

in the girls' lounge, where the camera pulls back to show a group of young women who are Katherine, smack in the center of a cluster of adoring young women who are drinking in every word that comes out of her lipstick-liberated mouth. And despite the treachery final scene where Katherine's formerly most hostile student races after the teacher, tears in her eyes and graduation gown billowing behind her, the film does offer a window—however overidealized—into the process by which desire inspires learning, and vice versa.

This transformation, from desire for a person to desire for knowledge, keeps teaching rewarding and learning passionate. And while this transference of teacherly temptation onto text is most familiar in our cultural imagery when the father/lover role coalesces in the body of the male teacher, an erotic pedagogy—where sublimation leads to scholarship—between a female teacher and her students is not yet impossible. Perhaps in the best of student-centered classrooms, men and women together would pick apart the following lines from "Elegy for Jane" where Roethke describes his beloved's temper: "Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth, / Even a father could not find her." Maybe they'd conclude that she's not for fathers to find or a student/daughter to embody, but for all to study.

Holy Fratrimony

Male Bonding and the New Homosociality

Don Romesburg / SUMMER 2004

GAY MARRIAGE IS ALL OVER THE NEWS THESE DAYS, BUT YOU wouldn't know it in Middle-earth. There, Frodo and Sam, the youthful heroes of *Lord of the Rings*, enjoy a love story as big as an IMAX screen, declaring heartfelt devotions as loud as THX allows. But there's not necessarily anything gay about it.

All over the small screen, men are similarly affectionate, swapping commitments and even trying on pants together. On *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, straight men weep over the new intimacies they share with gay men (to say nothing of all the free products). On two seasons of *Average Joe*, the Joes share fierce loyalties and trade confessions of childhood traumas, even mourning the loss of their rejected fellow Joes as if they were comrades and not competitors. What's going on?

While it may seem brand-spanking-new, this growing trend in popular culture is a revived form of old-school romantic male homosociality. What I'll call the New Homosociality is a window opened within mainstream popular culture that shines light on male emotional relationships that place neither sexuality nor—more crucially—its disavowal at their center. The intimacies of *Lord of the Rings'* Frodo and Sam (or, for that matter, Merry and Pippin) represent a kind of high point of such representations to date: These hobbits clearly love one another, and they openly express it through tearful proclamations of fidelity, long-term commitment, and soul-

ful support—and the occasional gleeful pillow fight. The depth of their affection circumvents the whole gay/not gay question by employing a transcendent romantic bond that makes asking whether they're having sex superfluous. It's not the Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name. It's the Love That Needn't Bother.

Male affection that hinges on emotional connection rather than sexual passion is not without precedent. About a hundred years divide the New Homosociality from the Old Homosociality. In the nineteenth century, it wasn't uncommon for American men—especially white, middle-class ones—to enjoy mutually tender, desiring, emotionally expressive relationships. They would write letters pledging their eternal love and snuggle together through long winter nights. (The correspondence of young Abraham Lincoln and his companion Joshua Fry Speed serves as a key example.) Numerous scholars, from the historian Jeffrey Richards to the literary critic Robert Martin, have found evidence of these male romances in everyday life and literary works. Such nineteenth-century men considered women marginal to this deep male bonding: Though marriage was a social duty to fulfill and an opportunity for heterosexual companionship and procreation, it often marked the end of a special period of men's lives in which they shared their greatest love with one another.

These affairs sometimes did and sometimes did not involve sex; the emotional style of the era placed not sex but love, in the most romantic and even transcendent sense, at the center of male emotional relationships. As Jonathan Ned Katz puts it in his 2001 book, *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality*, "The universe of intimate friendship was, ostensibly, a world of spiritual feeling. The radical Christian distinction between mind and body located the spiritual and carnal in different spheres. So hardly anyone then asked, Where does friendship end and sodomy begin?"

In such a system of feeling and gender, Old Homosociality provided intimate shelter for all sorts of male relationships. Because sexuality in the twentieth-century sense—sexual desire, urges, anxieties—was not yet generally assumed to be at the heart of all emotional relationships, men could openly admire one another's physical beauty, express deep feeling and longing, and even be physically intimate without having to affirm or deny the "gayness" of such interactions.

You can see this kind of comfortable male-on-male emotional and phys-

ical proximity in hundred-year-old photographs (so popular on eBay these days) of strapping young men draped all over each other. To our present sensibilities, these photos provoke questions about the nature of such intimacy: Was it homosexual? Was it erotic? But our modern queries sort of miss the point. Whether or not the relationships were sexual, the emotional affection at their center existed entirely apart from the sinful, marginalizing concepts of sodomy, buggery, crimes against nature, and mutual onanism.

All that changed gradually during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as sexologists, psychologists, and popular culture redefined love in terms of its connection to concepts like sex drive and libido. Throughout the twentieth century, the modernization of sexuality has asserted that lust and love come from the same wellspring, with eros driving feeling. Consequently, over the past century, our culture has come to view practically all same-sex emotional expression as something that can be perceived to have some sexual basis. This has structured our interactions with one another and transformed the meanings of male relationships past and present by placing sexuality and/or its disavowal at their core.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in pop culture, where gay-baiting and sight gags have long been a staple of movies, TV shows, and music videos. Think of the nervous heterosexual resolution of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which required Sal Mineo's character to die in order to bolster James Dean's heterosexual commitment to Natalie Wood; the incessant fag jokes in the 1980s *Porky's* franchise that reassured audiences that the intimacies of the main characters were just the palling around of ordinary guys; and the slapstick disgust and nausea experienced by Jim Carrey upon accidentally kissing a man in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), to name but a few. But of late, media representations in which intimacy between men can be pure and fierce without compulsively refusing sexual overtones are starting to look a lot more interesting.

Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* became a breakout hit in part because it presents same-sex affection that conforms simultaneously to ideas of both "gay" and "not gay." The Fab Five's desire for their straight male Eliza Doolittle can be articulated openly because it is assumed to be secondary to their more egalitarian relationship with the guy: Despite cheeky references to rimming and glory holes, they care about helping their charge achieve a very straight goal, such as a traditionally romantic marriage pro-

posals, far more than they care about making out with him. The guy, in turn, comforted by the Five's openness, rarely feels compelled to qualify his affection toward them.

In a different way, the Joes of *Average Joe* I and II bond in the face of the pretty, popular boys who are their competition for the bachelorette's affection. Their nurturing closeness is freed from the burden of proving their heterosexuality—since they're all courting the same beautiful woman—and is distinctly New Homosocial. The Joes work together in competitions of tug-of-war and dodgeball against the hunks, vying not just for dates with the bachelorette but also, by extension, a chance to stay together longer. When Joes get kicked off, they frequently lament the end of their time cohabiting with the guys and often express that they'll miss not the girl but their fellow Joes. Some of the hunks use gay-baiting tactics to suggest that the Joes' mutual support, along with their already nerdy and thus compromised masculinity, marks them as sissies, not man enough to have the girl. The Joes, on the other hand, often embrace their fondness for one another without fretting (at least visibly) over any sexual implications.

Our Buddies, Ourselves?

In popular culture, male affection keenly aware of its possible sexual undercurrent plays out with some predictability in the forms of buddies, the father-son couple, and the brotherly couple. None of these can really be considered an exploration of the New Homosociality, which promises to be something quite different. Still, they are worth reviewing here to better display their contrast from the new style.

The buddy relationship plays out archetypally in the pairings of Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise and Will Smith and Martin Lawrence in the *Bad Boys* movies. It is aware of its own homoerotic overtones and so becomes a contest of sarcastic wit, masculine feats, and heterosexual side interests. Buddies flirt with their deeply felt affection and loyalty to each other even as they mock its seriousness.

The recent *Starsky & Hutch* movie attempts to satirize this genre, playing up the former adversaries' budding romance with a montage of couple-type activities: running on the beach together, wearing matching clothes, and tucking each other into bed. Once their partnership hits the skids, a

postbreakup scene finds them trying unsuccessfully to find happiness alone doing things they used to do together. Ultimately, though, because the movie is so self-aware of its winking proximity to gayness—director Todd Phillips even described the film as “a love story between two straight men”—the joke undercuts its own attempt at subversion. Overly concerned with its heterosexuality, it ends up looking akin to frat boys who dress in drag and then spend the whole night groping their own fake boobs. Still, it's interesting how even predictable twentieth-century representations of male affection such as the buddy film now strive to accommodate some facet of New Homosociality. *Starsky & Hutch*, like “metrosexuality,” seeks to accessorize itself with only the surface aspects of queer male self-presentation as a means of shoring itself up against more radical implications. By expanding the depth of emotional ties while toning down—but retaining—sexual disavowals and buttressed masculinities, the buddy genre can feel fresh, rather than just being another helping of the same stale crap.

In paternalistic buddy relationships, any potential homoeroticism is repressed (or at least downplayed) by the resemblance of the partnership to that of father and son. In *Lord of the Rings*, the white-bearded wizard Gandalf has this type of deep, protective love for just about all the fellows in the Fellowship, and the four young male hobbits in particular. The wizard never falters in the desexualization of his paternalism.

Another popular representation is fraternity. Brotherly love is a lot like buddy love: Both involve some degree of antagonism mixed in with affection. Fraternity, however, often treads more closely to unironic sentimentality, because the presumed familial ties inoculate it from sexual desire. Slash fiction aside, the relationships between *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy or *Star Wars*' Han Solo and Luke Skywalker seem fraternal; they are gentle, nurturing, and affectionate, as well as competitive and sarcastic.

Although some may disagree, the relationships of the men on *Friends* can be understood as a mixture of buddy and fraternal male affection rather than New Homosociality. Chandler and Joey's companionship in particular has always flirted with gay undertones, and they've pushed the boundaries of straight male emotional expression, physical closeness, and cohabitation. Longtime roommates, they are tender, jealous of others' affections for their companions, and occasionally read as gay in their intentions and outcomes. Their anxiety about all this suggests their awareness of potential unconscious

homosexuality as well as their need to police it. Their fixation on the sexual and on perceptions of an affiliation of their desires or actions with gayness indicates their cognizance of taboo and transgression. This places them just outside the New Homosociality—they spend too much time disavowing.

What's New About the New Homosociality?

Despite one hundred years of centering sexuality, traces of Old Homosociality have remained in popular culture. When they resurface in new contexts, however, they have different meanings and implications. So it was that J. R. R. Tolkien, writing about Frodo and Sam in the 1950s, could describe another world, one where old-school romantic homosociality could still exist without being pathologized as either conscious or latent homosexuality. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy could, remarkably, do the same, despite a culture filled with gay this, straight that, and queer the other. Other glimmers of deep homosociality have, remarkably, appeared in pop culture over the years, despite gay anxieties: In the classic 1927 silent film *Wings*, for example, World War I pilot buddies Jack and David share a deeply affectionate relationship, complete with a tender kiss during David's tragic death scene. It is so loving that Vito Russo read it as subtextually gay in *The Celluloid Closet* (1981). More than five decades later, Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 film version of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* has a truly tender and unapologetic scene in which Ponyboy recites poetry to Johnny without any self-conscious snickering or arm punching to temper the scene's almost gooey sentimentality.

These examples, as well as the televised reality spectacles mentioned above, aren't evidence of some postgay move beyond identity categories. Everyone in the New Homosociality can claim or be claimed by whatever labels there are. The queer eyes and their straight guys, for example, all have presumably fixed sexual identities—that's the show's gimmick. They are still able to hug, pat, confess, and emote without commentary about whether or not such expressions are "gay." This works because the main tie is a romantic rather than a sexual one. The open, breezy sexuality seems to free the interaction from sexual obsessions: How can there be gay subtext if it's all out in the open? This is what sets the New Homosociality apart from either twentieth- or nineteenth-century male affective forms.

There are any number of reasons why this new version of homosociality is emerging now. Over the last decade or so, the rapid mainstreaming of gay culture has, paradoxically, made male bonding less directly tied to sex. The brouhaha surrounding gay marriage has been profoundly desexualizing for gays: Despite being an ostensibly civic debate about rights, it has really been, of course, a cultural debate over how society imagines gay relationships. Although procreation and the protection of property and bloodlines have historically been the major reasons for marriage, the idea of romantic love and partnership has been the primary component of the cultural institution, particularly in the past hundred years. When the marriage model is open to homosexual couplings, same-sex intimacy in general seems less about gay sex and more about the emotional connections and responsibility that are assumed in straight marriages.

At the same time, popular representations of gay culture have been, like gay culture itself, teaching all kinds of men how to stop fixating on gay sex. Even *Queer As Folk*, which touts itself as sexually provocative, has any number of gay male relationships that don't have homosexual desire (or, clearly, its disavowal) at their core. The friendship of romantic, flamboyant Emmett and down-to-earth Michael, for example, is frequently loving and tender. While sexuality is certainly acknowledged—they know about each other's pickups, swap sex stories, and even recognize each other's attractiveness—their interaction is primarily about their emotional bond and its tensions. The sexual component is just, well, sex. It would seem that mainstream culture is also beginning to recognize, following the examples of gay men, that just because sex is part of a bond does not make it the obsessive center of that relationship. And the related implication of this realization is that all affection between men needn't be overly concerned with homosexual and feminizing inferences.

A more slapstick example of refusing the centrality of sex occurs, improbably enough, in the 2000 film *Dude, Where's My Car?* Take the scene in which the titular dudes, Jesse and Chester, sit in their car at a stoplight, while one car over is Fabio and his girlfriend. A brief competition ensues: Fabio revs his engine; Jesse revs his. Fabio puts his arm around his female companion; Jesse puts his arm around Chester. Fabio makes out with the woman; Jesse makes out with Chester. Clearly, Fabio cannot top this. Victorious in their one-upmanship, the dudes drive off to their next big adventure.

What's most remarkable about this scene is not its explicit homoeroticism—although that's well worth remarking upon. Rather, it's the difference between this exchange and the bond between previous dudes, like Bill and Ted of *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) or Wayne and Garth of *Wayne's World* (1992), that suggests something new. Both buddy sets enact the aforementioned hug-then-back-awkwardly-away move—a moment of transgression that reveals perhaps too much about the homosexual undertones of their relationship. Like buddies and daddies and brothers everywhere, those dudes disclaim desire. Chester and Jesse, on the other hand, have every sign of a New Homosocial relationship. Their connection supersedes its potential sexuality; the dudes do not have to disavow their homosexual desire for each other, and not because they have girlfriends but because their desire for each other isn't sexual at all—it's romantic, sentimental, and playful.

The innovation of Jesse and Chester's emotional tie has provoked a number of cultural critics to explore its deeper social meaning. In recent conference talks, queer scholar Judith Halberstam has been exploring the fin de siècle position of the dude figure in pop culture. She argues persuasively that films like *Bill & Ted* and *Dude* mark the recent widespread popularity of the "dude," that is, the stupid white guy. He represents a particularly contemporary American sensibility, in which his identity remains stable in a universe of mixed time/space realities and racial, gender, and sexual slippages and blurrings, where, as Halberstam notes, "Anything goes (as long as everything stays the same)." The adventures of the dudes, she suggests, who can go anywhere, do anything, and yet claim accountability for nothing, are a powerful cultural trope in light of U.S. imperialism and, especially, the leadership of President George W. Bush.

Halberstam's analysis is important, because it's tempting to imagine that the New Homosociality is somehow more liberating or unencumbered than twentieth-century forms of male affection. Jesse and Chester's New Homosociality seems to spring organically from their white adolescent dudeness. As such, it privileges their style of romantic homosociality over other more labored or "unnatural" forms. (Gay men, for example, are caricatured in the film as overly styled and cartoonishly muscled Swedish homosexuals—who, as if to prove their inauthenticity, end up being aliens.)

Homo Saviors

Halberstam argues that because they never seem to get anywhere or do anything, dudes live in a time/space loop in which they never have to grow up and thus are freed from accountability. I'm suggesting a different reading: *Dude, Where's My Car?* implies that Chester and Jesse are on the cusp of responsibility and will eventually grow up and move on to primary relationships with women; with the burdens of maturity, their homosociality will gradually either drift away or transform into a more typical male friendship. The heteronormative logic of contemporary culture, in other words, overwhelms the internal logic of the film.

Situational homosociality like Jesse and Chester's is mirrored in reality television like *Queer Eye* and *Average Joe*. On *Average Joe*, the bonds between the men can't last forever; in the end, it's back to the boy and the girl. Moreover, in *Average Joe: Adam Returns*, former Joe Adam Mesh, the last one jilted in season one, becomes the bachelor choosing from female suitors. His old Joe companions are pressed into service to find a girlfriend for him in a variety of degrading settings, from ogling bikini models in Las Vegas to searching out his mate "scientifically," using database formulas for compatibility. Over on *Queer Eye*, most weeks the guys help the guy in order to get the girl. The boys' relationship can be affectionate in part because it is so temporary—the romance between the gay men and the straight guy ends when the episode does, replaced with good old heterosexuality. Nothing illustrates this better than the reunion shows, when the guys bring their female companions to visit the guys.

Back in Middle-earth, even Frodo and Sam can truly revel in their homosociality only while away from home. Distinct from the more fraternal, paternal, or buddy relationships of the other characters (like hunky would-be king Aragorn and dreamy elf Legolas), Frodo and Sam's affection while on the road is unabashedly loving, deep, physical, and emotive. Even so, in *Return of the King*, the trilogy's final film, lingering masculine sexual anxiety is pressing enough to demand forty cumbersome minutes of heterosexuality resolution. All three times I saw the movie, the audience assumed that the end was going to be the Dorothy-back-in-Kansas moment in which Frodo awakes from his ring-weary exhaustion to find he is in his own bed

back in the Shire with all his male companions surrounding him. Sam's entrance into the scene, followed by the soft-focus, slow-motion meaningful eye contact, hugging, and pillow fight, seems like the tale's conclusion. But that scene is almost directly followed by Sam's wedding to local barmaid Rosie. And of course, once Sam marries Rosie, Frodo is literally shipped off into the sunset.

An effect of this New Homosociality seems to be that women, pushed to the margins of these apparently progressive male relationships, find themselves represented in predictably boring ways—nag, supporter, sexy sidekick, mother, wife. In *Return of the King*, the men's romantic world only cursorily includes women. Poor Rosie seems to do little more than smile and reproduce. Even the powerful female elves, Arwen and Galadriel, are reduced to whispering cryptic messages and declarations of eternal heterosexual love. The women on *Queer Eye*, meanwhile, appear contained in a separate sphere as talking heads against a white, featureless backdrop.

So the question remains: How potentially progressive is this new (that is, old-as-new-again) form of male bonding in popular culture? Despite its current position either as dudelike global access to privilege without accountability or as situational and conditioned upon the marginalization of women, we should be enthusiastically cautious about the New Homosociality. Pushing sexuality away from the center of male relationships opens up different ways of defining and understanding sexuality and gender. If sex isn't the biggest game in town, it promises to become just one factor among others in appreciating the bonds we form and those that we reject. For all people, this holds some possibility for reducing the violence done in the name of sexuality and its refusals. Dare we dream of a New Heterosociality?

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Domestic Arrangements

WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY, AS THE SLOGAN ONCE WENT, but we also, historically, hold down the fort. Since the concept of an "angel in the house" took hold in Victorian times, Western culture has elevated the image of woman as domestic goddess while consistently undervaluing, if not just plain denigrating, the actual content of domestic work—a contradiction that has often made, in the modern age, for major antagonism between the so-called female realm and the actual living, breathing women who occupy it.

Okay, so you probably wouldn't know that from watching an average set of television commercials on any given network in any given prime-time slot. Check out this woman who's cheerfully scrubbing out the toilet while her children and golden retriever look on. Man, she looks happy. Here's another woman practically speaking in tongues because she's so thrilled that her dishwashing detergent doesn't leave spots on the glassware. Like Vanna White on a letter-turning bender, she runs her fingers ecstatically down the side of a glass in close-up. And sweet fancy Moses, here's a woman who is apparently so taken by the new Swiffer duster that she's dancing, dancing in her Mom jeans, around a home that's not even hers. That's right—this cleaning gadget is so incredibly unputdownable that this woman is fanatically dusting a house where the dirt's not even her responsibility.

TV commercials have remained the one constant of angel-in-the-house