

# You show me yours

**Why do we need a sexual identity? Is there a heterosexual community? How do we encourage safe sex if we don't validate straight men's sexuality? Writer and activist Gary Dowsett has some ideas. He is interviewed by Michael Flood.**

**W**HEN I ARRIVE at Gary Dowsett's office for the interview, the first thing he shows me is *Gentlemen Quarterly* magazine. It's full of glossy men's fashion, and Dowsett points out the gay-inspired, sensual photos he has found.

Gary Dowsett is the author of a series of fascinating papers on masculinity and sexuality. His latest one rejoices in the title of "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours: Gay men, masculinity research, men's studies, and sex." He co-edited the book *Rethinking sex*, and he is very involved in the study of the social aspects of AIDS at Macquarie University in Sydney.

Once Dowsett and I have flicked through *Gentlemen Quarterly*, I start by asking him what developments in sexual relations he sees as positive.

"I'll come from the perspective of gay men for the moment, because this is where I think something quite interesting is going on. I think that a remarkable innovation in gay sexual culture is occurring.

"As one result of HIV/AIDS, gay men have been mammothly re-enlisted at a grassroots level in the examination of their sexuality, which perhaps, had gone into abeyance during the late 70s and early 80s. AIDS has forced attention back on sexual practices and sexual relations again.

"The second important event is that the possibility of HIV transmission has meant that sexual practices themselves have had to be examined. And what we've found in gay men's uptake of safe sex is a remarkable elasticity and flexibility in sexual practice.

"In classical "perversion" theory, homosexuality was the great perversion, and it was by definition a fixation, a fetish. Certain practices within homosexuality, like anal intercourse, were also regarded as fixations. In AIDS we suddenly find, in response to a public health threat,

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that gay men transform these practices. They displace the importance of anal intercourse, elevating other practices such as oral sex. They confine it more to regular relationships, and/or they rapidly introduce condoms, where there was never any need for such protections in the past."

Dowsett describes what he terms a *dispersal of desire*: "In gay men's eroticism at the moment the whole body is much, much more involved in the erotic than the genitals: in gay men's fashion, in gay men's writing, in pornography.

"There's still of course a pre-occupation with genital sex. It would be stupid if there wasn't: what the hell would we be doing? There are penises and anuses and mouths present. But there is this dispersal of attention, and a multiplicity of desires are being enacted and ima-

gined.

"Now, I don't want to draw a revolutionary moment here: a lot of boring, ordinary sex goes on in the world, even among gay men. But I do see this quite remarkable renovation occurring."

The starting point for Gary Dowsett's involvement in gender and sexual politics was in his high school days in the mid-1960s. The discussions of feminism, civil liberties, black politics in the United States, student activism and peace issues "had a kind of resonance with me, as a young, homosexual and homosexually active man trying to find a resolution of my sexuality, which very soon became 'gay'.

"By the time I finished university in the early 70s, women's issues and issues of sexuality were firmly on my agenda. I was immediately involved in counter-sexist strategies in schools, in Queensland and South Australia. And by the mid-70s I was

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heavily involved in gay liberation in Adelaide, and attended the first national homosexual conference where, right from the start, gender and sexuality issues were always bound up together, with lesbians making quite strong demands on gay men to rethink our situation and our position with reference to women's sexuality and women's rights.

"My whole adult life in fact has been constantly tied up with the debates about gender and sexuality that have preoccupied my whole generation. I've spend more than half my life now being involved in gender and sexuality politics. Equally, I come from a fairly petit bourgeois, upper working-class background, and I've been always interested in issues of class in some formulation or other. These things have been important for the work that I've always done, be it as an activist, a teacher, academic, researcher or whatever."

**I bonk, therefore I am**

I ASK Dowsett what other shifts he sees in sexual politics.

"Sexual identity politics is hotting up, and I'm a bit concerned about some of that. I see, for example, an insistency on *hetero*-identity politics emerging, in a way which is likely to fly in the face of the energy emerging in sexuality theory, which is about deconstructing identity."

There is a tension in gay/lesbian politics and theory between a desire to question and deconstruct sexual identity, and a desire to assert identity in the face of oppression. As Dowsett states, "The politics of 'gay' is that the world is still an unsafe place for gay people: people are still being bashed and killed. So there is still a need to create safe places and cultures for gay men and lesbians."

"I see 'heterosexual' being slapped together in some form at the moment, particularly in AIDS. People use this ridiculous phrase, the 'heterosexual community'. Firstly, what happens if you take a gender analysis of the power relations

between men and women? Come on, *community*, what is this thing? Secondly, where is the whole analysis of heterosexuality which was developed through that critique of the nuclear family? How does that align itself with some notion of a unified and contented heterosexuality?

"We don't even believe anymore in gay politics that there is a singular form of homosexuality: we've talked about 'homosexualities' for nearly a decade, but you don't hear anyone talking about 'heterosexualities'. A false object is being constructed and made concrete, one which is very dangerous for gay people.

"I'm not disputing that heterosexual behaviour is the practice of the majority. But then, a lot of people swim, but do we have a swimmers' community? This is part of the problem of a binary: if you set up homosexuality over here and you say it looks like this, then in some senses you're forced to define its Other in the same terms. Like chalk and cheese, homosexuality and heterosexuality ought not to be compared in the same terms, particularly when one is trying to contest the terms in which the other has configured it. Homosexuality has been saying for 20 years, 'We aren't what you think we are. We never have been. Why do you think we are the way we are? Why are you even making us a "we"?' And then I look over here and I see a new 'we' being made in heterosexuality and I think, 'Why do you want to go down that track? Why institutionalise, put boundaries around, in a process we've experienced as really screwed?'

"There's something about the project that seems to me to undermine the 20 years of sexual politics that's been about trying to renovate all sexuality, all gender relations. It runs the risk of shutting out heterosexuality's own confusions and potentials, and locking it into some kind of rigidity. I don't see why heterosexuals should be subjected to that, quite frankly. It's not going

to be in the interests of heterosexually active people, in the long term, to have heterosexuality constructed in that form."

So, I ask, is it more liberatory to hold onto the notion of sexual identities as fluid and elastic?

"I've got my suspicions about the term *identity*, you see. I increasingly think, 'What the fuck is an identity?'

Who's got one, what does it do, and why do you have one and how do you use it?'

My hunch is that is it something which functions, or doesn't function: where the concept of an identity functions in some way for someone in order for them to deal with their social world, then it has a place. Gay men have an identity as gay because it is a place from which to cluster and face that which it is not, particularly that which is wanting to beat you with a stick. It is both a calling card and a rallying point. In the face of master discourses that argue that what you are or what you think you are (or you are doing) is sick or wrong, gay identity provides a vantage point for critique.

"I don't know why heterosexuals need an identity, except, as I always say, when a homosexual walks into the room. In order to have heterosexual relations between women and men, you don't have to say to yourself, 'Ah, there's a woman over there. I am heterosexual. I will go over there and ask her for a date.' Whereas gay men have to say, 'Is that another gay man? If so, then I can go over.'

"I'm not saying, 'Naughty heterosexuals, you shouldn't have an identity.' I am actually saying, 'What is going on here? Why do you need this?'"

**Straight praise**

WHERE does all this leave men's exploration of masculine identity?

"It's been pointed out before by feminists, 'Isn't it interesting that feminists ask "What is woman?", (concludes on page 26) ▶

◆ (from page 25) and men interested in gender categories ask "What is masculine?" Men don't play with the category *man*. I don't know if that's right, but I do think that men's fascination with what constitutes the masculine, and our lack of attention to what constitutes male, is a really interesting thing.

"I have a couple of concerns about the "men's project". A lot of the energy for the interrogation of the masculine comes, partly, from a feminist politics which finds no room for anything positive to say about the masculine. I think this is a hellishly bad starting point for the renovation of personal practice.

"A clear example of the dilemma this produces for political practice is the issue of safe sex again. How do you construct an education campaign to encourage young heterosexually active men to use condoms, if you can't somehow say something positive about their sexuality and their sexual interests?

"Now, people keep saying male heterosexuality has not been problematised. Untrue. Untrue. Male heterosexuality has been problematised, but only as negative: rape, child abuse, insensitivity in sex, bad fucks, all that stuff. There've been very few real attempts to identify and praise that which is good about male heterosexuality, or about heterosexual men.

"We know that the successes of the safe sex campaigns in the gay community have depended on being pro-sex and pro-gay. The same is going to occur with safe sex stuff for heterosexually active young people. And I've yet to see any attempt to validate masculine heterosexual behaviour, interests, images, symbols, languages, forms, desires, fetishes and priorities. It might be quite easy to say from certain perspectives, 'Well, that's because it only ever happens badly for the women.' I don't think that's true. I actually think there's quite a lot of wonderful heterosexual sex going on out there somewhere. So somewhere in all that good heterosexual sex we have to find those components which are praiseworthy of men, and use them. Because if we just say, 'You're bad fucks and you're lousy guys,' then they're not going to start using condoms, right?

"A second example is around the issue

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of sexual technique and emotionalism. I think this idea that men are emotionally shut down is complete bullshit. First of all, which men are we talking about?

All men, or just heterosexual men? Young men, old men? Would you call an Italian man screaming in the street after a car accident unemotional? Do you call men who lose their children unemotional? I think this is a nasty shorthand mistruth which has been swallowed uncritically for too long.

"The classic idea about sexual technique is that all men want to do in bed is keep it up, get to the end and have an orgasm. Well, yeah, that might be true for some, and I don't see why men shouldn't want to have an orgasm. Why not? They have as much right to have an orgasm as anybody else. The renovations of sexuality from the sixties onwards, which I think have done quite a service—in saying, come on, this is about two people and not just about you, and this is about women having pleasure, it's not about rolling over and falling asleep—have in fact led to a real concern on the part of men for pleasuring their partners.

**Tabloid headline**

"WHY must sex be meaningful? Why must sex be derivative of, or symbolic of, some other kind of relation between the two people involved? I don't see any reason why it should be. And I think to say something in response like 'Oh, that's very masculinist' doesn't actually answer the question that I'm seriously asking here.

If patriarchy is

about the inscription of oppressive relations between people, it may in fact be just as much a product of patriarchy that women want relationships to be meaningful and that sex must have emotional overtones, as it is for men to want the opposite. In other words, who says that emotionally involved sex is the essential sexual moment? Until we're prepared to take that kind of question on, I don't see why we should swallow this notion that it is men who have got it wrong. I don't think anyone has got it right, quite frankly. I think that everyone is struggling.

"We've relied too heavily on these kinds of headlines: "All men are unemotional," "All men are sexist pigs." It's the tabloid press version of sexual theory. All those easy slogans not only do not represent what is going on out there in sexual politics in people's lives, but of course they alienate people, who look at them and think, 'This is nonsense.' You can't construct a good politics out of that stuff." ●

*The second part of this interview, in the Winter edition of XY, will explore the divide between straight and gay men in the men's movement.*

# QUEEROGRAHY

A touring exhibition curated by Michele Barker and Andy Davey, of works addressing the concerns of sexual representation within the homosexual community. Artists include: Andy Davey, C Moore Hardy, Rod McRae, Gerard O'Connor, Kaye Schumack, Lisa Zanderigo, and Lachlan Warner.

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