"YOU CAN TELL JUST BY LOOKING"

And 20 Other
Myths about LGBT Life and People

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1890s, Lord Alfred Douglas famously described same-sex attraction as "the love that dare not speak its name." Since that time there has been a whole lot of talking. By the early 1970s, homosexuality had become, as many quipped, the love that won't shut up. American public life—the context for this book—is filled with claims and counterclaims about the nature and naturalness of homosexuality, the morality of same-sex marriage, and, increasingly, whether transgenderism is a disorder or just one gender identity among others. Acrimonious debates over these questions take place in arenas as diverse as pop culture, professional sports, and legislative politics.

In one of the most talked-about moments of the 2011 Grammy Awards, pop diva Lady Gaga bursts out of a shimmering, translucent egg to the propulsive beat of her LGBT anthem, "Born This Way." Later that year, she establishes the Born This Way Foundation to improve the lives and safety of LGBT youth. A lot of LGBT people dance to Gaga's beat; they deeply feel they were born attracted to the same sex or with a gender different from what others assigned to them, and embrace that identity and experience. Other LGBT people do not believe that, and with just as much Gagalike conviction claim they have chosen to be LGBT.

In September 2012, Brendon Ayanbadejo, a linebacker for the NFL's Baltimore Ravens, attracts the ire of a Democratic legislator in the Maryland General Assembly, Emmett C. Burns Jr. Ayanbadejo's offense? He has become a very public advocate for same-sex

marriage. Another football player, Minnesota Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, gets in on the act, writing a colorful open letter to Burns. In it, Kluwe offers his support to Ayanbadejo and for same-sex marriage—and schools Burns on the meaning of free speech. Still, all is not homo-cosy in the hypermasculine world of professional sports. Just a week after the dust-up between Ayanbadejo and Burns, Toronto Blue Jays shortstop Yunel Escobar sports black eye tape during a game with an antigay slur written on it in Spanish. He is suspended for three games.

In June 2013, the Supreme Court rules on two important marriage-equality cases. Holding that the third section of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) is unconstitutional, the Court now allows legally married same-sex couples access to all federal benefits available to heterosexual married couples, including a multitude of tax and Social Security benefits. The decision also eases the immigration process for binational couples. (In a striking coincidence, the DOMA decision is handed down ten years to the day that the Supreme Court, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, overturned laws criminalizing consensual homosexual sex.) In the second highly watched case, the Court rules on Proposition 8, which defined marriage in California as only between a man and a woman, and reversed a ruling allowing marriage equality. Side-stepping the substance of the case—the constitutionality of state bans on same-sex marriage—the Court holds that the groups bringing suit to defend Proposition 8 do not have the legal standing to do so. This narrow decision leaves in place a lower court ruling overturning Proposition 8 and opens the way to same-sex marriages in California again. The decision does not affect marriage equality in other states because the regulation of marriage is traditionally left to the states. As a result, marriage equality for same-sex couples remains a state-by-state proposition, with only thirteen states and the District of Columbia currently permitting same-sex couples to marry.

In July 2013, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would bar most public and private employers from discriminating against potential or current employees on the basis of sexual orien-

tation and gender identity, finally makes it out of a Senate committee for a full vote by the Senate. As this book goes to press, a vote by the full Senate has not yet been scheduled, though Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has confirmed his interest in doing so soon. Even if the bill succeeds in the Senate, however, it has no chance of passage in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. Supporters have been trying to pass a version of this law since 1974. In an end run around earlier congressional inaction, the federally appointed Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had already ruled, in April 2012, that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, applies to gender identity as well. In practice, this means that government agencies can no longer discriminate against transgender employees or applicants because of their gender identity. The ruling does not apply to employees of private companies.

As the preceding examples show, we are in the midst of simultaneous, rapid legal and social changes, even as pernicious stereotypes and outright inequality persist.

This book is an attempt to help readers clear through the thicket of these and many other hot-button issues. We want to dispel harmful, often hostile, myths, stereotypes, and false assumptions about LGBT people. But we also want to explain what myths do, how they work and move in the world, and why the myths in this book remain so compelling even when they are shown to be false. How and why do gut feelings solidify into hard-and-fast facts about the world? How has society allowed some myths that are manifestly untrue to flourish and circulate as fact?

The challenge of this book is about more than beating back anti-LGBT lies. We also scrutinize the claims that LGBT people make about themselves. What myths do they believe about their own lives and culture, and why?

Before we discuss specific myths, we need to give some brief background about LGBT people and their culture. A large and still growing body of scholarship shows that the meanings of same-sex

desire and gender variation are culturally and historically particular. It's not just that the names "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," and "transgender" are relatively new additions to the English language; so are the identities they name.

Hungarian social reformer Karl-Maria Kertbeny coined the word "homosexual" in 1868, using it publicly in a political pamphlet the following year to promote homosexual emancipation. Kertbeny's acts of classification and naming were done in the service of homosexual rights. But his model of innate sexual desires opened the door for early sexologists, women and men who attempted to look at sex and human nature in a scientific manner, to identify "homosexuality" as a type of sexual abnormality and pathologize "gender deviancy" as one of its manifestations.

Categories and labels are not static. From the early decades of the twentieth century forward, LGBT people have contested these negative judgments and fought to wrest control over their own names and identities. In so doing, they have been able to secure increased visibility and acknowledgment in culture and society. These important efforts to reclaim and revalue terms once used to disparage them have also reinforced the idea that sexual identity marks the definitive truth about a person and provoked increasing debates about this "truth."

In June 2012, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper disclosed he was gay, to the surprise of some and the "about time" response of others. Cooper, for his part, was walking a tightrope, trying to destigmatize gayness (his own and others') while simultaneously preserving the aura of neutrality and objectivity of someone who reports the news, rather than makes it. But is a homosexual identity ever a neutral standpoint?

All gender and sexual identities are creative fictions of a sort. Nevertheless, individuals whose sexual desires and gender expression conform to the norm are rarely asked to explain when or how they first knew they were straight, or why they believe they're really a woman. In contrast, people who deviate, or who are seen as deviating, from sexual and gender norms are commonly required to

explain and justify their very existence. Similar burdens fall on people and communities who are racially and religiously different from dominant norms. Importantly, then, the moral weight and real-world impact of myths do differ depending on who is doing the talking.

The stories LGBT people tell about themselves often represent an attempt to explain and defend their existence in the face of legalized discrimination, social marginalization, and even outright violence. The idea that "gay people are just like straight people" (a concept that runs through so many of the myths discussed in this book) contains an obvious kernel of truth; all people share some basic similarities. But it obscures the fact that specific everyday realities and social structures have shaped the lives of LGBT people very differently than those of heterosexuals. It also sidesteps how the meaning and value of sexuality differ from person to person, gay and straight, and often even across an individual's lifetime. Many heterosexual people are not like "everyone else" either. Dismantling myths about LGBT life and people also involves unpacking myths about heterosexuals and the very idea of sexuality.

One of the functions of myths is to fill in gaps in knowledge between yourself and others, between us and them. Myths help to police the boundaries between same and different, known and unknown, setting up some differences (whiteness, heterosexuality, Christianity, able-bodiedness) as the very measure of what it is to be normal, natural, and properly human. But all of us also differ from the ideal selves we think we have to be. Confusion and fear about these differences can lead to an inability to see facts that do not fit a particular person's, or entire community's, self-understandings—including our own.

A desire for short, quick answers to complicated questions about how to live with differences and unknowns about people has generated myths on both "pro-LGBT" and "anti-LGBT" sides. We are all used to hearing rhetoric such as "Sexual abuse causes homosexuality" or "Gay rights infringe on religious liberty" from people who see the rising public presence of LGBT people as detrimental

to society. We are also used to hearing LGBT people and their allies counter with their own inflated and factually unsupported claims, such as "Hate crime laws prevent violence against LGBT people" and "About 10 percent of people are gay or lesbian."

The three authors of this book—all of whom share an unwavering commitment to expanding equality and freedom for LGBT people—are deeply sympathetic to the complex reasons behind such ostensibly pro-LGBT myths. We are aware that in criticizing certain myths held by LGBT people, we risk accusations that this book is "bad" for LGBT people because we are publicly airing disagreements within this community. First, a myth is no less a myth if it is marshaled for "good" purposes than for "bad" ones. Second, we think that social progress and meaningful freedom for LGBT people are best advanced by creating the space not just for queer differences from the mainstream, but also for differences within the LGBT community.

The idea that "LGBT" is a single, clearly defined cultural entity is itself a myth. Being "gay," being "lesbian," being "bisexual," and being "transgender" are all distinct experiences. While there are some similarities—for example, all LGBT people know what it feels like to be outsiders—these groups are often separated by more than what joins them together. Even the experience of being "othered" and discriminated against differs across L, G, B, and T, and within each of these identity categories, too. LGB people are not always welcoming of transgender people. Sexism has historically impeded alliances between gay men and lesbians. Moreover, race, religion, class, and national origins profoundly affect how gender identity and sexual desire are experienced. They also shape which bodies are singled out for hostile attention and which, for protection.

Gay men and lesbians began organizing in political action groups in the 1950s. By the mid-1970s, bisexual women and men, who had worked in these movements, wanted recognition of their presence, and they fought to add the "B" to the "L" and "G." In the mid-1990s, transgender people also began to organize in national groups. Since they shared aspects of discrimination with lesbian,

gay, and bisexual people because of the ways gender is intertwined with sexuality, "LGBT" became one coalition. This occurred even though many of the concerns and needs of transgender people were importantly different from those of LGB people. Today, we say LGBT, or often LGBTQI (adding "queer" and "intersex"), as though this mash-up were a politically obvious historical given. But it is important to remember that this acronym emerged slowly, and often through intense fighting, as some gay and lesbian people resisted adding B and T. In the end, however, each of these groups understood that they were stronger banding together around certain issues, as any coalition would be, than fighting alone.

In the name of promoting LGBT-positive positions, advocates may unintentionally promote restrictive ideas about what it means to be a "real" LGBT person. Community does not have to mean unity at all costs. What about all those LGBT people who do not think they are the same as "everyone else," including other LGBT people, and who have organized their lives and built diverse cultures and communities around their deeply felt differences? Aren't they LGBT, too? Beyond the no more than 5 percent of people who actually identify as L, G, or B in the United States, what about the many more who nonetheless act homosexually or have homosexual desires at some point in their lives? And beyond the approximately 0.3 percent of people in the United States who identify as transgender, what about the many more who feel some disconnect between their gender presentation and their "male" or "female" body? This book makes room for dissenting positions and experiences that already exist in the world, but too often get left out of both anti- and pro-LGBT myths.

In some ways, this is a "how to" book for people who are arguing in the public arena about issues of LGBT life and rights. We provide readers with the concrete information, historical facts, and arguments they need to counter any of these myths in conversation or political discussions.

Undercutting the inaccuracy and power of a myth is not simply about correcting misinformation. One of our goals is to grapple with

the complexities of what it means to be LGBT in the broadest social, emotional, psychological, political, cultural, and personal sense. That is why debunking each of the myths in this book means placing them in as wide and inclusive a context as possible, including how they relate to LGBT as well as straight people. In this regard, there may be more uncomfortable similarities than differences between how pro-LGBT myths and anti-LGBT myths work in the broader culture.

Myths are fueled by ambiguities and uncertainties around fundamental, yet complex, human realities that affect how we live in the world. Gender and sexuality are not reducible to the birds and the bees, nor to biological patterns and responses. Gender and sexuality are full of ambivalences and instabilities that pose more questions and possibilities than the binary categories male or female, straight or gay allow. That's why people get so upset by them, or are fascinated, even obsessed, by them.

There is no pure human sexuality or gender outside of the world that gives it meaning and purpose. For each myth, we discuss how and why it came into being and explain why its misinformation continues to be appealing to people. Arguably, anxieties over gender and sexuality condense much larger anxieties about what it means to have a body and be dependent on other bodies—on other people—for our very survival.

One of the reasons straight people have so many questions about LGBT people is that they lack accurate knowledge and understanding of their own sexuality. The questions they ask about LGBT people are often the unasked questions, fears, and wishes about their own sexuality and gender. Despite the prevalence of sex in US media and consumer culture, we still live in a culture that has a difficult time forthrightly discussing sexual issues. Myths are a way for these lurking anxieties and questions to be raised, discussed, and wishfully resolved.

Over the course of this book, readers will be taken through an encyclopedic range of materials. In this way, the book functions as

a crash course in ideas and literature about LGBT life. We will be drawing on court cases, scientific and sociological studies, statistical analyses, histories, literary texts, and popular culture. Readers can approach the twenty-one myths by following the loose topical clusters, or they can go off-grid and chart their own paths. Either approach will shed light on the domino effect of misunderstandings impeding LGBT people and lives. Although each myth works as a stand-alone essay, cumulatively we want to show some common features in how myths function culturally and personally, the shared assumptions and shared anxieties they draw upon and reproduce.

These common features will also reveal some surprising and discomforting similarities between LGBT people and "everyone else." The dichotomy pro-LGBT versus anti-LGBT does not accurately reflect the way people's shared anxieties and assumptions about sexuality and gender are embedded in myths. Straight people are not the only ones who debate "How stable are sexual or gender identities?" and "When does a child become sexual?" and "How does parenting shape gender roles?" Nor are LGBT people the only ones who ever wonder "Am I normal?" and "Is it okay to desire this?"

Simply dispelling myths does not mean we will emerge with a clearer understanding of who LGBT people "truly" are, what their lives are "really" like, or what gender and sexuality essentially "are." To do so would turn this book into its own myth-machine. If anything, the reader's understandings of this material will be challenged and made more complex. Myths about LGBT people are so numerous that many readers may have specific ones they want to read about, but that are not included here. We do not claim to be exhaustive; nor could we be. We focus here on what we believe to be the most persistent and pernicious contemporary myths about LGBT people. The kinds of questions we raise will give readers a toolkit that they can then bring to bear in answering other myths not discussed in this book.

One major purpose of this book is to highlight the costs of stak-

ing good feelings, smooth relations, equality, and acceptance on simplistic understandings and myths. Here are five ways to classify myths and the social compromises they enforce in the world:

(1) Myths uphold existing social rules and expectations. Political and religious rhetoric repeatedly hammer home the mythological connections between homosexuality, gender deviancy, and all that is bad in the world. By focusing on the social conditions through which these myths operate, we question who determines what is and is not "true" or "safe" about homosexuality and gender nonconformity, why this is so, and whom the myth benefits.

(2) Myths erase the complications and differences of everyday lives. It is imperative to remember that while identity is necessary for political movements, there is no single LGBT, or straight, experience. How we talk about inclusion must honor rather than erase differences. Not every myth in this book applies equally to L, G, B, and T people; some focus on the connection between them, and many myths focus almost entirely on one or another letter of this alliance. This approach reflects our interest in tracking how individual experience and identity vary along the lines of gender, class, race, and religion. We do this to better understand sexuality and gender as they are lived and continually reinvented.

(3) Myths make uncomfortable questions somebody else's problem. Often, people who see themselves as the majority will focus on those who are not the norm, such as homosexuals or transgender people, to avoid larger social and cultural issues that make them uncomfortable. This book thus offers a minisurvey of Western culture's racism, prejudice toward women, and exclusion of religious minorities, showing how debates over sexuality and gender often become placeholders—hot seats—for anxieties about difference.

(4) Myths keep secrets. In a kind of bait and switch, many myths work to take attention away from their proponents by associating their own hang-ups with another group. These other groups come to stand for what is threatening and, perhaps, threateningly liberating, for society. The belief that, because you are not LGBT,

these myths have nothing to do with you is itself a myth. Same-sex attraction, or sexual curiosity, and gender ambiguity run through daily encounters, even between people who are not LGBT. None of us sees the world in a completely straight way, no matter what we may tell ourselves.

(5) Myths inhibit logical discussion. A myth's persuasiveness does not depend on its coherence or rationality. A myth works because it taps into preconceived notions of what is good or bad, just or unjust, pleasurable or disgusting. In this sense, a myth appeals to gut-level, emotionally laden understandings of the world. The desires a myth appeals to—such as the desire to feel safe or normal—can trump inconvenient, contradictory facts. Myths thrive even in the face of new knowledge, because they are designed to answer to the open-ended quality of continued confusion. As such, they cannot explain away underlying anxieties; they actually feed on them.

Myths help negotiate the messiness of personal and cultural histories that shape how we live and understand our lives. In this way, all myths express some kind of truth. Foregrounding their inconsistencies so that we can think about them openly and honestly does not make them any less complicated, nor does this have to lead to further division between people. An old progressive-movement axiom holds that it's only disagreement within movements, and the discussion that results, that move them forward.

There are no easy, and often no definitive, answers for enacting change in the world. The bottom line is that being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender is part of being human, and simply being human is very complicated. We want all readers, LGBT and straight, to engage, grapple with, and debate the issues in this book. Moreover, because myths are a central means for how LGBT people understand themselves as sexual beings, we want people in the LGBT community to question their own beliefs and why they hold them. Individuals, like cultures, can hold conflicting understandings of sexuality and gender. Admitting the inconsistencies of our own selves, rather than insisting on quick and easy answers, can generate new and unheard of possibilities for living in the world.

MYTH 1

YOU CAN TELL WHO'S GAY
JUST BY LOOKING

You can certainly tell something just by looking, but what? In American slang, the word "gaydar" is commonly used to describe a special skill gay people possess, the ability to know at a glance whether someone else is gay or lesbian. In theory, gaydar decodes factors such as clothing, body language, facial expression, pitch of voice, and overall attitude.

Gay men and lesbians often discuss gaydar very tongue in cheek, as if it's a homosexual superpower of detection. But gaydar is more than a joke. It raises serious questions. In a world in which most people are presumed to be straight, how do lesbians and gay men find one another? Gaydar is invaluable in helping gay men and lesbians figure out whom they can safely flirt with. Is this a bromance or a potential romance? Is this a date or are we just having drinks after work?

Gaydar is, quite simply, a skill that everybody—gay or straight—has: intuition. We all have developed skills at reading signs and cues to assess whether someone is interested in us romantically or sexually. But intuition is not hard facts. How much do we need to know about a person to make a snap judgment? What kind of knowledge are we talking about here?

The myth that you can tell just by looking is part of an impulse to categorize and sort the world. The belief that it is possible to see,

or "get," someone's sexuality from visible bodily traits, or listen for it in the lilt of a male voice or the deep alto of a woman's, comes in part from the widely held view that sexuality, and maybe especially a marginalized sexuality, is evident in every facet of a person's being. When a gay man walks down the street, he does so like gay men do. When a lesbian laughs at a joke, she is laughing like lesbians do. The individual is seen as inseparable from the group identity. And, if a gay person commits a crime, there is a presumption that it is connected to that individual's gayness, and that all gay people may want to do this too. In contrast, crimes committed by people who are seen as "mainstream" are never understood to be caused by their belonging to a specific group. When was the last time an editorial argued that Wall Street fraud revealed the potential criminality or untrustworthiness of all white men? If you belong to the dominant group, you get to be an individual. You are not representative of an entire group.

We commonly sort out people by sexuality, race, sex, religion—"just by looking." We are also frequently inaccurate. None of these identities is as readily detectable as we think. Accurate or not, however, this sorting affects our conscious and unconscious behavior toward people. No matter who we are, we might act differently around a white person (or a person we think is white) than a black person (or a person we think is black). This is also true for someone we identify as a woman rather than a man. Our behavior may also change around someone whose religious identity is visible to us by a yarmulke, turban, veil, or cross. At its worst, for many heterosexuals, the belief that you can tell who's gay just by looking rests on the belief that gay people will somehow stand out from the crowd because they can never really be part of the crowd.

Gaydar may be useful for lesbian and gay flirting, but there is a history of heterosexual gaydar, too. And it isn't pretty. Gay people are now allowed to serve openly in the armed forces, but in World War II psychiatrists developed their own version of gaydar to catch them if they attempted to enlist. These doctors assessed whether men and women fit a psychologically based homosexual type. They conducted interviews and physical exams to see if a recruit expressed a sense of superiority or fear because both were associated with homosexuality. They looked for signs of traditional masculinity or effeminacy in men's bodies, mannerisms, emotional makeup, and interests.[1] They used similar calculations for women who enlisted. But this was more complicated since volunteering for military service already placed women into a traditionally nonfeminine role. Of the sixteen million men who enlisted, only about ten thousand were rejected after being identified as homosexual.[2] This was far, far fewer than the number of those who were actually homosexual or who would have homosexual relations during their time in the military.

Was the medical gaydar not working? In numerous cases the doctors let lesbians or gay men join because the military needed troops. But the larger reality was that doctors weren't seeing everything. Their measures were simply not reflective of how people displayed, never mind lived, their sexuality. Worse, the gender stereotypes these tests used led to discrimination and abuse. Some lesbians and gay men could easily "pass" to be accepted, but some could never pass—then or now—even if they wanted to.

The gender stereotypes of homosexuality were connected to then-contemporary explanations of homosexuality. In 1947, psychoanalyst Clara Thompson wrote that lesbianism was caused by improper parental role models and excess leisure time during childhood. Lesbian adults manifested these root causes in later life via gender nonconformity, or mannishness, and aimless lounging about. Thompson believed a trained specialist could spot lesbianism by looking for these signs. Psychiatrists also linked particular professions to these gender stereotypes. People, straight and gay, still equate florist with gay man and UPS driver with lesbian.

These gender stereotypes also shape ideas for straight people about how they are not supposed to look. Many heterosexuals are very careful not to exhibit "gay" looks or behavior. Straight men who go out to dinner together, sometimes referred to as a man date, may choose a restaurant that does not look or feel romantic.

Despite the negative effects of the World War II psychiatrists, not all gender role stereotypes are detrimental. Depending on who is looking, these stereotypes can help gay people find partners and even form communities. For example, by the 1930s, lesbians had created butch, femme, and kiki (indicating women who were neither butch nor femme) gender roles to indicate the kind of sexual partner they desired. Butch/femme borrowed aspects of male/female gender differences, but asserted them in a very different sexual and political context.

Gay men's and lesbians' uses of coded signs and stereotypes to spot others were not necessarily a fun game, but vitally necessary for safety. Until 2003, when the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*, same-sex sexual activity was illegal in many states. Gay men, for example, developed a system of codes so they could identify one another without being as easily identifiable to the law. They used types of dress, hairstyles, affectation, and gesture to communicate their identity. They might also use phrases with particular vocal stresses to convey interest. There were several meanings to the phrases "Have a light?" or "Nice day." In the first half of the twentieth century, when gay men needed to form communities in order to find sexual partners, they used these codes to meet in bars and restaurants; paradoxically, homosexual privacy could be had only in public.[5] Often the desire for this prohibited socializing, along with the complexity of these secret signs, gave gay male life an added erotic charge.

The history of how lesbian and gay men communicated desire between one another tells us that looking is only one aspect of telling. Messages between people make sense only in a larger context and in relation to others. What there is to tell depends on what you're looking for: immediate sexual pleasure, flirtation, conversation, or something else. People aren't always looking for the same thing. They may not even know what they're looking for. Desire and attraction are not straightforward or logical. They are filled with ambivalence, ambiguity, and mystery.

Eyes—how we look—communicate many things. A steadily held

gaze can be a form of sensual touch and invitation. Looking can also be a form of aggression, in the sense of staring someone down. Experts on body language say that we hold our gaze with people we like or we want to like us.[4] Eye contact is one of the most intimate forms of communication because a look or gaze can only be held between two people at a time. If someone does not meet and return our gaze, we assume that person is not interested. A long, lingering look between two people is often quickly sexualized. While we don't really know what other people are thinking, our imagination fills out their thoughts, making our desirous conjectures very real. We then wonder, "Will the other person imagine along with me?" And if or when this look becomes a stare, we worry, "Will the other person beat me up?" Looking brings to the surface many possibilities, some good, some dangerous.

Recent experiments on the science of gaydar have explored how we process our impressions, and even our desire. Mainstream media have frequently exaggerated the modest, preliminary conclusions of many of these studies and proclaimed, "Yes, gaydar is real!" As we've seen, there is something very real about it. We also must place all such claims about gaydar in context. These studies help us understand how much more complicated and unknowable that context might be.

Nicholas Rule, an openly gay psychologist, has taken the lead on exploring the science of gaydar. He has conducted experiments that ask participants to determine whether a person is gay or straight based on how that person appears in a photograph. The photos are taken from profiles of people who self-identified as gay, lesbian, or straight on dating and hookup sites. Participants look at these photos out of their original context. They have no clue whether a particular photo was taken from a gay, lesbian, or straight site. Fascinatingly, Rule's studies show that the accuracy rate in picking out lesbians and gay men from straight men and women is, on average, 64 percent. This result is "significantly better," he explains, than the 50 percent that chance guessing would yield. Most important, this accuracy rate holds steady even when a participant views only

a subject's eyes, excluding eyebrows and even wrinkles, or just the mouth. The race or gender of the participants who were trying to determine the subjects' sexual identity, or that of the subjects themselves, had no effect on the accuracy rate. Neither did racial stereotypes of, for example, Asian men as effeminate and, thus, gay, or of black men as masculine and, thus, straight.

The results of Rule's experiments become even more suggestive when you consider that the accuracy rate has remained the same when study participants view the images, including just the eyes or mouth, at millisecond speeds. We don't know what participants "saw" in a face or eyes or a mouth. All that these studies prove is that participants often connected something in these images with the photographic subjects' self-identified sexuality.

How can we explain these results? Could self-identifying as gay or straight affect how a person's eyes or mouth appear? Is that just magical thinking? Does the legibility of sexual identity in these studies have something to do with the subject "wanting" to be read as one of three supposedly distinct identities: lesbian, gay, or straight? Importantly, people who identified as bisexual were not accurately judged at levels higher than chance.

We all decipher desire—whether cruising in a bar, attending a work party, sitting in the bleachers at a ball game—according to certain rules. These rules vary with the situation and shape our actions and responses accordingly. Rules can take the form of signs that cue us in to what might be an appropriate response. But what happens when we do not have obvious cues or stereotypes to lean on? What are we supposed to do then? Can our very desire to know something about a person also function as a kind of constraint, or rule, that directs where and how we look? The fact that our imagination is at play here does not make gaydar any less accurate. Empathy works in a similar way. When we feel empathy for others, we often want them to know that we know how it feels to be in their shoes, because we've experienced something similar. Empathy allows people to infer or read emotion across cultures and groups. Of course, greater familiarity with a particular culture offers additional help. One of Rule's

studies shows that gay men are more consistently accurate in identifying homosexuality than straight men. Might desire and empathy be working together?

We want to know more. We want to see more. This does not mean we instinctively know what is behind a face. Nor does it mean that the totality and complexity of each person's sexuality can be seen with complete accuracy. Rather than thinking about a person's sexuality as his or her essence, or even as a containable and, thus, an easily identified and measurable part, we should think about sexuality as a process. When two people, gay or straight, are looking at each other with desire across a room, maybe they are asking themselves what they like about each other and who they really are.

If we think about sexuality in this way—as a form of unspoken communication, as an ongoing question rather than an answer—it may open up an intriguing possibility for all the manifestations of gaydar. At heart, maybe gaydar has nothing to do with seeing either gayness or gayly, but seeing desire. Can a person indicate by look and demeanor, even in a photograph, that he or she is approachable? Sexuality is a matrix of associations that paints a picture of each of us. Looking creates an intimate world of human relations. Can telling by looking, and the give and take between people, not just communicate desire but actually instigate it? In some ways, "You can tell just by looking" may be a very subversive idea. It opens the door to new conversations about what we see, how we see, and what it means to us. Gaydar is less about spotting (for good or ill) gay people than it is about how we all communicate desire.

The hysteria surrounding homosexuality in our culture betrays a deep-seated fear: gay people are not really different from other people but rather too much like everyone else—and maybe everybody is a little bit gay, and a little bit straight. The myth that you can tell just by looking reveals that sexuality and sexual desire do not so readily sort themselves into the categories of gay or straight. When you lock eyes with a person, whether or not you're attracted to each other, you can make sense of the world you create together only by leaving many preconceived ideas, beliefs, and identities behind.