

## CONCLUSION

### ***Fag Hag : A Cautionary Tale ?***

Ever since this world began,  
There is nothing sadder than,  
A one-fag fag hag  
Looking for the fag that got away.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Rodi is a gay writer who has published a series of novels that with varying degrees of hilarity and cynicism expose and celebrate key archetypal figures in metropolitan gay subculture: *Fag Hag*, *Closet Case*, *Drag Queen* and *Kept Boy*.<sup>2</sup> *Fag Hag* narrativises a relationship between the generously proportioned Natalie Stathis, and a poetically beautiful gay man, Peter Leland. Natalie and Peter spend their weekends trawling the gay bars of Chicago, Natalie tagging along whilst Peter looks for Mr. Right:

she beamed a smile that pleaded, 'Notice me!' She pressed herself, all hundred and seventy-odd pounds, through crowds of taut, muscular young men and, through sheer flamboyance, attracted the attention of a few of them. And as she talked to them, using every ounce of feminine wile and wit at her disposal, they laughed in delight and flattered her and sometimes even kissed her, but never, never, once, not even for a moment, did they stop looking over her shoulder for something better.<sup>3</sup>

Each time Peter embarks on a new relationship, Natalie loses her consort, but is prevailed upon to counsel her friend through the tribulations of his romantic liaison. In the course of giving this support she uses her considerable insight and guile to disrupt Peter's path to true love so that he may return to her side. Natalie faces her greatest challenge when Peter meets Lloyd Hood and falls in love with this gun shop owning gay survivalist. Peter deserts his sidekick, realigning his behaviour and tastes with those of his new lover, whose house he moves into. As the novel progresses, and moves into realms of blacker and blacker comedy, Natalie resorts to more extreme tactics to attempt to dismay Peter's infatuation. When planting a bug on the lovers' headboard fails to reveal any friction that she may profitably exploit, Natalie attempts to instil in Peter a gun phobia by disguising herself, breaking into the house and holding her erstwhile consort at gunpoint with a weapon purchased from Lloyd's emporium. Finally, when this tactic fails, because Lloyd is prepared to sacrifice his business for his lover, Natalie kidnaps Peter, and intends to keep him in her basement (which she has converted into a luxurious prison cell) until he confirms his undying love for her: this does not happen. Eventually Lloyd rescues Peter, by which time Natalie has sunk to such depths of madness that she retires to a sanatorium, to be released in the novel's epilogue, cured of her fag haggery and independently spirited.

Taken at face value this product of and for gay subculture seems to offer a dismal reflection of the contemporary state of relationships between women and gay

men. *Fag Hag* would appear to punish women for maintaining an intimacy with gay men which those men rely on and take for granted. Whilst Peter is rewarded with his prince charming and the promise of living happily ever after, Natalie's obsession leads to mental instability and estrangement from those few people with whom she shared any intimacy. Thus, a presumptive reading of *Fag Hag* may suggest, with some credibility, that an imputed gay male readership would identify against Natalie, the fag hag, delighting in her descent into ruthlessness and madness as signs of her failure to assimilate herself into gay subculture, or as punishments for not being a gay man. There is sufficient material in the novel to support this reading. Consumed as a product of gay subculture, but read without a familiarity with the filters of irony that are a prevailing condition of queer reading strategies, *Fag Hag* would seem to uphold and valorise gay male misogyny.

However, *Fag Hag* seems to reflect the faultline conditions in which relations between women and gay men are conducted, and as a result throws up incoherences which open up more interesting possibilities. This presumptive reading cannot account for the way in which the novel's authorial interest is a function of Natalie's point of view: the narrative is constituted not only by following her actions, but the emotional resonances this narrative induces are empathic reflections of her experience. When Peter moves in with Lloyd, we are invited to associate with Natalie's loneliness and sense of betrayal and futility, and not with Peter's smug fulfilment. The integrity of the first, hostile, reading of *Fag*

*Hag* rests on the potential implausibility of a gay male novelist encouraging a largely gay male readership to identify with a heterosexual woman in her battle *against* a gay man. This identification with Natalie by gay male readers would seem especially unlikely as her struggle could be interpreted as one whose aim is the annihilation of his very gayness: her apparent aim is to replace Peter's male lovers with herself, and form a heterosexual coupling with him. However, that counter-identification becomes more probable in the extent to which Peter is held up as the lofty, unattainable apex of gay male desirability and in so far as he manages to achieve marital pair-bonding with Lloyd in the most unselfconsciously smug fashion possible, and with a right-wing man at that, whose very essence is antithetical to the concept of gay subculture. At a disastrous dinner party during which Natalie attempts to expose tendencies in Lloyd that will be unattractive to Peter, a tactic which fails because Peter has so thoroughly sublimated his own interests to Lloyd's, the survivalist explains his lack of interest in subcultural or communal affiliations; he tells her:

I'm a man, Natalie; I'm capable, I'm intelligent, I'm strong, I've got my wits. There's no reason I should *want* to depend on anyone but myself. (p.101)

Not only does this self-satisfied coupledness eschew any sense of communality, but in his monogamy Peter has rejected the gay spaces of Chicago's scene (as well as Natalie's heterosocial relations) for the company of Natalie's prejudiced brother Calvin, who responded with shock when she told him his gun merchant was gay:

'Goddam! That's what I thought! I can't believe that guy's a fag.'

'He's a homosexual, Cal,' she said, 'But he's definitely *not* a fag.

Trust me, there's a difference.' (p.114)

If this novel's gay men do not provide any critique of smug middle-class monogamy and the heterosexual values it underwrites, *Fag Hag's* fag hags exhibit little reticence about mounting such a critique. As Jennifer, Natalie's boss and confidant tells Calvin's pregnant wife, Vera: 'Bad case of sperm poisoning you've got there.' (p.290)

From a subcultural perspective, we might acknowledge the faultline nature of *Fag Hag's* representations, and see in it a challenge to the kinds of knowledge and experience that comprise the background noise of gay environments that I referred to in the discussion of Jarman's familiarity with the codes, if not the purpose, of female identification (chapter four). As Natalie acknowledges, the label 'fag hag' is applied to women 'derisively' (p.96). Yet as the narrative progresses Rodi draws out a tension between this derided fag hag and the kinds of icons of femininity beloved of gay male identification. Natalie questions the extent of her manifestation of what gay men understand in their labelling of fag hags: 'A silly indulgence, of no importance - not beneath notice, but not much above it, either?' (p.96). Towards the end of the novel, after she has held up Peter at gunpoint in a Ninja Turtle mask, her van has broken down and the police are on the way, Natalie needs an urgent ride home to avoid discovery. She climbs into a van full of late

adolescent young men who are hysterically policing each other homosocially. The boys pressure one particularly fey comrade, 'Fredo, into taking Natalie into the back of the van and having sex with her. Natalie's familiarity with gay affectation enables her to immediately realise that 'Fredo is gay and deeply confused. Natalie saves him from humiliation, using her maturity to protect him from the authority of homosocial intimacy. She pretends to have sex with the youth, hyperbolising his virility; then she tells him:

these guys are clowns. You don't need them. You're perfect the way you are, and when you figure out what that is, don't be afraid to be it. Okay? (p.195)

This is an affectionate, valorising portrayal of Natalie's heterosocial commitment to bonding with gay men that does not rest on her denial of homosexuality in men, or in her attempts at 'conversion', but which is empowering and enabling of the young man's homosexuality and protective of it in relation to his ventriloquism of opportunistic homosociality.

If Natalie is a heterosocial heroine, it is not merely for her care of fawn-like baby-queens:

She peered into her future and tried to see herself in a week, a month, a year; but there was nothing but darkness, no matter how far she projected.

She licked and swallowed the blood from her hand. Fuck the future; darkness was just fine with her. (p.266)

This kind of delicious malevolence specifically appeals to gay men as it constitutes a perverse rejection of the kind of rational subjectivity men are institutionally organised as personifying, and gay men are punished for queering:

He was going to have a fight on his hands. He'd have to scrape her flesh and blood off that basement door before he opened it. And God help him if she got him *first*.

It was petty, it was demeaning, it was evil. It was what she wanted more than anything. (p.276)

Notwithstanding Natalie Stathis's textual womanhood, we have seen that this kind of irrational rejection of homosocial subjectivity is not a strategy that is very effective for women; they are already denied access to rational social authority. Glorifying in enacting demeaning and petty behaviour as acts of dissent is a familiar gay male negotiation of homosocial legislative ideology. It is the oppressive *proximity* of male subjectivity which circumscribes gay men, so that our queerness may function as a policing mechanism. In order for our presence to be sufficiently disquieting, it is necessary that gay men should share a degree of male power: heterosocial gender dissent perverts that subjectivity by flirting with the abjection, the lack of subjectivity, experienced by women in male homosocial culture. Similar flirtatious affectations of femininity do not activate dissent for

women because such performances constitute their necessary negotiation of male power in heterosexuality in order to gain vicarious privilege.

Given the nature of Natalie Stathis's homosocial dissent, and her patronage of baby-fags, it seems unlikely that a preferred reading of *Fag Hag* would encourage gay male hostility towards her. She protects gay men from an apparent sense of altruism (she has nothing to gain by saving 'Fredo) and she activates the same kind of 'bitch diva' dissent gay men valorise. Yet if we are encouraged to empathise and identify with Natalie, can we claim a consistent project for the novel which would reconcile its mode of address and its narrative, which tells of a straight woman's attempts to convert a gay man and ruin his homosexual relationships, with its intended audience and the identification it elicits from that audience? Does this project serve prejudicial, heterosexist purposes and ask us to become complicit with them? On the contrary, it would seem that *Fag Hag* attempts to enact a critique of how gay male culture exploits women, at the same time as engendering gay male empathy with that exploitation, so that we may be able to take some responsibility.

Despite her apparently evangelical heterosexuality, Natalie Stathis does not exhibit any collusion with male homosocial interests. Quite the reverse. We have seen how she attempts to protect 'Fredo from the more vicious effects of homosocial ridicule. There are no heterosexual men with whom she shares any degree of intimacy, let

alone through whom she may acquire social privilege, or gain cultural capital enough to exert homosocial leverage upon Peter's homosexuality. Indeed, until Peter pair-bonds with Lloyd, his and Natalie's relationship is specifically constituted as resistant to heterosexual norms and values. The nature of Natalie's desire for Peter is complex and contradictory. This desire is certainly not to settle down and reproduce conventionally sponsored marital monogamy in order to accrue authoritative credibility: it is Peter and Lloyd who do that, their normativity emphasised by their socialising with the dreadful Calvin and Vera. Natalie acknowledges that her desire for Peter does not follow prescribed fantasies of heterosexual romance:

The last movie she'd watched was *An Officer and a Gentleman* ... she tried to replay it with Peter and herself in the starring roles, but gave that up at once; it was silly and embarrassing. Such flourishing, grand passion would certainly never be part of their relationship. (p.76)

Indeed her desire for Peter, whilst recognising and valorising his erotic appeal, is manifested largely as a turn away from heterosexual men. Natalie asks herself why she pursues Peter:

Was it because a beautiful, exciting, funny gay man who doesn't want to sleep with you is better than a dull, plain, predictable straight guy who does? As far as Natalie was concerned, that was more or less the case ... virtually all the slow inconsiderate

*heterosexual* men she ever met had paunches and bad table manners and loved to wear disfiguring clothing bearing the hideous logos of inane sports franchises. (p.76)

It would seem, then, that Natalie's evangelical zeal in her pursuit of Peter could not be described as heterosexual, in that the relationship her desire generates does not uphold male power by reproducing homosocial narratives. Natalie's desire for Peter certainly enshrines a considerable degree of smugness about the glory of male homosexuality: she is after all a function of Rodi's gay male imaginary. Whilst Natalie is portrayed as unrealistically admiring of gay men, as *Fag Hag's* readership we are not necessarily encouraged to align ourselves with this unremittingly positive perspective on gay male behaviour. If Natalie's attempts to bond with Peter are resistant of homosocial narratives, then Peter's treatment of Natalie exhibits his commodification of her in line with the extent of his male power and the access this gives him to social legitimacy, confirmed by Calvin and Vera's acceptance of him and Lloyd.

The title *Fag Hag* is provocative precisely because it promises the recirculation of a derisory representation of women from a gay male perspective. We have seen how useful the presumption of gay misogyny is for those male interests which retain considerable structural power: heterosocial affiliations between gay men and women constantly negotiate that hostile intrusion. Yet despite being published by such a large concern as Penguin (admittedly under the more marginal imprint of

Plume), *Fag Hag* manifests a specific, focused, level of subcultural address. The publication of Rodi's novels by Penguin may indeed indicate the profitability of a constituency which benefits from a material proximity to male power. Despite these factors, which may lead us to expect that Rodi's novel would deliver merely a gleeful recirculation of bitchy stereotypes and lazy misogyny, *Fag Hag* actually offers a witty and incisive commentary on gay men's relationships with women. Peter's desertion and commodification of Natalie is constantly framed as callous, smug, and a turn not only away from his friend, but from a more exuberant expression of his sexuality. (When Natalie breaks into the lovers' house in disguise and holds Peter at gunpoint, he has been living with Lloyd for some months. Before she makes her presence known she observes her object of desire as he watches five minutes of that gay institution, *The Golden Girls*. It is with his own authorial voice that Rodi notes that Peter watches the show 'without laughing' (p.187), which is a fairly considerable indictment of his current lifestyle.) Such betrayals are not handled by Rodi with the same kind of delight with which he details Natalie's scheming to break up Peter's relationships, nor his enthusiasm for her descent into ever more extreme behaviour in order to punish Peter's desertion. It would seem, then, that we could make a reading of *Fag Hag* which would suggest that it challenges the commodification of women in gay culture, but more than that, which invites gay male readers to speculate on the dissident potential of bonds with women, a potential often disregarded and betrayed by our assimilationist ventriloquism of marital (homosocial), heterosexual relationships.

*Fag Hag's* deliciously malevolent didacticism offers an opportunity to draw together many of the themes that this book has addressed, which is why I have introduced it here in the conclusion. The initial intentions of this work were involved with questioning the nature and purpose of gay male culture's interest in women: *Fag Hag* makes an investment in relationships with women - which we may now understand as heterosocial bonds - by drawing out the value of such relationships from our familiarity with the subcultural commodification and exchange of women. *Fag Hag* quite literally aligns such commodification with powerful homosocial interests, in Peter and Lloyd's socialising with Calvin and Vera, in such a way as to enable us to see the assimilationism of our continuing disregard for women and the potential heterosocial affiliations we may make with them.

Clearly, producing such proximate and familiar representations of the commodification of women by gay men is risky: representing the kinds of knowledge which are sponsored or upheld by powerful, hegemonic interests is a precarious dissident strategy; *Fag Hag* is, as a result, uneven, with a narrative which is sometimes unclear about its authorial investments. Whilst we may see that the novel licenses a degree of heterosocial commentary, it does also allow an endorsement of conventional gay mores. There are occasions when Rodi slips into a more spiteful narration of Natalie's descent into filth and madness which ridicules

her. Nevertheless, there are considerable opportunities for us to draw out the similarities in the effects of homosocial exchange, and gay male exchange. In Peter's desire for romantic fulfilment in a relationship with a man, and in his deprecated indifference to his relationship with Natalie, *Fag Hag* challenges gay men to reconcile the competing and often contradictory elements of our political, emotional and cultural investments. Fags and hags can be queer sisters.

### **Fags, Hags and Gender Dissent**

In the first chapter's analysis of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the critical culture which has shaped our context for reading that play, we were able to see how closely aligned the interests of women and of gay men can be. Unpicking inversionist knowledge allows us to see how much ideological work goes into concealing the functional place homosexuality has in the reproduction of gender systems that uphold patriarchy and capital through homosocial male bonds. Yet not only in *spite* of inversionist accounts, but *because* of their investment in our gender dysphoria, *Streetcar* offers cultural resistance by insisting on our ability to comment on gender systems, and offers political dissent by denaturalising gender roles as effects of homosocial work. This denaturalisation, along with the conditions of homosexual representation in America in 1947, which necessitated Williams's closetedness, enables an extraordinarily powerful indictment of heterosexual women's powerlessness, at the same time as portraying the

seductiveness and circumscribed privilege of femininity. *Streetcar* is striking in that it offers a gritty, pro-feminist materialist critique of heterosexuality, and a screaming exaltation of the performative guile of Blanche's femininity, and manages to hold both kinds of representation in a compelling oxymoronic flourish. The second chapter offered a detailed examination of the narratives and conditioned phobias that constitute male homosocial bonds. These bonds work to maintain the security of male interests, and to enable a structure of knowledge with which to stabilise men's ownership of capital and the racial and class distinctiveness of successive generations. Men's authority is constituted in homosocial narratives as power over women, in both quantitative and functional terms: men have more power than women, and directly control women by making notions of womanhood functions of masculinity. I have argued that understanding our homosexuality purely as a non-reproductive sexual pleasure, cruelly legislated against by an intolerant or ignorant state apparatus, is an inadequate structure of knowledge, and will not allow us to gain access to the kinds of dissidence we can see in Williams's work. We must be able to exploit our position in gender systems: homosexuality, constituted by homosocial doctrine as a threateningly proximate abjection, acts to adjudicate male bonds. This chapter suggested that many of the problems inherent in the conflicts between these sexual politics and politics of sexuality, are attributable to the shape of homosocial mechanisms, which work to seduce marginal interests into assimilation. I went on to elaborate heterosocial bonds as a precarious, but promising arrangement by which gay men and women

could bond and in the process of that bonding enact dissent against homosocial systems. Chapters three and four drew together the knowledge accumulated through the first two by examining in detail texts which seem to make the heterosocial move described in chapter two, and which were read to privilege gender as the opportunity for gay male dissent, in line with the knowledges about that category opened up by *Streetcar*. *Fag Hag* cautions us to be more considerate about an affiliation that *Roseanne*, slash fiction, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *Streetcar* show us has considerable dissident potential.

Despite the claims I have made about the ways in which gender ambiguity, gender dissent and cross-gender identification are implicated in a whole range of gay self-identifications, I am aware that currently such notions, which we might typify as modes of gender dysphoria, are associated with transsexualism or more recent transgendered positions, and not with homosexuality. However, in as far as transgenderism seems to represent a radical engagement with the kinds of damage and punishment experienced by those who cannot reconcile their identity with the expectations of a hostile gender system, then perhaps we could see homosexuality and transgender as alternative responses to similar conditions. (An alternative to both would be a conformist, or assimilationist (as opposed to radical) engagement with the kinds of damage and punishment afflicted by normative gender systems: we may describe this engagement as heterosexuality.) Of course, there are transsexuals who experience their dysphoria as a biological mistake, and

seek reassignment therapy as a way of fulfilling a biologically authentic, naturalised gender role to correct that mistake.<sup>4</sup> However, there also seems to be an ever more confident transgender movement which disputes the binary notion of gender that is naturalised in heterosexuality.<sup>5</sup> One expression of this recognition is the double inversion undertaken by some transsexuals, not only of their gender, but of their orientation, so that a queerness may persist in the chosen gender alignment. Such a secondary inversion would indicate both the effectiveness of queer self-identification as a disruption of gender normativity, and also the extent to which transgender positions are themselves a function of dissident discourses produced historically in gay subculture by a range of differently identifying lesbians, gays, cross-dressers, drag queens, butches and femmes.

However, despite the similarities between homosexual and transgender dissent, there remain considerable difficulties in alliances between the two movements. Many lesbians and gays see the gender dysphoria of transsexualism as a homophobic reproduction of natural gender categories, whereby same-sex desire can only be tolerated through an inversion of gender that heterosexualises that desire.<sup>6</sup> There have also been a number of disputes between butch lesbians and female to male transsexuals over questions of gender dysphoria and political space. Aware of the need to protect newly emerging cultural spaces and political articulations, some FTMs have been highly critical of the assertions by butch lesbians of their concurrent female embodiment and gender dysphoria, which is

seen as an appropriation of transgender discourse.<sup>7</sup> Such disputes in part arise because of the impoverished conditions within gay and lesbian culture for discussing the gendered implications of lesbian and gay identities (butch *and* femme, male *and* female), and this is a major problem for our culture, as I have been arguing throughout. However, it is clearly problematic to suggest that lesbian identities, which have always negotiated gender transgressions are now appropriating transgendered discourse. The two movements share a heritage.

It is clear that not all formations of identity will promise effective political dissent. Many gay and lesbian formations unfortunately remain hostile not only to the notion of gender dysphoric transsexualism, but to gender dysphoria as a condition of homosexuality. Emphasising sex-based versions of homosexuality, where our only difference from straight normativity lies in our sexual practice, seems to have become a dominant mode of gay civil rights discourse, where we ask for lower ages of consent, or the opportunity to become open members of the armed forces, or for the opportunity to have our relationships administered by state institutions, on the basis of achieving equality with heterosexuals. What does gender dissent, with its unsettling connotations of pathological third sex identities, have to offer such lesbians and gay men, whose political project is to seek equality within existing social formations?

Heterosocial bonds are clearly going to be of little use to those gay men whose social and economic security naturalises their performance of masculinity. For these kinds of gay men their material access to power balances out their cultural disadvantage as abject functions of homosocial knowledge to such an extent that they may effectively understand themselves as 'good citizens'. It seems unlikely that we would expect an involvement in the messy, distressing and disruptive business of radicalism when the inducements not to are so powerful and pleasurable.

We can see the effects of this kind of understanding in the assimilationist politics of Andrew Sullivan, discussed in chapter three. He displays what appears to be a naive surprise that gay men continue to be denied the same kinds of civil rights accorded to their heterosexual brethren, and sees gay marriage, gay military and equal ages of consent as our rights as otherwise institutionally privileged subjects. Such articulation necessarily identifies us with the kinds of oppressive and powerful systems which continue to diminish the life opportunities of other marginal groups. Is this really the kind of complicity that we want? For these kinds of gay men there is no advantage in understanding their queerness as anything other than an erotic disposition, oppressed as a function of ignorance and squeamishness, but hedonistically exalted in the libidinous eroticism of gay subculture to such an extent that it closes the gap between their exclusion as homosexuals and their otherwise respectable masculine citizenship. We can see a

more thoughtful and contorted version of this kind of thinking in Mark Simpson's work, which we looked at in chapter two. Here the naturalisation of the desirability of gay masculinity is so complete as to stretch out into an appreciation of heterosexual manhood as a misguided representation of queerness itself.

Here, and in Leo Bersani's *Homos*, the ironic phallic doubling gay clone culture often celebrated, which played on the tension between an acknowledgement of our constitution as dickless faggots and our unmediated sexual obsession with the penis (we've got one, and *he's* got one too...), loses its transgressive flourish and becomes an assimilationist hankering for the elusive homosocial subjectivity sexual indifference promises. The security of that subjectivity is elusive for heterosexual men, never mind queers, as we have seen. Patriarchal regimes precisely gain their vehemence from the anxiety homosocial narratives produce in potential male subjects, which necessitates the constant display of their exchange of women and a suppression of homosexuality. However pleasurable, privileged and materially secure such negotiations of prejudice are, they will never challenge the very power base that is the source of that prejudice. As we have seen, the disgust and oppression produced by heterosexual cultures about homosexual eroticism are functions of the place queerness has in ideologies of gender, rather than being due to inadequate levels of awareness or patronage. The circumscription of their libidinous activities experienced by assimilationist, affluent, white, middle-class, well educated, professional gay men who can pass as

masculine, is caused by the functional effects this legislation produces in heterosexual male subjects who must repress the queer threat and its proximity to them. Such an awareness may comfortably elude privileged gay men because their very performance of gender is a denial of those signs which indicate the presence of demonised faggottry. Double incomes, double dicks, no kids and access to metropolitan facilities can feel like good citizenship despite legislative difficulties. These men aren't fags, just as women who relish the privileges of marriage and the humiliations of male objectification aren't hags. There is no advantage for assimilated gay men in making heterosocial bonds with women, or enabling some other form of gender dissent, unless that heterosocial affiliation enables a commodified exchange, as it seems to do in Pedro Almodóvar's public consort with female or transsexual members of his repertory company. In order to activate their dissident potential heterosocial bonds necessitate a rejection of male homosocial affectations of authority, and an empathic affiliation with the realm of the commodified: an active identification with women, against (gay) men's gender privileges.

Despite the fact that it merely confirms our awareness of how hegemonies function, it is ironic that the most materially and socially prosperous manifestations of homosexuality are those which are furthest from an appreciation of the institutional source of our oppression. These libidinous negotiations of prejudice are not only assimilationist, they actually naturalise performances of masculinity

and the male power that such performances broker. They are unlikely to facilitate an understanding of what constitutes the intolerable in homosexuality, and thus they are self-defeating. The more subtle ways of displaying masculinity gay men find, the more we may attempt to 'queer' dominant performances of masculinity, the more we effect a proximity between queerness and masculinity, then the more we underpin homosocial power by bringing the threat of queerness closer to homosocial subjects whose naturalised masculinity is a function of homosexual panic and the ruthless commodification of women. Aspiring towards masculine power, authority and legitimacy, maintaining an identification of desire to be and to have masculinity, reproduces the structure of homosociality, a structure which enforces the castigation of homosexual eroticism as a function of its commodification of women. That aspiration not only undermines the dissident potential of homosexuality in its assimilationism, but invigorates the very system which is the source of our disempowerment, and collaborates in the continuing powerlessness and exchange of women. Such concerns may not be consonant with attempts to flourish as respectable, materially prosperous citizens: there is a profound challenge in attempting to implicate our more successful and incorporated gay men in political engagements and social responsibilities that undermine their levels of comfort and assimilationism.

If hags and fags are 'sisters', then we are indeed queer ones. The sistership we have the potential to share by virtue of our mutual oppression within hetero-patriarchal

regimes, is 'queered' as a function of the way our identities are circumscribed by the homosocial narratives that uphold those regimes. Yet if that queering of our homosocial potential is an obstacle to bonds between women and gay men, it also marks the dissident potential of an affiliation that by definition threatens the integrity of male homosocial subjectivity, by eclipsing the power of that subjectivity through the very axis of its structural integrity. Homosociality exists as that which is circumscribed by homosexual panic and exploitation of women. As heterosocial relationships make considerable demands upon both women and gay men who participate in them in order that their dissident effectiveness may sustain, they also often work, as we have seen, to threaten each member of the bond under the most vulnerable term of their identity. Heterosexual women acquire social credibility precisely through their naturalised connection to heterosexual male authority: that is, the kinds of behaviour they enact in order to preserve their heterosexual privilege are understood as natural expressions of their womanhood. There would seem to be little value for women who wish to sustain their heterosexual privilege in denaturalising that which is the very opportunity for gaining access to rational cultural credibility. The effect, in relationships which strive for heterosociality, of this reluctance to denaturalise femininity and gender role-playing, is to 'queer' gay men's unnatural, often feminised gender performances. Gay men who female identify, are thus often cast, in heterosocial relationships, as unnatural women, inferior and subject to disenfranchisement by the 'proper' feminine performances of straight women. Similarly, if gay men do not

accede their male authority in heterosocial bonds with women, by enacting that disempowering identification with the commodified realm of the feminine, then they risk entering into those heterosocial relationships on the same terms in which women experience conventional homosocial relationships with men, where there must take up deferential roles as functions of sexual indifference. We can see the effects of the former tendency in *Roseanne's* Leon, the Mary-come-lately; and we can see the effects of the latter tendency in Pedro Almodóvar's public consort and exchange of women who are subject to the director for their livelihood. As we have seen, despite Roseanne Conner's heterosexuality, *Roseanne* offers considerable heterosocial potential, as does *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*; our successes, however, will always be hard won, and plagued by assimilationist tendencies which draw us back towards patterns which are sponsored by dominant authorities.

We may suggest that the success of heterosocial relationships with straight women may for gay men be related to their investment in queer sistership with lesbians. For it is through relationships with lesbians that gay men really have the opportunity to challenge their own gender power. Relationships with straight women are often fraught because the terrain upon which those connections are made is always mediated - that is, it is not a queer one, not one in which heterosexuality as a given, natural phenomena is problematised. Furthermore, some relationships between gay men and straight women promote the notion of

gay men's sensitivity which offers respite for women from straight men (such as those represented in *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Object of My Affection*). Such relationships implicate gay men in a homophobic collusion with straight women's repression of the political and cultural challenge lesbianism offers to heterosexual privilege and objectification.<sup>8</sup> Gay men's relationships with lesbians are conducted under the mutual acknowledgement of queerness, such that the gender performance of each is equally and celebratedly unnatural. Relationships between gay men and straight women seem to be perpetually negotiating the structuring absence of straight men, and this locks us, as we have seen, into a perpetual dialectic with homosocial triads which produce a mutually alienating asymmetry. Each agency of disempowerment remains active in relation to the other: queerness remains perverse in relation to heterosexual women, who remain sexually indifferent in relation to (gay) maleness. It seems very difficult to engage a public affiliation with the 'otherness' across the triadic structure of homosociality without re-presenting that 'otherness'. As we have seen, in *Roseanne*, queers still seem to be the playthings of natural folks, and in *Fag Hag* the withdrawal of gay men's attention leads to madness, however ironically it may be presented.

Queer sistership with lesbians may liberate gay men from the homosocial trap. On the one hand a mutual recognition of queerness prevents any pathologisation of performances which are unnatural, as it also prevents gay men from assuming the stance of the oppressed martyr on the liberally inverted hierarchy of oppression. In

heterosocial relations with women, both sets of identities are jostling for small residual faultlines within homosocial systems: it is because of this that relations between women and gay men are often adversarial, even when those relations are striving for heterosociality, as we saw with the 'theoretical fag hags' of *Attitude*. Shared queer culture with lesbians makes it very difficult for anyone to lay cultural claim to the essential 'truth' of identity. Although some lesbian feminism does challenge expressions of gay male female identification, that challenge is framed, as we have seen, in the context of a denaturalisation of male power and heterosexuality. In relation to this kind of political culture gay men's empathic alignment with the female realm of the commodified will not threaten the basis of lesbians' social privilege, as it often does in relation to straight women. Furthermore, in bonds with lesbians gay men will be able to more fully escape a reactionary entrapment by homosociality, and be able to more deeply challenge the foundations of their male gender roles. Lesbianism is woman-centred, and is organised as a resistance of those structures which impel women to act in the interests of men. In heterosocial relationships with lesbians, gay men will be challenged where they are strong and often culpable, that is as subjects who often ventriloquise patriarchal values. The mutual acknowledgement of the inauthenticity and contingency of gender performance would seem to be a precondition of heterosocial bonds with lesbians: we're all queers, and nobody can pretend that that they're a real girl (or boy): other than our same-sex desire, that is what we share.

The advances available to gay men through civil rights activism are achievable, and nearly won. Whilst we must remain vigilant against the growth of the ultra-right, and maintain our presence as lobbyists and politicians at local, national and international levels, we must also remember that we're queer and that this is something tremendous, that we have our own cultures, and that assimilation is cultural death. Our frequent political insistence on our *tolerability* has serious implications that undermine our own alliances of sistership, communality, support, resistance and excessive glamour which define us as gay men. We must remain able to conceive of our identities not only as functions of sex and desire, of privacy, domesticity and commodification, but of gender dissent, subcultural affiliation and the identification with fellow fags, hags and sisters.

We must remember how alluring it is to be fags, queens, screaming sisters, to be effeminate, to be fabulous, intolerable, emotional, hysterical, unreasonable, to be bitch goddesses, twisted divas, mincing Marys, and *stop* pretending to be real.

There is a place for making advances in our civil rights, but we mustn't allow ourselves to be fooled into thinking that this means that becoming good citizens is worth aspiring to, or possible. It isn't.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Rodi, *Fag Hag* (London & New York: Penguin, 1992) p.95.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Rodi, *Closet Case* (London & New York: Penguin, 1993); *Drag Queen* (London & New York: Penguin, 1995); *Kept Boy* (New York: Dutton, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Rodi, *Fag Hag*, p.1.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Caroline Cossey, *My Story*, (Winchester: Faber, 1992).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Zachary I. Nataf, *Lesbians Talk Transgender* (London: Scarlet, 1996) and Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>See Nataf, *Lesbians Talk Transgender*, pp.33-47.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of these debates see Judith Halberstam and C. Jacob Hale, 'Butch/FTM Border Wars: A Note on Collaboration', Judith Halberstam, 'Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum' and C. Jacob Hale, 'Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/Ftm Borderlands' all in *GLQ*, vol. 4 no. 2, 1998.

<sup>8</sup>In a *Kilroy* discussion programme, aired 9/6/97 on BBC1, on fag-hags and their desire of gay men, a common theme was the intolerability of conventional heterosexuality for women, yet there was no discussion of the possibility of lesbian alternatives. Such an absence was seemingly a function of female homosocial homophobia, and gay men's vanity in their attractiveness to women.