay? *Not Gay* thrusts deep into a world where straight guy-on-guy action is not a myth but a reality: there's fraternity and military hazing rituals, where new recruits are made to grab each other's penises and stick fingers up their fellow members' anuses; online personal ads, where straight men seek other straight men to masturbate with; and, last but not least, the long and clandestine history of straight men frequenting public restrooms for sexual encounters with other men. For Jane Ward, these sexual practices reveal a unique social space where straight white men can—and do—have sex with other straight white men; in fact, she argues, to do so reaffirms rather than challenges their gender and racial identity.

Ward illustrates that sex between straight white men allows them to leverage whiteness and masculinity to authenticate their heterosexuality in the context of sex with men. By understanding their same-sex sexual practice as meaningless, accidental, or even necessary, straight white men can perform homosexual contact in heterosexual ways. These sex acts are not slippages into a queer way of being or expressions of a desired but unarticulated gay identity. Instead, Ward argues, they reveal the fluidity and complexity that characterizes all human sexual desire. In the end, Ward's analysis offers a new way to think about heterosexuality—not as the opposite or absence of homosexuality, but as its own unique mode of engaging in homosexual sex, a mode characterized by pretense, dis-identification and racial and heterosexual privilege. Daring, insightful, and brimming with wit, *Not Gay* is a fascinating new take on the complexities of heterosexuality in the modern era.

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Chapter One

Introduction

SUMMARY

Opening with two examples of sexual contact between straight-identified white men, the introduction establishes the focus of the book: sex between *straight* men (who are not to be confused with “closeted” gay or bisexual men). The chapter lays out the central book’s central argument that homosexual contact is not incongruent with heterosexual masculinity, but is a central ingredient in the making of heterosexual men. Much attention has been paid to the sexual fluidity of women and men of color, but white men’s sex practices have largely been ignored. Exploring straight white men’s sex practices allows us to see how racial and gendered power shape the way we perceive the sexual fluidity of different social groups. The second half of the chapter defines heterosexuality and traces the relationship between ideas about sexual fluidity and the rising popularity of sociobiological accounts of sexual orientation. The study’s methodology and the remaining chapters are also summarized.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What theories have been used to explain the sexual fluidity of young women? How about men of color? Can these theories also account for the sexual fluidity of white men?
- What is heterosexuality? How do social constructionist accounts of heterosexuality differ from the popular notion that heterosexuality is nature’s default?
- Define “homosexual contact.” What measure does the author use to determine whether or not straight men have been “sexual” with one another?
- According to the author, how should we make sense of the sexual identities of straight men who have sexual encounters with men?

Chapter Two

SUMMARY

This chapter offers a survey of straight white men's homosexual contact throughout the twentieth century. The late nineteenth century invention of the heterosexual/homosexual binary is explained, along with an account of the ways that racial hierarchies influenced distinctions between normal and abnormal sexuality. The central argument of the chapter is that straight white men were viewed by twentieth-century scientists as the embodiment of normal sexuality, even as they engaged in a remarkable amount of sexual contact with other men. This argument unfolds through examination of men's same-sex encounters in the immigrant saloons of early twentieth century New York, in the Hell's Angels biker gang in the 1950s, and in public bathrooms raided by police from the 1960s onward.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did men understand the dividing line between normal and "queer" sexuality in the 1920s and 1930s? Why were many men able to engage in homosexual sex and not perceive of themselves as queer?
- Describe Hunter S. Thompson's ambivalence about the homosexuality of the Hells Angels. What does this ambivalence reveal about the relationship between gender and sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s?
- What are some examples of the role of white racism in same-sex encounters between men in public bathrooms?
- What explanations have been used to make sense of the homosexual behaviors of straight-identified religious leaders and politicians?

Chapter Three

SUMMARY

This chapter opens with a discussion of the increasing popularity of biological accounts of sexual desire and their twofold effects: First, queer people are now under significant pressure to adhere to a “born this way” narrative about their homosexual desires—whether this narrative feels accurate or not. Second, *straight people*, too, increasingly understand their heterosexuality as hardwired and unchanging. This chapter develops the argument that, paradoxically, the belief that heterosexuality is a congenital and immutable condition has opened the door for straight people to engage in temporary homosexual encounters without suffering the same homophobic stigma assigned to “true” gays and lesbians. The remainder of the chapter outlines three popular arguments that are used to justify and exceptionalize the homosexual activities of heterosexual men: 1) homosexual contact is sometimes necessary for straight men; 2) homosexual contact builds homosocial bonds among straight men; and 3) homosexual contact among men can be accidental, and therefore meaningless.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why and how did the debate that swirled around Cynthia Nixon’s sexuality reveal the importance of biology to 21st-century beliefs about sexual desire? Why do you think so many people—both gay and straight—are invested in believing that sexual orientation is hardwired?
- In lieu of accessible scientific testing to determine whether individuals are truly straight, gay, or bisexual, what pop-cultural diagnostic measures have people developed to make this assessment?
- What is *heteroexceptionalism*? Can you think of some current examples of heteroexceptionalism in popular culture?
- What some specific examples of the ways that scholars and lay people have tried to explain straight men’s sexual contact with other men?
- Why do you think so much effort has been made to dismiss straight men’s homosexual activity as meaningless?

Chapter Four

SUMMARY

Using the films *Humpday* and *Jackass* as its point of departure, this chapter examines how whiteness normalizes sexual encounters between straight white men. Central to both films is a white male bohemian or daredevil ethos in which risk, adventure, difference, and breaking free from domestic safety are celebrated. This ethos compels the straight white men in the films to come into intimate, sexualized contact with one another's bodies. The chapter then turns to an examination of personal ads posted on Craigslist Los Angeles by self-identified straight white men seeking sex with other straight white men. Although the ads technically describe homosexual sex acts, they are rife with heteromascuine imagery and heteroerotic scripts (such as references to straight porn, sports, beer, and fantasies about sex with women). White culture and white male archetypes bolster the apparent normalcy of the ads, which purport to be ordinary expressions of a desire for male bonding. In contrast, ads in which white men seek sex with men of color take a less friendly and egalitarian tone, thereby producing a "queerer" effect.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In the films discussed at the beginning of the chapter, homosexual sex is treated like a radical stunt or an extreme sport. Why do you think this particular framing of homosexual contact is common in straight white men's accounts of sexual contact with other men?
- What is *homosociality*? How is it different from homosexuality? How might the two overlap?
- What are some of the common white male archetypes that appear in Craigslist ads written by straight white men seeking sex with men? What cultural and erotic function is served by these archetypes?
- What role does nostalgia, or yearning for the time of youth, play in straight white men's personal ads?
- How has sexual contact between straight-identified Black men been represented by the media? Is "the down low" a useful way of thinking about Black men's sexual fluidity? How might we understand white men's sexual behavior in relation to the down low?

Chapter 5

SUMMARY

This chapter opens with the argument that homosexual forms of hazing are not simply expressions of power and dominance; they also, simultaneously, have erotic meaning for male participants. The chapter highlights the inextricable links between desire and repulsion within circuits of white male heterosexuality by examining hazing across three sites: the U.S. military, the extra-military zone of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, and military-style hazing represented in the popular genre of “reality” pornography. Dominance, humiliation, anality, and repulsiveness—As normalized features of straight male culture—function to attribute heterosexual meaning to homosexual encounters. Hazing, which entails all of these elements, is not simply a practice of bullying, it is also a heteroerotic trope, one that facilitates access to homosexual activity while inscribing this activity with heterosexual meaning.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some examples of the normalized role that violence plays in representations of heterosexuality, or sex between men and women? Think about the colloquial language that is used to describe sex itself. Does this language imply a relationship between sex and violence?
- When straight men include homosexual contact in their hazing rituals, do you think these forms of contact are best understood as sex, violence, or both? Why?
- Think about the kinds of intimate contact that take place between men during the Navy’s “Crossing the Line” ceremony or during the Elephant Walk described in chapter one. What sense do you make of these practices? Do they have any bearing on how you perceive the sexual orientations of the men involved? Would you interpret these activities differently if the participants were women?
- Why do you think the “Crossing the Line” ceremony is such a longstanding tradition in the Navy? What function does it serve?
- How is heterosexual authenticity established in hazing pornography? Who do you think is the audience for hazing porn and what do you think they find appealing about it?
- What parallels can be drawn between hazing pornography and the military and fraternity hazing documented by anthropologists?

Chapter 6

SUMMARY

This chapter concludes the book by reflecting on the consequences of heterosexual fluidity discourses for queer, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. As straight people imagine their difference from “real” gays and lesbians, they create a narrative about authentic gayness to which gay men and lesbians are held accountable. In the 21st century, this narrative centers largely around normative love and marriage, enabling straight people to engage in casual and non love-based homosexual activity without understanding themselves as truly gay. The popularity of this narrative about gay love, while often perceived as a progressive development, misrecognizes or erases what remains subversive about the erotic lives of queers.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why does the author include a story about her own coming out experience in a book about straight men? Why does she believe that narratives about heteroflexibility have affected her own life?
- What does the author suggest is the difference between straight culture, mainstream lesbian and gay culture, and queer culture?
- Why, other than for biological reasons, might men and women have different perspectives about whether we are born with our sexual orientations in tact?
- How do the examples of same-sex activity provided in this book lead us to rethink or redefine heterosexuality?