

Harry Hay's Essentialism

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"We are a Separate People, with, in several measurable respects, a rather different window on the world, a different consciousness which may be triggered into being by our lovely sexuality."

Harry Hay, 1983

HARRY HAY'S FIRST FORAY into gay activism was his attempt to organize homosexuals on behalf of a politically progressive candidate in 1948. Two years later, he would find a like-minded other—Rudi Gemreich—with whom he would create the most important homosexual organization of its time, the Mattachine Society. The name referred to a Renaissance European folk dance and spoofing social satire called "Les Mattachines," performed in France by fraternities of what Harry Hay's gaydar sensed were bands of gay brothers in Renaissance France (*sociétés joyeuses*). In effect, Harry—who always wanted to be known by his first name—was conscientiously promoting what would later be called an "essentialist" idea about homosexuals as early as in 1948. This provided the spiritual glue needed to sustain a movement.

As an educated Marxist and teacher, Harry was inspired by the Marxist understanding of African Americans as a "national minority," and the idea that a "nation is a historically-evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture." Harry argued that gay Americans possessed two of the four criteria, as Will Roscoe put it in his book on Harry, *Radically Gay* (the source of the following quotations): "a language and a shared psychological make-up—and that this was sufficient to consider them a cultural minority." Grounded in this "ethnic minority" thesis, Mattachine grew to 3,000 members and became a nationwide movement by 1953. It was then that the assimilationists booted Harry out due to his radical views and difficult personality.

It is amazing to consider that Harry developed his "ethnic minority thesis" in a virtual vacuum, amidst the terrifying red-baiting climate of fascist McCarthyism. As Roscoe put it, "no one lived a 'Gay lifestyle.' ... Gays were merely 'sick heteros' leading schizophrenic lives of secret desperation." Equally astonishing is how cognizant Harry was of his 19th-century forebears, such as Edward Carpenter, Walt Whitman, and Karl Ulrichs, and how he was able to synthesize their sex-inspired thinking into a more modern, activist formulation that allowed

for an unprecedented process of developing a viable and healthy gay identity. "Without the idea of Gays as a cultural minority," writes Roscoe, "there would be no Gay identity and no Lesbian/Gay movement today."

At the heart of Harry's essentialism was his use of varying sources in anthropology, history, genetics, and biology to detect an underlying symbolic pattern or gay "archetype" in pre-patriarchal human history—a pattern that a more homophobic gaze had been missing completely. From there Harry unearthed the presence of a "homosexual person"—often seen in the form of the Native American berdache*—a figure who has walked the earth since the Stone Age and who did much to functionally organize society and oversee its spiritual, religious, and healing apparatuses. The emergence of the berdache as an institution, according to Roscoe, eventually allowed for "an alternative gender status for those whose social differences are today termed homosexual." Because the berdache was such a different person from everyone else in the community, a mythos developed that a "changeling" had been swapped by fairy presences who were not human. The berdache was therefore a spiritual being who

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possessed access to a magical realm unavailable to his biological kin. In some cultures, this child would be called "two spirit" and in others "the fool."

Gay liberation, conceived now through Harry's "gay window," emerged as the most consciously revolutionary revival of the berdache archetype in modern times: "There are voices on the wind giving dimensions to the

freeing of the *Spirit of Man*. The time is *now* for our minority to begin at last to comprehend what we have known for so long. ... Even the Free Generation [the counterculture of the 70's], seeking a widened angle of worldview, challenges us to throw off the Dream-destroying shackles of alien thought that we may exhibit, at long last, the rich diversities of our deviant perceptions." But Harry did more than just establish a theory in the 50's that would come to guide the modern gay movement worldwide. In 1979, along with collaborator Mitch Walker and community organizer Don Kilhefner, he helped to further the development of gay consciousness through the establishment of the Radical Faerie Movement and its fostering of the first manifestation of gay-centered spirituality in modern times.

Besides Harry's seminal work in identifying qualities of homosexual social forms to help gays conceptualize themselves as a people, he also developed many ideas that suggest the presence of gay traits located within each gay person's psychology, such as: the "gay window," which is looking at reality from a

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* See Will Roscoe's book on We'Wha, *The Zuni Man-Woman*, and Walter Williams' *The Spirit and the Flesh* for more on the berdache.

gay perspective; "analog vision," metaphorical or symbolical thinking as opposed to the binary (heterosexual) thinking; "subject-to-subject consciousness," or treating the other person as a subject to love as oneself rather than as an object to be dominated or controlled (another heterosexual habit, as he saw it); and "the gift of being gay," an idea that was visionary as well as antithetical to the common practice of pathologizing (or minimizing) homosexuality.

In his quest to develop a theoretical basis for his essentialism, Harry conducted research to see what accounted for the non-aggressiveness, altruism, creativity, and special forms of consciousness he saw in gay people: "The struggle to wholeness, to reach a level where Gay love is embraced as a true human value, means the attainment of a high level of consciousness." As Roscoe tells us, Harry incorporated several sources—Roger Sperry's work on the bicameral brain, Konrad Lorenz' analysis

on how same-sex ganders "stimulate each other to acts of courage," and Edward O. Wilson's investigation on how "genetic factors underlay 'the adoption of certain broad roles'"—to conclude that gay "neural networks" can be inherited in a variety of ways. He speculated, according to Roscoe, that "Gay consciousness might indeed have a neurological basis in a distinct psychic organization perhaps involving the relationship of right and left hemispheres."

Ultimately, this conceptualization allowed Harry to incorporate the Lorenzian concept of "triggering" for homosexuals, which is to say that when two gay men experience their first sexual encounter, they undergo an ecstatic union not just with each other but with an entire way of being, an analog vision that re-connects them with their berdache legacy. "At the instant of first eyelock," Harry wrote, "it was as if an invisible arc of lightning flashed between us, zapping into both our eagerly ready young

The Writer's Journey to Harry Hay

Like most college students in gay studies programs these days, I was taught to treat my gay identity with suspicion, to see it exclusively as a tool of unjust power, a mere labeling device "constructed" by modern socio-political forces—not, as I do now, as possessing a transcendental essence or soul capable of imaginatively transporting me along with my *fae* brothers and sisters to the gardens of ancient Sumeria, where Gilgamesh experienced his epochal romance with Enkidu. No—as I view it now, my prior indoctrination by unfeeling deconstructionist materialist ideology was not exactly the best thing for my gay identity or my pursuit of homosexual love. It wasn't until after I finally dragged my butt to gay-affirmative therapy almost fifteen years ago that I began to realize how this currently mainstream academic approach corrosively colluded with my internalized homophobia to make me feel lonely, desperate, self-hating, and depressed, with the only apparent answer to my woes being compulsive sex and a sadistically codependent relationship.*

It now deeply disturbs me how this still popular deconstructionist propaganda, which I clearly see now as a homophobic wolf in queer clothing, has distracted me from a vision of Gay Spirit and of gay essence which I now see as indispensable to my personal well-being and development as a healthy, self-respecting gay man. These values and

ideas can be traced to Harry Hay, the spiritual forefather of gay essentialism whose work I had yet to discover. But back then I credulously bought the postmodern line that essential values, even if those values were necessary for the support of my own gay identity, were suspect and didn't actually exist as a constitutionally rooted construct, because I was uninitiated into the reality of my own archetypal capacities. I consider this to be a failure of adequate schooling in gay liberation thought.

There were times in college and graduate school when it did occur to me that I was abusing myself with skeptical intellectuality, and that there must be other ways of acquiring self-knowledge. For example, one of my most important mentors was Aner Candelario, whom I met when we were both nineteen, in New York's Ninth Circle bar, who had no formal education but had attained enormous wisdom through the hard knocks of gay street activism. Unlike the deconstructionist thought in which I'd been steeped, he had no such misgivings about his gayness as being central to his being. There was something powerful in me, too, that yearned for his initiatory interest in getting me to "to open up" and get into my body. I did know on some level that my vaunted intellectualism could unmoor me from my libidinal roots and inflate me into some academic master of the universe to fulfill my mother's dreams of grandiosity. The symbolism of my uptight difficulty in "relaxing" and being able to "give in" was not lost on me. I knew that if I could not get fucked, I was fucked up.

Perhaps I was forced to grapple with this because I was in the grip of a divinely inspired love, the profundity of which I could not deny. While Aner appreciated my braininess, he didn't like how I was using it in my

academic pursuits. I was in the closet then, and he would call me every day to talk about what street demonstration he was going to. When I told him that everything was not about being gay, he screamed at me that "yes it was," calling me a coward and insisting that gay people had to stand up for ourselves. At first I was outraged, and then he said that if I continued to yell at him, he was going to come over right then and fuck me in the ass. Almost, instantly, I had a change of heart—or an opening of my heart—and attended the demonstration in Washington with him, where I had a spiritual awakening.

Aner ended up breaking my heart, which was another spiritual awakening, especially for an intellectual who had little access to his feelings. In retrospect, I can see how this whole experience was the education I really needed to make me receptive to what I would experience on my first trip to Los Angeles four years later. It was there that I took a pivotal turn in my journey of gay self-realization (and West Coast, gay-centered spirituality), including, to my good fortune, some direct involvement with Harry Hay himself. I can't believe now that I didn't know about Harry at that time. It couldn't have been more than a few days after my first arrival in L.A. that I found out about this fabulous gay bookstore in Silver Lake called A Different Light Bookstore, where Richard Labonte and Jim Pickett opened my eyes. I was awestruck by Richard's calm temperament and his grasp of gay liberation history and theory, and especially intrigued when he came out to me as a "faerie." He taught me that it was Los Angeles, rather than New York, that can be seen to be the birthplace of the modern gay movement, and that Harry Hay was central to the establishment of this movement.

— Douglas Sadownik

* While I tend to take issue with issue with post-modernism when it is directed against gay essence, I also realize that it has served an important emancipatory function in challenging the dominance of the heterosexist, racist, patriarchal power structure. I actually see gay essentialism and gay postmodernism as the twin children of Nietzsche's thought, with the former minimized by the latter as of late.

bodies *total systems of knowledge*. ... Now through that flashing arc of love, we two young faeries knew the *triggered* tumult of Gay consciousness in our vibrant young bodies."

HARRY'S ESSENTIALIZING ideas are clearly relevant historically insofar as they were seminal in laying a theoretical foundation for how gay people could further develop themselves in ways previously unimaginable. As powerful as these ideas were and are, however, they nevertheless have several weaknesses that seriously concern me not only as a political activist and thinker but as a self-realizing gay man. First, there is no explicit, unifying psychological principle in Harry's understanding of gay identity. Second, the problem of the psychological shadow—Jung's idea of the dark side of the personality that contains our feelings of inferiority, rooted to a great extent in unfinished family business—is not dealt with. Finally, there is a failure to identify an explicit form of homosexual libido motivating gay being and becoming throughout his thought.

These limitations, to my way of thinking, have seriously compromised our GLBT movement's progress. For example, over the past forty years, since Stonewall, the extraordinary militancy and exuberance that used to be so apparent has tragically faded away, as the forces of assimilation and the anti-gay aspect of Ivory-Tower-funded deconstructionist thought have flourished. It seems ironic that the more rights we obtain, the more we compromise our essence by assimilating to the powers that be, and the more we disappear into a meaningless, ephemeral existence, a gray sea of "fluidity." Without an explicit guiding principle to "earn for ourselves Space in which to contemplate affirmatively *our particular dimensions of self-realization*" (in Will Roscoe's words), the existence of gay identity itself is seriously threatened, in my view, potentially erasing all the gains of the last fifty years.

One way to address the problems in Harry's thought, as well as those in postmodernism, is to see how Hay's collaborator Mitch Walker extends Harry's gay spirit vision by addressing the missing psychological dimension of gay essentialist ideas, infusing gay thought with the idea of erotic intelligence in a way that only a shameless, self-respecting homosexual could. In 1976, several years before their collaboration, Mitch had already posited an underlying archetype of same-sex love and soul in his article, "The Double: An Archetypal Configuration," the first publication of an affirmative analysis of gay identity in a mainstream Jungian journal (*Spring*, 1976).

Whereas Mitch Walker felt profoundly mirrored by Harry in his thinking, it wasn't long after their early efforts to create a gay-centered spiritual movement that he became increasingly disturbed by Harry's refusal to acknowledge how hypocritically *not* "subject-to-subject" his own behavior could be (see *The Trouble with Harry Hay*, by Stuart Timmons, 1990). Walker's encounters with Harry's psychological limitations did much to motivate and consolidate his thinking about the importance of working vigorously to confront the personal gay shadow and violent vestiges of hidden and denied internalized homophobia, toxic shame, and unfinished heterosexist family business, so as to maximize the gay spirit vision that Harry was so eloquently conveying. Walker then devoted himself to developing and promoting what he saw as the underlying, psychologically rooted

principle of the archetype of gay spirit as it unfolds within each person's subjective experience, and to integrate the person's disowned homophobic shadow side with the help of the erotic soul double—the personified symbol of homosexual essence. This addressed all three of the main missing principles mentioned above: the need for an explicit, introvert psychological explanation for gay identity; the importance of addressing gay identity's homophobic shadow side; and the fundamental need for an erotic, libidinally intelligent gay soul image as the symbol of homosexual self-realization.

With these additions, Harry's thought can be used as a theory and as a practice for how to come into greater relationship with one's gay essence. That there now exists a practical and life-enhancing supplement to Harry's visionary ideas may be enough to allow this form of gay essentialism to stand up to the dominance of social constructionist ideology in academia. As Nietzsche teaches in *The Genealogy of Morals*, what is "useful" may be the best "truth" we have at a given moment, especially if it is "valuable in the highest degree." In other words, "the falseness of judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment: in this respect our new language may sound strangest. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating."

IHAVE ATTEMPTED here to address enormously important ideas involving gay identity and the politics of the gay psyche. At the same time, I should note that I have only touched upon the question of how to harness Harry's thought to psychoanalysis in a practical and experiential way. Gay essence should be a living presence and should be experienced and engaged inside the reader's unfolding subjectivity as these words are read. For this reason, I invite concerned gay activists, students, intellectuals, and lay people to inquire further into the fecund field of gay essence and its further actualization.

For my own part, it has taken me decades to develop and hone a workable theory and practice of my personal gay identity. It upsets me that it has taken me this long, due to my all-too-tragic limitations and the homophobic ideology of my formal education. I have written this paper in the hope that readers today could be inspired to learn more about the thought of Harry Hay and how it pertains, not just to their own self-realization, but to the future of an imperiled humanity. However, I firmly believe that Harry's vision can only be fully actualized through the use of a gay-centered approach to psychoanalytic understanding, which alone can help us stand up to the seemingly indomitable forces of homophobic violence inside our own psyches and in the real world. We must not allow these forces to water down or extinguish the vital gay essence about which Harry said this:

Now that we are beginning to perceive how great a treasure of commonality we share collectively at the spiritual levels of our bio-cultural inheritance, just below the levels of that inadequate obsolete Binary Hetero makeshift of a language we Fairies are earthbound by, *It is time we find new ways and means to confer and convoke the forging of the new language we will need to communicate the glories of our treasure, our "gift to be gay."*

Perhaps we can imagine that this new language to which Harry refers is the language of the gay psyche. ≡