

The White Racial Movement and Gays

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Back in 2008, I wrote an essay/review—I called it a review at the time, but it was as much an essay as a review—of the book *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* by Michael S. Sherry (The University of North Carolina Press, 2007). The book was informative and personally helpful. It got me clearer about myself and what I'm up to in my life.

I approached the writing from a white racial angle, so I ran it by the editor of a print journal that dealt with racial matters from a white perspective. He gave it a cool reception. The gist of his response was the review was too gay-friendly and wouldn't play well with his readers. Perhaps if I were to mute my congeniality toward homosexuals so it wouldn't be such a turn-off . . .

No thanks. I wasn't up to changing the piece at all, even if doing that would have gotten it into print. It was my truth—reality as I perceived it, in the world and inside me—and anyway, I felt done with the writing and had no more energy to give to it and wanted to move on. I wasn't even up for running it by other publications that might accept it as is. I posted it on my personal website, which I've concluded is one of the internet's best kept secrets, and there it sat for a decade.¹

I seldom re-read my writings—I produce them and let them go—but this one I've revisited, I suppose, four or five times over the past decade. It has been a positive experience for me every time. It re-affirmed some things about who I am and got me back on track in my life.

I went back to the gay artists writing again a couple of days ago, and this time thought to myself, this gets at an important issue; how about making another run at getting it in front of the public? There's an animosity—tacit, and at times explicit—toward gays among white analysts and activists and organizations, and an absence of a gay presence, gay voice, gay sensibility, in the white

movement. I decided, yes, it might do some good if I called attention to the gay issue, encourage people to think about it and talk about it, and see if this topic can be discussed and debated with a reasonable measure of dispassion and objectivity; I realize it's a touchy subject.

I've edited out the actual review of Sherry's book and kept the material that deals with what I personally have taken from gay-influenced art and from gay artists' life examples, as well as my comments about the wisdom of the anti-gay posture I've picked up in white racial discourse. The basic point: I don't see the movement entertaining and incorporating gay perspectives or inviting gay involvement in its efforts, and I think it would be good if it did.

I view gay white people as bona fide white people, and, the vast majority of them, as being good people. They may not agree with the prevailing accepted wisdom in white activism on every issue, but I believe they have much to contribute to the movement if we could enlist them. Besides that, it isn't morally right to across-the-board disparage, even demonize, other white people simply because of their sexual orientation; it's cruel at best and hateful at worst. Also, as a practical matter, gays are powerful enough and organized enough and in positions of power and influence enough that we would best think twice before getting on the wrong side of them, especially if there's no pressing need to do so, and I don't believe there is.

You can read this updated 2008 article and see what it brings up for you and let people know what you think. This writing is about personal responses to artistic expressions—a narrow focus, but it should, or at least I hope, prompt a broader consideration of social, political, cultural, philosophical, religious, moral, and strategic concerns related to gays and the promotion of white interests.

Here it is.

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What do the following individuals have in common?

Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Franz Schubert, Henry James, George Santayana, Walt Whitman, John Cheever, Oscar Wilde, W.H. Auden, F. O. Matthiessen, Jack Kerouac, Rudolf Nureyev, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Cole Porter, Ian McClellan, George Frederick Handel, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Samuel Barber, Thornton Wilder, Dirk Bogarde, Edward Albee, Jasper Johns, Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, Montgomery Clift, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Hart Crane, Herman Melville, James Dean, Philip Johnson, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, John Cage, Ned Rorem, Andy Warhol, Christopher Isherwood, Jean Genet, Johannes Brahms, Van Cliburn, Franco Zeffirelli, Hubert Selby, Anthony Perkins, Robert Mapplethorpe, Terrance McNally, and William Inge.

All of them were or are artists—broadly defined anyway, Matthiessen was a critic and Philip Johnson an architect. As far as I know, they are all white gentiles of European heritage. All of them are reputed to be other than strictly heterosexual in orientation. And all of them are mentioned in Michael S. Sherry's book, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy*. Sherry is a professor of history at Northwestern University. His book deals with events and personages in the mid-twentieth century. None of the above list is in the prime of his or, in two cases, her career. Sherry is himself gay. Disclosure: I'm heterosexual.

Among the Jewish artists Sherry considers are Gustav Mahler, Aaron Copeland, Gertrude Stein, Allen Ginsberg, and Leonard Bernstein (who although married led an active gay life). Sherry reports that writer James McCourt described Bernstein's notorious fundraising cocktail party in Manhattan for the Black Panthers in the 1960s (see the *Radical Chic* half of Tom Wolfe's book, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*) as "an effort by the Uptown Homintern to appear radical without doing anything so socially compromising as coming out." Sherry devotes a good amount of space to describing the creation of the hit Broadway show *West Side Story*, in which the entire creative

team was both Jewish and gay: Bernstein for the music and, along with Stephan Sondheim, the lyrics; Arthur Laurents for the book; and Jerome Robbins for the choreography and direction. Another Jewish gay, Ernest Lehman, wrote the screenplay for the film version.

The only black that Sherry discusses at length is the writer James Baldwin. He briefly mentions dance choreographer Alvin Ailey, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and writer Alice Walker.

Women don't get much play in Sherry's book. Besides the two listed in the opening paragraph and the two black women named in this last paragraph, he refers briefly to the writer Adrienne Rich, anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, '50s pop singer Patti Page, and the film director Claire Denis. The one woman who gets a lot of space in the book is the essayist Susan Sontag. Over four chapters, Sherry quotes extensively from her classic essay written in the 1960s, *Notes on Camp*. Interesting to me, Sherry never identifies Sontag as a homosexual. She was, and this included a relationship of long standing with the photographer Annie Leibowitz, who recently [as of 2008] published photos depicting Sontag's last days in her losing battle with cancer.

Beyond including contemporary comedian Margaret Cho in a long list of names, I don't recall any reference in Sherry's book to Asians. Personally, I have been taken with the work of two gay Japanese artists active during the period Sherry focuses upon in the book, the writer Yukio Mishima and the film director Yasujiro Ozu.² My connection with Mishima and Ozu centers on the top-rank quality of their art—check out Ozu's film *Tokyo Story* and Mishima's book *Confessions of a Mask*—and the messages about living I have taken from their work. My guess is that, in good measure, the creations of these two superb artists were shaped by their sexuality, and that makes this gay topic an important one to me personally.

For readers antagonistic toward gays, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture* serves up many arrows for their quiver. Below

are six examples. All but one dates back a half century and might well ring unseemly to modern sensibilities; but then again, I suspect that more than a few in our time, including a good number of racially conscious whites, can resonate with these sentiments in both tone and substance:

- The composer Charles Ives excoriated many European composers as “pansies,” “lily-pads,” “old ladies,” and “pussy-boys.”
- The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., criticized homosexuals for their “soft” leftism, cliquishness, and lack of mature manliness.
- The psychologist Albert Ellis maintained that homosexuals “are almost invariably neurotic or psychotic.” Gay artists, Ellis argued, “cannot devise new solutions to artistic and scientific problems” and “are the most imitative, most conventional, and most acceptance-demanding people in our ultra-conforming culture.”
- Novelist Philip Roth attacked Edward Albee’s play *Tiny Alice* for its “tediousness, its pretentiousness, its galling sophistication, its gratuitous and easy symbolizing, and its ghastly pansy rhetoric and repartee.” Disguise is the villain in all this, declared Roth. “How long before a play is produced on Broadway in which the homosexual hero is presented as a homosexual and not disguised as an *angst*-ridden priest, or an angry Negro, or an aging actress; or worst of all, Everyman?”
- A 1966 *Time* magazine piece concluded that homosexuality is a “pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life, that deserves fairness, compassion, and understanding” but “no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness.” The article pointed out gays’ “vengeful, derisive counterattack on the straight world.” It embraced writer Somerset Maugham’s view

that queers “lacked deep seriousness” and have only a “wonderful gift for delightful embroidery.”

- Midge Decter in a 1980 *Commentary* magazine essay shared that she found most gay men to be “mama’s boys,” alcoholic, “adolescent in personality,” unhappy, and prone to “drugs, sadomasochism, and suicide” and the “obliteration of all experience, if not, indeed, of oneself.”

The bullet points above don’t speak for me. Increasingly over the last few years, and without doing it consciously, I have engaged the work of gay artists and attended to their life examples. I came away from that admiring both the people themselves and what they produced, and consider myself to have been uplifted by these encounters. I’ll outline five things that draw me to gay art, and discuss their significance with reference to white racial concerns.

1. *The quality of the art.* Look over the names that lead off this writing—Michelangelo, da Vinci, Henry James, and on through the list. That represents some great art, and simply, I don’t want to die without experiencing at least a fair sampling of it. These past few days, I read a collection of John Cheever’s short stories.³ Great writing. I was moved, transported. Earlier in my life I was in a modern dance company (with more than a few gays, I might add) and remain very interested in dance. Dance doesn’t come better than that choreographed by Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor. I don’t want any movement I’m associated with denigrating artistic accomplishments because of the sexual orientation of their creators and thereby discouraging people from experiencing them, and I worry that the white racial movement does that.

2. *The insights I gain from it.* Often those on the margin bring a fresh perspective to the ways of groups and individuals. Tennessee

Williams has written that the cruelty and hurt gays experience results in greater sensitivity, and prompts gays to look deeper into themselves and the human spirit. Sherry quotes social scientist Donald Webster Cory, who argues that, as outsiders, gays see “the stream of humanity, its morals and mores, its values and goals, its assumptions and concepts, from without,” and thus contribute to us all.

In recent months, I have been immersed in the films of the Japanese director referred to above, Yasujiro Ozu. Yes, I can cherish my Western heritage and my race without closing myself off to the art and wisdom of other peoples. I wrote the following about three of Ozu’s films:

I feel as if I am different for having seen these three films, that the person I am, the entity I experience as me, has shifted. I’m more sensitive and softer in a good way and more grounded than before. I believe if I had seen these films when I was young—I’m old now—I would have viewed life differently and lived differently than I have. I wish I had known to see them back then. Time has run out for me. I can’t start over, it’s too late.⁴

The late Revilo P. Oliver, a classics professor at the University of Illinois and a prominent and highly respected defender of the Western heritage and the white race, wrote of the need to be “a man who is willing to learn from the accumulated experience of mankind.”

He must strive to observe dispassionately and objectively, and he must reason from his observations with full awareness of the limitations of reason. And he must, above all, have the courage to confront the unpleasant realities of human nature and the world in which we live.⁵

It is not just Western heterosexuals who can help us confront the realities of our nature and the world in which we live.

3. *It brings me back to the reality of my life.* Recently, I watched an interview with the French director Bruno Dumont (*Humanite*, *Twentynine Palms*) that accompanied a DVD of one of his films. From watching Dumont's films, I pick up that he is gay. The interviewer asked Dumont what matters to him in his life. Dumont answered that making good films matters greatly to him—he gives his all to his work. But what matters most of all to him, Dumont said, is his own existence.

In gay art, there is an emphasis on the private, the personal, and I have found that to be a healthy counterbalance to the public, impersonal thrust of the white racial movement. White activist writings, the discourse generally, is predominantly about *it*, the fate of the West or the white race, immigration, government policy, what *they* said and did *over there*. That is all fine and good, but it's rarely if ever about the person making the point, or about you and me and how we are doing. In a book review, I wrote:

[Chilton] Williamson's presentations focused on the collective: religion, culture, ideas, public issues, what it is all about, what *we* are, what *we* do, what *we* should do. Where does that leave *me*? I ask myself—this mortal, finite, human being sitting here in front of this computer on a Friday afternoon? And where does it leave *you*, the person reading this right now. I care about the destiny of the West, but the truth of it is I spend most of my time thinking about friendship, love, sex, pleasure, honest expression, my mental and physical health, and finding a rewarding way to get through my day-to-day activities. And the truth of it is I'm going to attend to people whose work or life example informs these personal concerns.⁶

I read contemporary novelist Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*, *Choke*), whom I presume is gay [he has since come out]. Palahniuk reflects a nihilistic perspective—nihilism is very much a part of the Western intellectual tradition. He deals with issues that

confront people in their everyday lives, like dealing with noise pollution and the anger we feel about things people do to us and our desire for revenge. Palahniuk attacks rigid emotional restraint and foot-soldier loyalty to work and the state and the cause, whatever it happens to be. He writes about the body and sexuality, and having fun. He writes about pissing in the soup of the big shots, the top dogs, the I'll-do-the-talking guys. Does this, in good part anyway, come out of Palahniuk's sexuality, out of the fact that he has lived in a world that has said "get back," "get down," "not you," to people of his kind? My guess: yes, it does. Is this irreverence a dimension of the Western heritage: yes, it is. The West, America in particular, has been about telling the pompous to f--k off.

Palahniuk wrote the following inscription on my copy of his book *Lullaby*:

**To Robert—
This is *your* life!!
[signed]
Chuck Palahniuk**

I can relate to that and still care deeply about white people.

4. *It emphasizes gentility and softness and kindness.* Last year [2007], I was asked to review a book that profiled "real men" that had struck the favor of an editor of a white racial publication. I wrote the review but it was never published. It's on my website.⁷

All ten of the exemplary men in the book were head-of-the-table, no-nonsense, tough guys—war heroes, football coaches, hard-charging entrepreneurs, those kinds of people. In the review, I wrote the following (which may get at why it never got published):

As I read the profiles, I thought about what all this was saying about my father, slight of build, manicured,

deferring, who ten hours a day, six days a week, stood on his feet with his arms raised cutting people's hair, his shoulders throbbing as he got older, and rode the bus home every evening to be with my mother and me.

My father is long dead, but would he be welcome in the white movement? I'm not sure.

I'm a sensitive, introspective, artistic type of person and have drawn inspiration from the American painter Robert Henri (1865–1929), whom I believe was gay. Henri exemplified and wrote about the artist's way, as he called it, where one's total life, including his vocation, is conducted artfully, from that impulse; or another way to say it, where one's life is one's art.⁸ I find Henri's formulations appealing generally, and that they fit me. But I don't think Pat Buchanan would take to Henri, or me. What gay artists are saying is that there is room in this world, including the white racial movement, for both people like them and me and people like Pat Buchanan [and today's strident alt-right types].

Sherry reports that Arthur Laurents, a gay man who wrote the book for "West Side Story," said it depicted a world of violence and prejudice in which the two lovers were trying to survive. The critic Deems Taylor said Tchaikovsky, a gay man, "felt great pity for the mental and spiritual invalid." I am personally up to here with violence and harsh talk. And while I might choose different words than "pity" and "invalid," I care deeply about people who are in pain. I'm in pain. Can people in pain be part of the white racial movement? Do they have to pretend they aren't in order to be white advocates and included in the group and valued? For that matter, aren't we all in pain? Isn't that part of the reality of being a mortal human being?

Sherry quotes author Virgil Thompson: "The way to write American music is simple. All you have to be is an American and then write any kind of music you wish." What Thompson is saying is you don't have to be a certain kind of person and you don't have to conform to a particular creed to express yourself to

the world as a white person. You don't have to stay silent or hidden or on the outside looking in if you aren't "normal" by somebody's definition. You have as much right to get on with what you do when you are truly yourself as anyone else. You are not behind anybody in line

A concern of mine is that the central strain of white racial thought equates acceptability, legitimacy, and morality with normality, with normality defined as being like the person doing the talking. The columnist Joseph Sobran is [was, he has since died] a perceptive, and courageous, writer, an inspiration to me. But still, nobody is above critique and criticism. In a 2003 column, he wrote about his kind of people, those who "aren't easily bluffed" by gays.

When the abnormal claims to be normal, their instinct is to respond not with arguments but with jokes ("Did you hear the one about the straight Episcopal bishop?"). Even Stalin couldn't stamp out gay people. More powerful than armies is a wisecrack whose time has come.⁹

There's a smugness and nastiness in some spokesmen for whites that is getting old for me. If we are perceived as smart-ass bigots we are going to stay on the periphery of American life.

5. Gay artists promote reflection and self-criticism. Self-analysis and self-criticism are not hallmarks of white racial discourse. Rather, it is more the idea that we know the truth, we've got that down cold, there's no doubt about that. Our task is but to get others to see things our way. In a healthy way, gay lives and creations shake up that certainty. They prompt us to think about the degree to which white racial activism links the wellbeing of Western culture and white people to certain immutable and unquestioned orthodoxies: in religion, ideology, politics, sexuality and gender relations, art, lifestyle, work and leisure, and schooling. Are we overly collectivist, authoritarian, male-dominated, closed-

minded, hero-worshipping, exclusionary, and intolerant of anybody who is different from our central spokesmen? As I see it, the challenge is to maturely and calmly consider this question.

Endnotes

1. The website: www.robertsgriffin.com. The essay/review in its original form is in the writings section of the site: <http://www.robertsgriffin.com/Sherry.pdf>.
2. See my writings *On Mishima* and *On Three Films That Touched Me*. <http://www.robertsgriffin.com/Mishima.pdf>
<http://www.robertsgriffin.com/Three%20Films%20.pdf>
3. John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Vintage, 2000).
4. *On Three Films That Touched Me*.
5. Revilo P. Oliver, *America's Decline: The Education of a Conservative* (London: Londinium Press, 1982), p. 182.
6. See my review of *The Conservative Bookshelf: Essential Works That Impact Today's Conservative Thinkers* by Chilton Williamson in *The Occidental Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 2005. <http://www.robertsgriffin.com/ConservBookshelf.pdf>
7. The book: R. Cort Kirkland, *Real Men: Ten Courageous Americans To Know and Admire* (Nashville: Duke Cumberland House, 2005). The review: <http://www.robertsgriffin.com/RealMen.pdf>
8. See my writing, *On Living the Artist's Way*. <http://www.robertsgriffin.com/Henri.pdf>
9. Sobran's July 23, 2003 column, *A Gay Man's Manifesto*. <http://www.sobran.com/columns/2003/030729.shtml>.