

Five Outings in Queer Indirection and the Ingredients of my Undoing

Erica Rand

1. Out of Order

I couldn't stop thinking about the pills in his apartment. It looked too casual: a fistful scattered across a shallow candy dish with short sides barely protecting the contents. Like it wouldn't matter much if someone accidentally sent them flying. Or if visitors helped themselves, knew what they were taking, took one rather than another, or four rather than two. But it also seemed too staged. Why would a scraggly mess of pills sit there like badly tended party snacks? Nothing else in the apartment looked disarranged. Besides, pills live in containers for a reason, such as protection from sunlight or steam.

By the time he told me his secret a few hours later, I had already guessed it, although I'd hoped I was wrong. He was startled by what tipped me off, which was what that dish wasn't: the Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday pill organizers that some of my friends, especially middle-aged gay men like him, had out on counters, the mark of too many pills to keep track of, too important to skip or mix up. To me the dish screamed: "These aren't AIDS drugs," which made me

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fear that I could find those elsewhere. In a drawer, in a medicine cabinet, or, if he had been lucky so far, in the future.

2. Fictional But True

A teenage duo in the early stages of romance schemes to cover their murder of two sexual-harasser, presumably straight, football players by staging their deaths as the double suicide of gay lovers. (Actually Veronica, crazy for her demented avenger, believes the deaths will be fake, too, but that's a longer story.) She writes a suicide note about jocks too ashamed to "reveal [their] forbidden love to an uncaring and un-understanding world." JD assembles "homosexual artifacts" to place at the scene. Aside from the "issue of *Stud Puppy*," they suggest irregular gender and sexual tastes more indirectly: "Candy dish. Joan Crawford postcard. Let's see, some mascara. All right. And here's the one perfect thing I picked up. Mineral water." When Veronica suggests that mineral water has become too mundane to signal *queer* anymore—"Oh, come on, a lot of people drink mineral water, it's come a long way"—JD replies "Yeah, but this is Ohio. I mean, if you don't have a brewski in your hand you might as well be wearing a dress." Sure enough, it is the mineral water that first grabs the attention of the cops who come to the scene: "My god, suicide. Why?" "Does this answer your question?" "Oh man! They were fags?" Even the kids' families buy it. At a joint funeral, where the players lie in open caskets side-by-side, dressed in their football uniforms and holding footballs, one of the fathers proclaims that his fatherly love and pride endure anyway.

That didn't really happen. It comes from the 1988 cult movie *Heathers*, which presents it as a comical slam on uncultivated hicks who view home-grown gays as urbane-aspiring outsiders, can't keep up with current signs of sophistication, and get it all wrong.¹ But something just like it happened to my friend, who *is* gay. Recently divorced from his wife and departed from his household, he wanted to avoid courting bigotry or causing more upheaval for his kids. He told them he would be discreet; they could tell their friends when, if ever, they wanted to. I think he imagined avoiding swish, marches, holding hands in public with his boyfriend if he ever got one. But when his son confided to his girlfriend, it turned out the kids at school already knew. Someone had spotted his father at Dunkin' Donuts one night, buying whole bean coffee. The whole beans were merely part of what gave it away. It was also that he was buying his own provisions. Dads who left usually did so for a younger woman. Had that been the case, surely the new wife would have been buying their coffee.

¹ *Heathers*, directed by Michael Lehmann, New World Pictures, 1988.

3. Hide and Seek

Is she or isn't she? Every time this topic comes up I pull up a headshot on my phone and say: "look at her hair." Sometimes I make it sound like her hair requires a collective deduction project. Sometimes I make it sound like her hair is a dead giveaway. I suspect that both are true: Her hair is a dead giveaway because of the particular way that it's mystifying. It reminds me, in its obfuscations, of the Dorothy Hamill haircut that became popular among white women, including a lot of dykes, after Hamill won the gold medal at the 1976 Olympics in (what is officially called) "Ladies" figure skating. If styled just right, the short wedge could enhance the perky straight-girl look that got Hamill endorsement deals for White Rain hair products and Short and Sassy shampoo. *People* described it as "swingy, bouncing hair" that "twirls out like a second skirt as she spins."² There's something about the act of likening the haircut to a skating skirt that matches the skating skirt itself: a wisp of feminine signification, betokening modesty, that turns crude and garish once set into motion, flashing panties with every twirl, a crotch shot with every extension. Placing a skirt on someone's head gives them pussy for brains. But stop short of that Surrealist substitution and rest with the twirly good-girly-ness that the authors probably intended to invoke. That's one reading of the Dorothy Hamill haircut.

Yet the hairstyle's hold on heteronormative femininity could be quite tenuous, as a story by Jo Ann Schneider Farris reveals. A figure skating coach and writer, Schneider Farris was a competitive skater herself during Hamill's era, and trained, like Hamill, with the Broadmoor Skating Club in Colorado Springs. Directed to by her coach after Hamill's Olympic victory to imitate Hamill's cut, Schneider Farris ordinarily, like many skaters there, used the services of a hairdresser at the nearby Broadmoor Hotel who was known as an expert in the style. One day, when that stylist wasn't available, Schneider Farris "made the mistake" of trusting her hair to someone else. As she recalls, ". . . that stylist, to put it mildly, demolished my hair. Unfortunately, for a short period of time, I looked like a boy."³

The moral of that story could have been to stick with your own hairdresser. That's what Hamill did. Her hairdresser for the Olympics was Yusuke Suga, stylist to the stars who also created Donny Osmond's "body wave" for the 1980 Republican Convention. Every eight weeks, while traveling with the Ice Ca-

² "Call It the 'Dorothy Hamill,' the 'Wedge' or 'Wash 'N' Wear Hair,' It's the Coming Summer Look on Top," *People Archive*, April 26, 1976.

<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20066410,00.html>.

³ Jo Ann Schneider Farris to About Sports, March 23, 2013,

<http://figureskating.about.com/b/2013/03/23/remembering-dorothy-hamills-famous-wedge-haircut.htm>.

pades, Hamill flew him in to touch up her hair.⁴ Schneider Farris, presumably, could simply have phoned ahead to confirm that her stylist was available down the road. But that one mishap ruined the Hamill haircut for her altogether. After a Zamboni driver mistook her and her male ice dance partner for "fellas," she decided to grow her hair out.

You can see from the special touch needed to get the feminine gender just right how the Dorothy Hamill haircut could assist people interested in signaling some version of queer gender and, relatedly, queer sexuality at various levels of apparent intention and legibility. Its convenience extended far beyond the "wash and wear" quality that commentary on the style often advertised. Under the right scissors, the Hamill haircut could acquire a queer deviation with a well-known (apparently) heterofeminine reference and plausible alibi: "I wanted to look like Dorothy Hamill but look what happened." In other words, you could pass off your good hair as bad hair. (Or, sometimes, you're not so good hair; it's not simply fond recognition that generates laughter these days among people who remember having had or having been surrounded by lesbianic Hamill haircuts.)

So, too, with the woman I pull up on my phone. Femme (of a sort), butch (soft or hard), lesbian, genderqueer: Slightly reshaped by cut or product, her hair might have signaled one or an intentional combination of those. Instead, it seems deliberately opaque, all the more so when it also looks untended, as if to say, "Don't think my hair means anything *about* me because you can see that it doesn't mean anything *to* me."

4. Looking Inside and Out

In the late 1980s, my girlfriend and I were outed as the butch/femme couple we could have been, or might have already been, sort of, a little. I repeatedly caution my students to avoid overpopulating the 1970s and 1980s with middle-class feminist white women who shirked butch and femme identities as patriarchal brainwashing. But I was one of them, insisting to my skeptical friend Joanne that growing my nails was simply easier than cutting them, ignoring that I might have been dating precisely one of those dykes Joanne said would never risk the feminine impression long nails sent. I said "might" have been dating because we never talked about it except for the one night we went to a party together having decided independently to dress up a little. I wore a dress. She had on a jacket and tie. Both of our outfits involved a little built-in disavowal. My dress was casual. It looked like an overlong pink and black striped sweat-shirt. Her jacket and tie had a certain whimsical quality. (I remember red cor-

⁴ Suzy Kalter, "Samurai Stylist Suga Got a Wedge in with Dorothy, and Now He Clips Candy, Faye and Marie," *People Archive*, August 18, 1980.
<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20077212,00.html>

duroy, but I think I'm mixing in Pee Wee Herman.) Still, we looked at each other in horror. We didn't want to look like we were "doing roles."

Then later I did, at first just for a side effect we discovered after we both quit smoking and gained weight in different ways that often get mapped onto gender like dresses and ties do. Walking down the street with my broader hips and her waist-erasing bigger stomach, we became visible as dykes within several frameworks: to people in the know who recognized femme-butch as a prominent form of so-called "same-sex" coupling; and to people out of the know who expected every sexual/romantic twosome to contain some approximation of a male and a female. ("Which one of you is the man?" as the standard version of that presumption goes.) Some people read us as "lesbian couple with the butch in charge." That didn't bother me, even if it didn't match my relationship politics (ever), or my erotic interests (yet). I was just glad to be visible, extricated from a closet I didn't want to occupy.

A few more years later, when I wanted more than the look, I started describing that shape shift as nature's way of revealing us to ourselves. It felt like deep truth, even though the fact that it isn't was never far to seek—nor, if somewhat later, the hurtfulness and privilege involved in touting an apparently seamless matchup between body and identity. Biology doesn't make destiny. Hips never simply yield up any sort of gender—more queer or less, femme, female, or feminine—in the bone, in the flesh, in movement, or on display. Visibility has no singular form or value, no clear relation to legibility, progress, or liberation.⁵ Who you are, what you show, who you show it to, and why: factor in desire and opportunity; reward and punishment; training, regulation, and coercion; place, time, skin, company, and context. Identities are found and made, from inside and outside. Evidence we find can be evidence we make as we learn to find and make it.⁶ I moved on to people ready for the one in the skirt; I saw myself in that picture and also changed to fit it.

⁵ As Carlos Ulises Decena writes, the notion of coming out both as necessarily a good and as a process of individual "self-realization" as its own end, instead of a "beginning of a process of social transformation," represents a "neoliberal interpretation" shaped and underpinned by dominant narratives and presumptions of middle- and upper-class predominantly white gays and lesbians. *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 17-18.

⁶ On identity-making as a collective, social, and situated project that is thereby no less real or authentic see, among many sources, Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 19, and Ernesto Javier Martinez *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 5-6.

Take Two

This piece began as one thing and turned into another. I conceived it as a little collection of stories about queer contemplation. The stories, I thought, were already in the can, recounting thinking already done in narratives fixed through repetition. I like these stories. I've told them a lot. I thought they would work well together for an issue on contemplation. They all concern seeing the queer by looking queerly. But when I brought them together and began to transfer oral narratives to text—turning the stories into objects as well as products of contemplation—I started to see them differently.

For example, I usually tell that first story when I think that I have pulled off another, similar feat of reasoning. I sense a telling absence, an odd presence, a shift in rhythm or timing, a sign of something it has no direct reason to signal, like how I used to know that a now-ex had started drinking again when the adjective “complicated” reentered her vocabulary. I often flatter myself that I have a special gift, and people sometimes collude with my assessment. “You’re very intuitive,” my longtime figure skating coach and friend responded when I told her that halfway through her three words “I have news,” I knew that she was leaving; half-noted oddities suddenly made sense.

Maybe I am. Yet I discovered during editing that that my assessment, and my credibility, depend on certain elisions and omissions. Twenty years later I find that I can’t confidently place the candy dish. I first wrote “on the kitchen counter,” where I saw it vividly. But as I worked over the text for word choice, order, cadence and the like, I started picturing it on the coffee table—in a different shape for a while, then not. Instead of sharing my uncertainty I deleted any reference to the surface it sat on. Similarly, I didn’t tell you right away that drinking clues didn’t precisely come to me. I was always on the hunt for them. Nothing so special, just like anyone trying to survive that particular kind of gas-lighting. As Pamela Anderson put it about Tommy Lee, “‘It’s like the attack of the pod people - ‘That looks like my husband, but it’s not.’”⁷ Nor did I write that I suffer from what a friend in a similar situation calls the mandatory abandonment issues that come with losing a parent early on. Deep down, I’m always waiting for the news to be “I’m leaving.” Besides, the morning after my coach told me of her plans, I woke up with physical signs of loss that I associate with endings that are always unexpected whether you have expected them or not. My chest hurt, I felt a little dizzy. Bodily relays of reeling: I knew but I didn’t.

In sitting with these stories, I’m also taken by how often claims to queer knowledge rest on presumptions that can slide easily into snark and remain far

⁷ Wenn, “Pamela Anderson Tackles Alcoholism in Monthly Magazine Column,” *Contact Music*, July 16 2004, <http://www.contactmusic.com/pamela-anderson/news/pam-tackles-alcoholism-in-monthly-magazine-column>. Wenn is referring to Anderson’s regular column in the now defunct *Jane* magazine.

from benign even if they don't. You can follow the smug *Heathers* kids and see in its whole-bean counterpart a hilarious story about small-town ignorance. Seriously, Dunkin' Donuts? But you can also see a story about local smarts grown in particular circumstances, manifest even in this one micro-intersection of caché and capitalism. After all, 1990-ish is not like 2015 when the local supermarket carries Peet's coffee, known back then only to people with a link to California sophisticates. The ability to clock dominant social arrangements, beliefs, and values can be crucial for connection and, sometimes, survival. Maybe that kid at the Dunk was bracing for their own family break-up or was queer themselves.

Gaydar skill sets are honed and hampered in specific geopolitical, social, cultural, and historical contexts. Here is something else I didn't think much about until I brought these stories together: Aside from my ongoing hairdormination project, they all take place with a seven-year period from the late 1980s to mid-1990s (and I attribute that hairdo to an old-fashioned now-you-see-it-now-you-don't strategy that would have been right at home then). The timing makes sense. The non-fictional scenes from that period all took place in locations marked by their own particular mixes of ACT UP and secrecy, support and censure, sharing commonalities across expected, but not always realized, differences between big cities and smallish towns, urban centers and flyover states. The big-picture historical specificities scream out in the contrast between the funeral scene in *Heathers* and its 2013 reimagining in *Heathers: The Musical*. The movie plays one father's newfound not-so-much awareness for ridicule. Snookered into believing his son is "a pansy" and "homosexual," as he puts it, he looks and sounds silly as he places the football onto his son's chest and weepily proclaims, "I love my dead gay son!" The musical turns that now classic line into a song where the dad imagines a future of PFLAG-type activism, admonishes the slower-convert dad to remember a certain hot fishing trip in their own past, and, presumably like the audience, has an arsenal of knowing references to disco, rhinestones, Judy Garland, and bear cubs.⁸

I was new to town when I heard the coffee tale. Five years later, in a terrible token of the film's sometimes-accurate aim, a local gay high school football star did kill himself (and was buried with his football jersey, too). By then, I had learned a lot more about where I lived than the reputation of whole beans. I shopped at the local bookstore with a "gay and lesbian" section and the one with a covert trail to the goods (Barbara's "Staff Picks"!). I'd been through an anti-gay referendum that had recently passed by a devastating margin, joining an opposition that had also been sizeable and homegrown. That combination of in-and-out was familiar enough to me from my previous time in a land of mundane mineral water that I can't parse out the imported from the acculturated in

⁸ Laurence O'Keefe and Kevin Murphy, "My Dead Gay Son," from *Heathers: the Musical*, 2013, CD Yellow Sound Label, 2014.

what made me think “Oh, no, that kid is gay and killed himself” when I read that he was missing—or when they found him after a week of hunting and the local paper, it seemed, abruptly stopped speculating.

I tapped more into local knowledges a year later during planning meetings to revive a queer youth group in the wake of his death. High school kids around the state knew, one of them told us, and “everyone who knew a cop.” So did the guidance counselor who let queer kids hide their journals in her office and the straight-but-not-narrow activist whose young child longed for the pink shoes that they spotted in the girls’ department but had already figured out for themselves that only girl-labeled children could safely wear them to school. Sometimes people brought up evidence to back up common knowledge. There *was* a note, some said; maybe or definitely it implicated his father’s rage. The authorities, I was told, hid it—out of respect or shame, depending on the account.

5. On The Way Out, One More for the Road

In “When Something is Not Right,” Ryka Aoki describes an encounter that she thought might have turned violent had she and her friends not been wildly misread. Walking down a hotel hallway in 2008 with three other performers from the Tranny Roadshow, “a barnstorming transsexualgenderqueer vaudeville show/gender symposium coming soon to a liberal arts college near you,”⁹ the group runs across another foursome, who look to be drunk, straight, non-trans locals: two dolled-up women hooking up with two muscled younger guys who remind Aoki of some “carnivorous wrecking balls” that she’s known. Just as Aoki’s group is walking by, the blond woman yells “hold on! . . . *Something is not right!*” and grabs Aoki’s arm. Aoki’s group fears that she’s identified them as targets for queer- or trans-bashing. They discover, however, that, partly by misgendering Kelly, the other trans woman, as male, she thinks she sees three straight guys planning to rape Aoki. She refuses to let Aoki go until she’s satisfied that Aoki might not be in danger but tells her where to find them just in case things turn out differently.

Finally, they escape:

We walk down the hallway, and once we turn the corner, we giggle like idiots and dash to our room and bolt the door.

“Okay, now how many ways did they get *that* wrong?!”

Kelly and I are screaming “Oh my God! We fucking almost *die!*” . . .

I flop on my bed and stare at the ceiling. What the hell? And as I finally catch my breath, an even weirder thought comes to mind: In Greensboro, North Carolina, some straight white women, who obviously had other things

⁹ Ryka Aoki, “When Something is not Right,” in *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender Studies*, ed. Anne Enke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 195.

going on, noticed what they thought was a vulnerable Asian girl from out of town and decided that they were going to help.¹⁰

I began with an interest in queer ways of “putting two and two together.” My plan to deliver them for your pleasure, like little pearls on a string, fell apart for various reasons. These include some that apply to passing along any story, like the vagaries of memory and the way that objects of contemplation don’t stand still despite common associations of contemplation with stillness, and of movement with animacy, might suggest.

But they also include some factors that I am surprised and, to be honest, ashamed to see in my habits of thinking. For decades, I have considered it a central principle of my life, teaching, and writing to be wary of oversimplifying the complexity and smarts of other people. Everybody thinks and theorizes, not just professional critics, or people at fancy colleges like the one I teach at. Yet until I sat with this material, I aligned those kids judging whole-bean coffee with the foolish, straight, and fictional hicks in *Heathers* instead of thinking that I might associate at least some of them with, say, my friend who taught me that because his hold on being read as male remained somewhat precarious he had to stop drinking diet soda in public.

Plus, while this line of thinking is not new to me either, I saw more than before how limiting can be a premium on getting things right or a narrow view of what constitutes that. People who read me as a femme before I knew that I was one were right about a future that they helped me create. People who thought they knew about a suicide note supported a youth group that the region needed whether or not that note actually existed or that particular young person needed the group. The woman who misidentified Aoki and her friends nonetheless grabbed Aoki’s arm “for the right reasons,” to borrow a phrase used constantly on the *Bachelor*-franchise TV shows to mark the importance of motivation as distinct sometimes from knowledge or outcome.¹¹ Aoki’s group did some misreading, too, probably including, because we all do it, in some ways they didn’t recognize. I wonder, for instance about Aoki’s description of the two women having “bagged two big young bucks” younger than themselves.¹² To me, from the vantage point of far from young, that smacks of cougar stereotypes in which older women always function as desiring predators rather than objects of de-

¹⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹¹ These shows, on the ABC network, include *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Bachelor Pad*, and *Bachelor in Paradise*. The phrase and concept are so popular that in season 9 of *The Bachelorette* the show made fun of itself by having bachelorette Desiree join Soulja Boy and a bunch of bachelors vying for her heart to make a rap video called “Right Reasons.” (Season 9, Week 2, June 3, 2013)

¹² Aoki, “When Something is not Right,” 196.

sire. Maybe those young bucks had at least equally bagged them and couldn't believe their good fortune.

I still love to think about queer ways of putting two and two together: of recognizing two-and-two's that might well escape notice and arriving at "four" in ways as queer as what you find. I'll probably keep telling these stories. Yet I think I'll tell them differently now, with a lot more attention to what's not queer in the least.



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