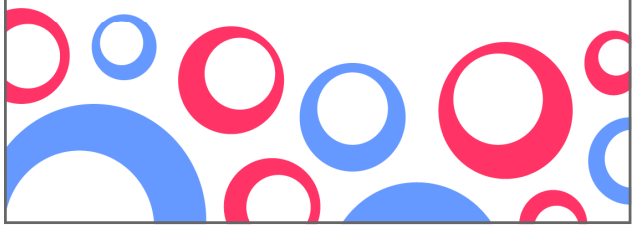
BEYOND MASCULINITY

ESSAYS BY QUEER MEN ON GENDER & POLITICS



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TREVOR HOPPE, EDITOR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people to thank, and so little time. First, I must thank the numerous activist and scholars who inspired me and ignited the passion to produce this anthology. I have been blessed to have had many mentors in my few short years, including the indomitable and sorely missed gay men's health activist, Eric Rofes, who sadly passed away in June of 2006; David Halperin, who has always been a willing and encouraging audience to even my most poorly thought out ideas; Sherryl Kleinman, whose class at UNC provoked my interest in feminist thought; and Pamela Conover, whose class on the politics of sexuality at UNC is the reason I ever became interested in writing about sexuality. Their impact on me is written all over this anthology.

Throughout my time as an activist and organizer, I have benefitted from the knowledge of many an overworked queer activist, including Chris Bartlett, Mandy Carter, Amber Hollibaugh, Sue Hyde, Suzanne Pharr, Tony Valenzuela, and Urvashi Vaid. Similarly, academic thinkers like Leo Bersani, Cathy Cohen, Patricia Hill Collins, Gayle Rubin, and Michael Warner have all deeply informed the way I think about sex, desire, and gender.

But perhaps most important to my continued efforts in making this anthology happen have been the various queer male friends who have constantly provided fuel for my fire at each stage in my life. Coming out in North Carolina at the age of 14 was no easy feat, and there are many gay men in Charlotte who made that more bearable, most notably James Bartlett and Jon Darcey. I am indebted to my friends from UNC Chapel Hill, who first provided a support network in which I could thrive, including Justin Carter, Win Chesson, Spencer Derrico, Zach Howell, John Jackson, Drew McLelland, Tommy Rimbach, Nick Shepard, Jon Tirpak, and Troy Wood. San Francisco brought new men into my life, equally as important: Jackson Bowman, Ethan Suniewick, and of course honorary gay men, Jennifer Feeney and Bonnie Zylbergold. Now in Michigan, I'm blessed to have the support and encouragement of my friends Andre Cavalcante (who generously composed and recorded the music for the *Beyond Masculinity* podcasts), Nat Coleman, and Maxime Foerster.

I want to take a special moment to thank two friends who have been particularly important to me as I've worked on this anthology. Troy Wood, who has been with me – through all the wonderful ups and agonizing downs – for eight years now. Troy, you are so beautiful, thoughtful, and deliciously irreverent. Don't ever change. And Jackson Bowman, who I knew would be important in my life the moment he slammed down his fork and knife at Sparky's Diner on Halloween night, outraged over my offhand complaints about a sexist professor. Jackson, thank you for listening to me and for never being afraid to say and represent what is needed.

Most of all, thank you to all the queer feminist men out there, who I know are out there living their lives at full volume. *Beyond Masculinity* is dedicated to each and every one of you.

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INTRODUCTION

TREVOR HOPPE

I started dreaming of *Beyond Masculinity* as an undergraduate taking Women's Studies classes that rarely featured men's voices. Feminist anthologies like *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation* and *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Challenging the Face of Feminism* dotted my bookshelf, but I was frustrated to discover that no similar anthology exists for and by men – let alone queer men.

This all began my senior year in college, a product of conversations with friend and fellow queer activist Nick Shepard at Chapel Hill. We had different politics – Nick was always much more of an anarchist-vegan-type, while my radicalism was mostly saved for sex politics – but we shared one desire: to produce smart feminist political analysis for men. When I moved to San Francisco the next year to start my Masters program, though, Nick and I lost touch. But I didn't forget about this anthology, or our dream.

I began researching the various small publishing houses that might be interested in publishing such a project, and sent a proposal out to six or seven editors across the country. These were mostly traditionally women's presses that had a history of publishing smart collections of feminist essays. The response was unanimous: no one was interested in my project. I had anticipated this; the publishing market of the 21st century is, to say the least, extremely unfriendly to projects like *Beyond Masculinity*. As a 23 year-old activist and academic, I didn't have the caché to warrant their investment in my idea.

I wasn't deterred. I had been designing websites since I was a teenager, and had recently begun blogging. I knew I had the skills to create something unique – something unlike anything that existed on the market. The recent proliferation of podcasting distribution networks, open source blogging software, and more generally of online media content had created the perfect opportunity to try something new. Best of all, the final product would be: 1) free; and 2) available to millions of people across the world.

With the help of friends and colleagues, I whipped up a call for submissions and began circulating it via LGBT college group listservs and on feminist online networks. I settled on the title "Beyond Masculinity," hoping to challenge potential contributors to provide accounts of our experiences as queer men that moved "beyond" masculinity as the sole framework for understanding maleness. It wasn't that I thought masculinity had exhausted its usefulness as an analytic lens – but rather that I wanted to resist relying on it as an organizing principle.

Over the next six months, I was thrilled to receive over fifty fantastic essays that covered a wide range of topics and experiences. I spent several months huddled in the middle of my living room with the essays scattered around me, carefully reading each piece and making difficult decisions as I whittled the pool down to just over twenty essays.

A bit overzealous, I was confident that I could pump this collection out in a few short months. In hindsight, I'm grateful that I was wrong. I spent the next year working with my group of contributors to polish their essays to perfection. I can't help but brag about this brilliant bunch of writers. I have been so inspired by their thoughts and tireless efforts throughout this process. A handful of them happily endured a year of repeated revisions. I must admit that I am a bit of a perfectionist, and this made for some tough head-butting at times. But, in the end, I think the final product that you see here has benefited tremendously from the hundreds of hours of work that we invested in these essays.

What you will find in this collection is a tremendously diverse group of queer men thoughtfully reflecting on their experiences – and using those experiences to build powerful analyses of their social worlds. There are beautiful, poetic essays that are as elegant as they are insightful, such as Qwo-

Li Driskill's "Shaking Our Shells: Cherokee Two-Spirits Rebalancing Our World." There are ridiculously funny stories that will make you laugh out loud while simultaneously challenging your ideas about gender and sexuality, like Brian Lobel's "Penis. Vagina. Penetration. The End." And then there are incredibly thought-provoking, incisive pieces that move our ways of thinking about maleness and queerness so far forward that, even after well over a dozen readings, I'm still finding new nuggets of wisdom along the way. Both Rob Day-Walker's brilliant and challenging piece, "Jesus of San Francisco: Can Jesus be a Resource for Queer Masculinities?", and Daniel Solís y Martínez's thoughtful and incredibly useful essay, "Mestiza/o Gender: Notes Towards a Transformative Masculinity", are representative here.

And this is just the beginning. Perhaps what I love most about this collection of essays – and what I hope you as readers will benefit from – is the variety of both perspective and form that are represented in this collection. While all of the essays here draw on personal experience to build (both implicitly and explicitly) powerful arguments about gender and sexuality, this collection is big enough to hold an 80 year-old gay man's reflections on living life "in between" maleness and femaleness (Autrey's "Somewhere in Between"); a gay man's first-person account of stripping for the first time (Jost's "Stripping Towards Equality"); and a transgender gay man's plea for bottoms to please (Macey's "From Top to Bottom"). There is so much good stuff here. I know that you're going to enjoy this collection.

Questions remain about the future for *Beyond Masculinity* – questions that I'm not yet prepared to answer. What happens, for instance, in ten years to this website? Or, for that matter, in two? Because of its nature as an online creature, adding new essays to this collection is entirely possible. Let me use this space here, then, to encourage savvy queer writers out there to contact me with ideas or drafts. I'm a willing audience. I recognize that there are holes to be filled (no pun intended, really) in this collection. Fill them. This is first and foremost a project in motion. With your continued investment, we can keep it moving.

Finally, I would be remiss or perhaps foolish to not end by soliciting your generous donations. *Beyond Masculinity* is a volunteer-run project, and fees associated with it come directly out of my pocket. No one involved has ever been paid for their work on this project. If you enjoy this collection, as I know you will, please log on to our website to make a small donation to keep this project moving in the coming years.

Don't forget to log onto our website to comment on the essays you read, or to download audio recordings of most of the essays included. Thanks for reading. Enjoy *Beyond Masculinity*!

Trevor Hoppe
April 30, 2008
Ann Arbor, MI

I. BEYOND BINARY GENDER

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

WILLIAM AUTREY

"While I am attracted to both masculine women and feminine men, I find that I am stimulated by the male body differently than that of the female body. After a lifetime of attempting to fit in – by trying to reject and stifle my unique sexual passions -- I've concluded that I inhabit an area where the dichotomous poles of male and female sexual experience overlap – a zone of sexual desire 'somewhere in-between'."

As an 80-year-old man who has been marred three times (yet sexually attracted to men all my life), I feel I have had the good fortune to have loved both men and women during my (as yet unconcluded) lifetime. I do not feel "transgender" per se, but as if two different people cohabitate in one body, reacting differently in different situations. Neither do I feel "transsexual", just blessed with the ability to explore the richness of an unencumbered sexual life well into my later years.

While I am attracted to both masculine women and feminine men, I find that I am stimulated by the male body differently than that of the female body. After a lifetime of attempting to fit in – by trying to reject and stifle my unique sexual passions -- I've concluded that I inhabit an area where the dichotomous poles of male and female sexual experience overlap – a zone of sexual desire "somewhere in-between".

If you were to meet me you might notice that my appearance and voice is neither male nor female, but rather a curious mixture of both. I do not feel that I strongly belong to either group, making it hard to fit within the social priorities that our society insists upon. To be certain, I was born with male genitalia, but higher up in the abdominal area than other typically "masculine" men. I have more breast tissue than most men, with nipples so sensitive that they have become the key to my sexual arousal and response at this later stage in life (in the absence of an erection, stimulating my nipples can often produce multiple, long-lasting orgasms). I have noticed that some men have no sensitivity in their breasts, while many others have only limited sensitivity. And if pornographic portrayals are to be believed, men with sensitive nipples appear to dominate gay pornography.

The embarrassment of having a smaller than average sized penis located higher in my body than what was considered normal was difficult to deal with as a teenager, but as time went on, it did not seem to be a hindrance to having sex with men or women. And while my sexual experiences with women were often less than outstanding, my sexual experiences with men didn't seem to suffer from lack of size. Perhaps it is a cliché, but a romantic feeling of love for my partner definitely has to be present in order for me to respond sexually with men or women, otherwise it is difficult for me to become aroused. Masturbation would often provide the only satisfactory sexual experience for me and considerable manipulation of my nipples while massaging the head of my penis would be necessary for full release. For me, this results in strong, lengthy multiple orgasms -- just as I might experience if I were a woman massaging her clitoris. When my sexual partner stimulates my breasts, I don't have trouble at all in responding sexually with either sex.

I've often wondered whether these elements common to both sexes -- nipples and genitalia -- are the "missing link" for those of us "in-between". After all, isn't it only a specific mix of various hormones found in both males and females that makes a child distinctly male or distinctly female? Not every baby will have the necessary mix; variations are bound to occur in a percentage of all newborns. Those of us who believe we were born with a balance of male and female hormones can only be glad that our "abnormality" allows us to relate to being both male and female and follow our sexual bliss with whatever sex that might be.

In the gay community, I have observed a wide range of men whose appearance and mannerisms are very feminine, very masculine, or somewhere

"in-between". My observations of human sexual behavior tell me that there is no such creature as someone who is "totally male" or "totally female," regardless of body structure and our attempts to separate everyone into those two extreme categories. I often wonder whether this purely intellectual, dichotomous categorization of the sexes is an attempt to buttress the current social/religious value placed on procreation – and to ostracizing people like myself who are genetically in-between male and female.

Physical gender often fools us into believing that it is the only criteria for deciding how we live our lives. Many children are born without identifiable genitalia and their true gender identity only erupts at puberty, when their emotions collide with their physical development. The all too familiar (and all too painful) social anxieties of junior high causes many young people to hide their true feelings and true sexual orientation, creating a phobia of anything "not normal". The trauma that many differently gendered young people endure greatly affects how young people develop their personality and sexual identity, threatening their safety and sanity at the same time.

As a bisexual man born in the early 20th century, I grew up in a society that pressured me to choose a heterosexual lifestyle and conform in order to survive and succeed within its norms. The social changes of the past 60 years has lead to a better acceptance of those of us who are "queer" but is just beginning to acknowledge and accommodate those of us with both male and female inner selves. Society is slowly warming to the idea that people ought to be free to follow their sexual orientation and desires without choosing a gender role or lifestyle based on the approval from others.

Growing up in the 1930s in a small rural town was not the best situation for exploring unconventional sexual identities. During my teenage years, I did not feel comfortable to freely explore my sexuality with either men or women. By the time I was 25, I dove headfirst into a marriage that I was not prepared for in order to put an end to my gender anxieties. So began a life of denial.

I hid my true feelings and desire for people of the same sex my entire life, unable to let what was inside me merge with my daily life. Being the son of a domineering mother, I tended to choose strong willed, domineering wives. In such a household the gender roles were often reversed and I ended up taking care of the domestic duties while trying to fulfill my socially imposed role of father and household provider. I managed to perform sexually and produce two beautiful daughters, yet I remained sexually confused and desiring of sexual contact with men. I loved my wives and, being a devoted father and loving spouse, I didn't act on my same-sex desires with others, yet I indulged my same-sex fantasies while masturbating, prompting plenty of self-imposed guilt.

In my fantasies the men I desired to be with embodied the most masculine traits possible. Secretly, I was hoping that somehow, perhaps by "fantasy osmosis", I could satisfy both my masculine and feminine needs. I yearned to abandon my "male" role and embrace that of the female, being enveloped by that which I felt I was not.

Based on my life experiences with all kinds of people, I've found that, although some people are truly exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, a great majority feel some level of attraction and desire to both sexes. The men of my era – the "grey flannel suit generation" – were expected to be manly men and take care of their wives and children. The hidden lives of several of my male friends came to light only after I reached retirement age. A close childhood friend (whose wedding I attended during the 50s) recently contacted me after his wife died to tell me that he and his boyfriend were moving to Key West! If I had known that he was gay, I probably would have taken him up on his offer to go hunting all those years ago. I wistfully think of all those extended trips he took with other "buddies" of his. I suspect that the *Brokeback Mountain* story is not unique: In the woods no one will be wiser as to how physically intimate two men might be.

I have spent most of my 80 years trying to understand why I was born into the body I was and why I feel the way I do toward both men and women. It wasn't until recently that I discovered that I was not "abnormal",

but part of the entirety of the human condition. Just as there is great variation in the human form, there is variety in human sexual desires. Once society acknowledges these sexual variations, people with complimentary sexual desires, gay or straight, will be free to openly build their lives together and satisfy their sexual nature.. And once society is open and honest about sexuality, the surprises and disastrous repercussions of mispairings and marriages based on misunderstandings, sexual denial, and outright deceit will begin to fade.

My life's path has been determined by what I had to do in order to survive until I was old and secure enough to ignore what society wanted. In my dotage, I am celebrating my true inner self and feel really and truly free for the first time in all these years.

The title of this anthology, "BEYOND MASCULINITY," implies that perhaps the feminine in all of us can be developed and celebrated, if that is our inclination. We're all "queer," really. Very few people measure up to the idealized roles that our culture dictates for our bodies. Suppressing that part of us that society has, in the past, rejected may not be the norm in succeeding generations. Many more young people are entering puberty ready to express their true sexuality with emotional openness and honesty. Depending on the social, parental, and peer reactions they encounter (as well as pressure to conform), they will either proceed into adulthood with sexual maturity or may become maladjusted based on the sexual experiences and fantasies of their youth. A yearning to return to that earlier time of exploration and sexual freedom can often be inappropriately acted out later in life. Society has a role to play in seeing that everyone expresses his or her sexuality, whatever it might be, in a healthy, honest, and emotionally open way.

My story is not unique. In all cultures there are men and women who live with a blend of masculine and feminine striving to exist beyond the traditional masculine / feminine dichotomy of society. Most people want to create something of permanence and value in their lives. Yet not everyone needs to produce children to achieve that. Those who don't are free to channel their creative energies into other areas that may contribute to and

improve society. Love has no gender preference. From what I observe about the younger generation, they are embracing the freedom of a "bisexual" identity with androgynous looks, gender neutral activities, and couplings based not on social/genetic "survival" but on attraction alone. I hope that future generations will be able to explore and express their sexuality freely and not carry fear, shame, denial, and frustrated desires into their adult years.

We are all products of our times and, at least during my lifetime, the times have changed dramatically. I discovered my true nature far too late in life to openly be who I was meant to be and create the life I truly desired. Watching the youth of today openly discuss their sexuality and express their inner desires at an age when it really matters (adolescence) gives an old man hope that the next generation will push society "beyond masculinity" into a new era of sexual acceptance and emotional openness. A new era is coming; if only I could be here to see it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Autrey is an 80-year-old gay man, military veteran, astrologer, and life-long resident of Boulder, Colorado. Pressured by the social and sexual mores of the mid- to late-20th century, Bill married three times before returning to and accepting the realization he initially had at age 17 -- that he was sexually attracted to men.

EXPOSING MASCULINITIES: MY JOURNEY AS A QUEER ARTIST

SEAN GYSHEN FENNELL

"At age 14, I underwent a double mastectomy as a result of gynocomastia, a disorder in some boys that results in the formation of breasts at puberty. The surgery left me with large scars across my chest and around my nipples. These scars represent my own painful experience with non-normative gender. These photographs attempt to take control back over my body in a way that celebrated that experience while acknowledging the pain."

This essay chronicles my experience as a young queer artist. The narrative of what follows reflects my creative process; it begins by speaking intellectually about my reasons for making art and begins to become more personal as the work develops. I conclude by discussing some of the artists and theorists that have guided me through this creative process. While my works do not always have a common aesthetic, they are interconnected, and the linear form of this essay reveals the connections between the various pieces and the momentum of their progression.

Figure 1. *One-Sex Model* (installation), 2005, lazerlight prints mounted on plexiglass

I am fascinated by the actual nature of gender and investigate how it relates to ideas surrounding self-representation. This prompted my, "One-Sex Models." In the project I attempted to find and photograph people who I felt were, to varying degrees, existing outside gender norms. I did not want every model to be completely androgynous but to have an element, through either physical structure, gaze or pose, of gender ambiguity; I wanted to blur the categories rather than create a new one. I chose to photograph each individual on a white background with a soft but revealing light to give a stark, yet glamorous aesthetic to the work in order to call attention to and explore the personal androgyny of the models. The title "One-Sex Models" was meant to reference the notion of gender as a continuum rather than a distinct categorization[1]. I found that by questioning the validity of gender I am also, and perhaps more effectively, addressing the validity of sexuality.

[1] Feminist theory specifically on the topic of gender formation is of particular relevance to my work. One of the most influential texts I read was Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and*

Figure 2. ***Transitional Faces (study 1)*****, 2005, digital photograph, make-up, acrylic**

While creating "One-Sex Models" I was also working with some of the same images in an aesthetically and conceptually different fashion to create "Transitional-Faces." This work explores externalized psychological states of how some queer men explore gender. From firsthand experience and observations in the queer community such exploration can take many forms ranging from drag to hyper-masculinity. I chose to investigate the effeminate side of this exploration, which mimics my own experience. I worked with the most "masculine" of the images in order to give the images more gender range and conflict. To achieve this effect I used paint and make-up on the surface of the images to put the faces into tumultuous states of drag.

Genderfrom the Greeks to Freud. Laqueur shows that the Pre-Enlightenment concept of gender was more ambiguous. It was believed "that inappropriate behaviors might really cause a change of sex" (Laqueur, 126). The classic story of Marie-Germain serves as a clear example of natural sex change. The story is about a girl named Marie who was soon to be Germain. During puberty Marie jumped across a ditch while chasing a pig, which ruptured the ligaments that held 'her,' (now 'his') male genitalia inside (Laqueur, 127). Thus Marie became known as a boy by the name of Germain, " a well-built young man with a thick red beard" (Laqueur, 127).

Though aesthetically disparate both "One-Sex Models" and "Transitional Faces" were created during the same time and used the same models. These works revealed an interesting dynamic in my art: the psychological state creating self-representation. This realization would not surface again until "Sewing the Façade" and "Veiled," which will be discussed further in the paper.

Figure 3. ***Beauty Monsters*** **(installation), 2006, digital prints**

After the previous projects I began to investigate the various sources that may inform ideas of self-representation to create "Beauty Monsters." I became particularly interested in the sources that directly depicted the notions of hyper-beauty and body: fashion, fitness and porn magazines. I began obsessively consuming and cutting up these magazines and would then spend hours piecing together various disembodied parts to create grotesque figures out of idealized gendered forms. I took great care when constructing these images to make them as visually seamless as possible to heighten the work's plausibility. These figures were then scanned and printed in various scales from life-size to the approximate size they would have originally been in a magazine. In the final presentation, they were pasted to a gallery wall to

appear as if an army of Beauty Monsters was about to march into the space of the viewer. Among my constructed figures I included one image that was directly scanned from the magazine. The inclusion of this figure both highlighted the ridiculousness of fashion images and made my constructions more believable. The intent of "Beauty Monsters," beyond an investigation of these sources, is to again provide visual depictions of a queer gender continuum. In this way "Beauty Monsters" is conceptually similar to "One-Sex Models."

Figure 4. ***Iconoclast,*** **2005, mixed-media**

While working with ideas surrounding gender, a series I had created previously, titled "Iconoclast" began to receive some controversial press.[2] This was the result of some conservative activists objecting to my work being publicly place at my undergraduate university. This caused them to photograph my work and appeal to several conservative media personalities. Lars Larson, a conservative radio talk show host, picked up the story. I was notified by some of my friends in Oregon and subsequently called *The Lars Larson Show* and was interviewed (see Appendix 1, "Interview Transcript"). After this I made my own appeal to the liberal press and was published in *The*

[2] My first polemically queer series is "Iconoclast." In these works I photographed homosexual couples/individuals and paired them with patron saints such as Saint Martin de Porre for social justice, Saint Joseph for marriage, Saint Patrick for excluded people, and Saint Anthony of Padua for oppressed people. Text from the recently passed amendments prohibiting gay marriage surrounded the figures and saints. The images were then gold-leafed and made to resemble Byzantine icons. The purpose of the work is not only to draw parallels between religion and legislation but also to highlight inherent hypocrisies.

Advocate and picked-up by other small Oregon-based newspapers. Through being in *The Advocate,* I was contacted by members of the Catholic gay community. This was around the time that Pope John Paul II died and Pope Benedict XVI was appointed. His appointment is the source of turmoil amongst gay Catholics, especially after the Church issued a new document on the church's view on homosexuality. I could not resist making a documentary about being queer and Catholic in this turbulent time in the Catholic Church. While this seemed a departure from the work I was engaged in I felt compelled to make the documentary "A Place at the Table."

Figure 5. ***A Place at the Table*** **(video still), 2006**

Despite my connections I began to face a great deal of resistance from both the straight and gay Catholic community. The gay community was afraid they would face discrimination if they were part of the documentary and the straight community did not want the issue talked about. Fortunately, I had become friends with Brother Brian Halderman, a 'religious' in The Society of Mary (a sect of the Roman Catholic Church), who was one of the first openly gay people to enter religious life in the Catholic Church. He became the largest supporter of "A Place at the Table." He put me in contact with many other gay Catholics, over fifty people in all, of which only seven allowed me to interview them. To gain more familiarity I began to be an active member

of the gay Catholic community. I volunteered at Catholic booths at queer events, sang in the Catholic choir for the Sounds of Acceptance benefit, and attended Peace and Justice meetings (a gay friendly Catholic organization). By doing these activities I not only was able to meet more gay Catholics but gained firsthand knowledge of the discrimination gay Catholics have to endure, both from the queer community and within the Church. This helped me gain the proper perspective for the work.

After I had interviewed several gay Catholics and the leader of Peace and Justice (Sister Marge O'Gorman), I realized that I had to find someone who could set the stage of the documentary by laying out the official Church doctrine on homosexuality. This proved to be a complicated process of dealing with Catholic bureaucracy from the Archbishop down to the ostensibly heterosexual Father James Knapp, the leader of Courage (the official Catholic Group for people with homosexual tendencies). While I was attempting to get an interview from someone inside the Church about the doctrine, I had to be very careful to not draw too much attention to some of the other organizations and people I had already been in contact with. I did not want to cause the gay friendly organizations to be shut down. Eventually, I was granted an official Archbishop sanctioned interview with Father Knapp. The interview was tense, his speech was guarded and he recorded me as I recorded him.

"A Place at the Table" runs approximately ten minutes and is comprised of interviews shot in the interviewee's personal spaces such as, a home or place of worship. They are linked together with symbolic footage of Catholic imagery, mostly taken from the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis and the Saint Francis Xavier College Church. This documentary addresses the Church's doctrine in contrast to the actual experience of living as a homosexual in the Church.

After working closely with the gay Catholic community, I wanted to return to working with ideas of gender, experience and the body. I also felt it was time for me to work more directly from personal experiences.

Figure 6. *Sewing the Façade*, 2006, digital print, thread and needle

At age 14, I underwent a double mastectomy as a result of gynocomastia, a disorder in some boys that results in the formation of breasts at puberty. The surgery left me with large scars across my chest and around my nipples. These scars represent my own painful experience with non-normative gender. These photographs attempt to take control back over my body in a way that celebrated that experience while acknowledging the pain.

Out of the images I had, I found one that struck me; my eyes were closed, my expression a mix between ecstasy and pain – my gesture dynamic. I wanted to highlight the gesture and emotion while emphasizing the scars. I came to the idea of sewing red thread into the image over the scars to accentuate the emotional consequences of the surgery. During the process of sewing I noticed that the gesture in the photograph was similar to the action I was making. This realization caused me to connect the thread to my hand in the image. The thread and image seemed to visually merge into each other.

Figure 7. *Sewing the Façade*, 2006, digital prints, needles and thread

For the final presentation of what came to be known as "Sewing the Façade" I chose five images, printed them life-size on matte finished paper and sewed into them with red thread. On some of the images I sewed strictly over the scars from my surgery and in others I responded less literally to the image. All of the images are of me from the mid-torso up, on a black background, with my eyes closed. The thread is sewn into my chest at various locations and connects to my hands to make it appear as if the image is sewing itself. I left the needle on the thread dangling outside the frame to further the illusion and to break the frame of the picture. The use of red thread and the inclusion of the needle is of particular importance to the work. They are meant to be read beyond the literal reference of blood and surgery, to be healing yet destructive, concealing while highlighting, masculine and feminine. These elements get to the core of what I want "Sewing the Façade" to visually articulate.

"Sewing the Façade" addresses ideas surrounding the body in relationship to self-expression, queerness and gender. It celebrates the beauty of the non-normative while documenting the pain afflicted by the normative ideal.

Figure 1. *Veiled*, 2007, video installation

Most recently, I created the video installation "Veiled." The work consists of large amounts of various white fabrics suspended in the middle of a dark space with a video projection coming from inside. The initial view is of a large circular glowing white satin form. There is a part in the fabric that serves as an entry revealing the inner part of the installation. Inside there is soft gathered chiffon. From behind a single sheet of sheer fabric a video of myself is projected in small scale. Since the fabric is sheer and the projection is from behind, the flowing fabric lining the structure also has a larger less sharp version of the video projected on it. The rear projection is also what gives the exterior fabric a glow, even though no discernable image can be seen from the outside.

The video projects an image of me nude from the shoulders up slowly spinning as thin red threads bind my face and neck. The video begins with a few threads on my face and over approximately six minutes they form large ribbon-like bands over my eyes, mouth and neck, at this point the footage reverses and begins to unbind me; It is meant to be seen as non-linear and perpetual. I chose to edit the clips with very slow cross-fades in order to maintain the meditative feel of the work and reduce the loop from two hours to twelve minutes.

To me, gender is learned and not innate. The video references gender as a performance by depicting the nature of the constraints of normative gender with the slow building of the thread over time to completely deform and constrict my face and neck. The looping shows how one can never truly escape these constraints: first they appear invisible or inconsequential, but over time they will build up until they completely conceal a person.

While there are several potential reads for the function of the fabric structure; I am most interested in it as a veil and in reference to theatricality. The veil is currently a highly debated and controversial topic with reference to the Islamic tradition of veiling women. To me the veil is an overt symbol of oppression, a garment that binds and obscures. I hope to tap into this debate and the possible reads of the veil. I am using the reference of the veil by literally veiling the image from viewers by projecting the image through many layers of fabric to make the initial image unreadable but aesthetically seducing. I then invite the viewers to come inside the satin veil. Once inside they are then confronted by a crisp and disturbing image of a person being bound by thread. The harshness of the image is contrasted by the ethereal nature of the large softer image being projected onto the chiffon lining. This duality is important as it articulates the duality of what is perceived with gender and what is experienced.

The reference of the theater, with the fabric alluding to a curtain, parallels the concealing of the veil but speaks directly to the idea of gender as a performance. This is also integral to the work because the clear image is eventually revealed. In this way the connotations of the veil and the theater, in reference to gender as performance, combine to make the potential interpretation of the work more accurate to my intention.

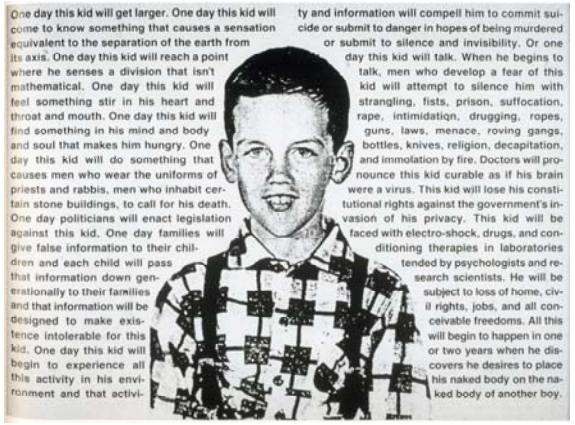

Figure 9. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled [One day this kid...],* 1990, gelatin-silver print, 30 x 40"

A Foundation for Artistic Practice: Discussion of Influences

My discovery of David Wojnarowicz was the result of two important moments in my life: coming out as queer, and making the decision to pursue being an artist. I immediately became enthralled by his work and pored over it for months. His writings are coarsely honest and his imagery complex and loaded with meaning. The works that combined his writing and images became of particular interest to me. For example "Untitled [One day this kid…]" is full of rage and hope. The story is moving and the image of the innocent looking boy (a photograph of David Wojnarowicz as a boy) surrounded by the text work together to produce a powerful account of his life in a manner that reaches beyond mere autobiography. Above all I value and carry with me his unapologetically personal approach to art making. As Dan Cameron states:

> He was a genuine idealist in the sense that he spoke up loudly for causes that he believed in and never hesitated to make his art a vehicle for his political convictions. But he was also a visionary artist in the sense that his works were often triggered by

> private experiences or dreams, and he was especially fond of creating links between ecstatic experience and polemical confrontation (Cameron, 3).

Wojnarowicz seemed to give me permission to speak loudly and never hesitate. I began to create art that explicitly dealt with my personal experiences, often in an overtly political way. Working this way was an extremely important step for my work. I still work from personal experiences but have begun to move away from being as aggressively political and as overtly autobiographical.

Figure 10. David Wojnarowicz, *Fuck You Faggot Fucker*, 1984, black-and-white photographs, acrylic, and collage on masonite, 48 x 48"

The way I approach materials and object making mirrors that of Wojnarowicz. I do not focus exclusively on aesthetics or issues and I use a variety of media as a way to bring new layers of meaning and context to my work (Cameron, 4). However, visually my work is very different from Wojnarowicz's. This is especially true in my more recent work where I have sought to have a very simple and elegant aesthetic as opposed to Wojnarowicz's complexly charged and emotionally raw style.

Figure 11. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear,* 1975, oil crayon on photograph

Adrian Piper's essay "The Joy of Marginality" speaks eloquently about passing as mainstream, yet being marginal to it, and the perspective this relationship provides (Piper, 236). I also attempt to utilize this privileged perspective in my work to comment on the mainstream thought process. Although the source of my marginality is due to being queer and not my ethnic identity, my awareness and response corresponds with Piper's.

> I become aware of my racial identity when someone brings it to my attention. This happens, for example, whenever someone makes a racist, sexist, homophobic, or ethnic slur of any kind. That brand of irrational hostility, no matter where it is explicitly directed, reminds me of my vulnerability as a black person (Piper, 233).

This is analogous to how I perceive my sexuality and gender and react to any statement of bigotry; it makes me feel vulnerable and enraged. My work is in response to these feelings, as is Piper's. This perspective affects my work directly; I use this perspective to channel my experiences in productive ways and to take back power in order to not be confined (Piper, 234).

Beyond Piper's writings, her interventionist performance based work and how it functions is of great importance. In "The Mythic Being" she created an alter-ego (a young black male) and walked around public places asserting this false identity, reflecting the root of the discrimination she feels as a black female. This speaks not only about racial discrimination, but can be

read as showing gender as performance. It is also of interest to my working method in that she photographs these performances as documentation of the event and then through an additive process uses that documentation to make an art object. Much of my work is based in performance, and the photographs of the event are altered. These alterations, such as the adding of thread to "Sewing the Façade," turn the documentation into autonomous art object.

The purpose of Piper's work makes viewers aware of their own racism. She constructs relationships with the viewers to highlight their xenophobia. While my work is not as immediate and more specifically addresses ideas surrounding sexuality and sex, our perspective and intent is similar.

Figure 12. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew,* 1599, oil on panel

While my ideologies and some working methods parallel both Wojnarowicz and Piper, aesthetically there are few similarities. Visually I draw from such artists as Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe, both of whom are used as examples in Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* where he talks about the idea of transgressive beauty and its "subversive potential" (Hickey, 13).

In my work, I look to the gestures, tenebrism, and imagery of Caravaggio. Today he is seen as a maker of beautiful paintings. However, Hickey argues that during the time of Caravaggio his works were seen as political due to their subject matter surrounding the religious debate of intercession.

> [W]e must ask ourselves if Caravaggio's 'realism' would have been so trenchant of his formal accomplishments so delicately spectacular, had his contemporary political agenda, under the critical pressure of a rival Church, not seemed so urgent (Hickey, 18)?

He argues that Caravaggio used aesthetics to lull his viewers into contending with its subject matter. I draw from this baroque aesthetic in my lighting and color palette. I want my viewers to be visually seduced by the work and therefore made to contend with the more socio-political content of the work.

Figure 13. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Annamirl and Wim,* 1984, silver-gelatin print

Robert Mapplethorpe used beauty's inherent visual draw as a means to communicate ideas of sexuality that run contrary to the mainstream. Hickey argues that the subject matter alone was not what caused conservative

activists of the time to react so violently, but that he depicted the acts as beautiful.

> It was not that men were making it then, but that Robert [Mapplethorpe] was 'making it beautiful.' More precisely, he was appropriating a Baroque vernacular of beauty that predated and, clearly, outperformed the puritanical canon of visual appeal espoused by the therapeutic institution (Hickey, 22).

If one represents marginal experiences or people in an unappealing or ugly way then there is nothing being said that runs contrary to mainstream thought. By using beauty while photographing queer subject matter one subverts the mainstream gaze simply by portraying what is widely seen as negative in a positive light.

Another major aspect to my work is how queerness is manufactured. Michael Warner claims:

> The closet is better understood as the culture's problem, not the individual's … It is experienced by lesbians and gay men as a private, individual problem of shame and deception. But it is produced by the heteronormative assumptions of everyday talk. It feels private. But, in an important sense it is publicly constructed (Warner, 52).

Warner touches upon several main preoccupations in my work. I aim to explore how queerness is mediated and defined by the heteronormative culture, and to reveal those definitions and rearticulate them from a queer perspective. I see the body as the site of mediation between this heteronormative culture and the internal psyche of the individual. The body, like Warner's idea of the closet, is experienced as an individual place of shame and deception, but is ultimately publicly constructed. In my work, I strive to depict the internal experiences of heteronormativity on queer bodies. The depiction of this struggle is an attempt to regain power over the effects of heteronormativity.

Through this discussion, I have put myself in dialogue with some of the key artists, cultural critics and art theorists that have informed my art making. From them I have gained a great deal; from Laqueur an understanding of the true nature of gender, from Wojnarowicz an unapologetically personal

approach, from Piper an embracement of the perspective and experience of being Other, from Hickey an understanding of the role and power of subversive beauty, from Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe examples of how to create images of polemical beauty, from Warner a critical understanding of heteronormativity. In this sense my work can be considered a branch of the Politics Identity Art Movement. While I draw from these ideologies, I am moving away from an overtly political stance to work with an emphasis on cultural commentary in an attempt to make visible the mechanisms by which people's experiences are mediated and how they manifest.

Thus far, my work has been engaged with a critical yet celebratory investigation of queerness, with a particular emphasis on gender formation and experience. For me to achieve this, it is crucial that I begin by working from my own personal experiences in an attempt to transcend the autobiography, without discounting it. To effectively communicate my ideas I strive for visually seductive work that contains cultural commentary.

I am still fascinated by, and will continue to work with, the mechanisms that inform gender. However, I have been investigating feminine aspects and experiences of queer gender. While this is an important aspect to my work, I have come to the realization that masculinity has an analogous relationship to the invisible mechanisms that cause systems of oppression. I plan to use this perspective and to begin investigating masculinity and how it functions in relationship to queerness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean Gyshen Fennell is queer artist and activist originally from the Pacific Northwest. He attended Willamette University in Salem, Oregon and recently completed his graduate work at Washington University in St. Louis, Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts. Fennell is currently living in Denver, Colorado and teaching at the University of Denver, School of Art.

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Appendix 1, "Interview Transcript

Las Larson: Sean Gyshen Fennell is an artist at Willamette University. How are you doing Sean?

Sean Gyshen: Doing pretty well Lars, how are you?

LL: Glad to have you on the program but I'm not real happy about that artwork. I mean it's a private university you can put what you want on the walls. I've had a lot of people trying to figure out what this artwork means. These naked figures of people who appear to be in embraces that would indicate they are homosexuals and then torn up pages of something at the bottom of the photos. Why don't you tell us what it's all about.

SG: I'd love to. First of all the goal of the icon project is to yield art that investigates societal constructs and visually stimulates the viewer and to facilitate discussion. Which is why I am very happy to be on your show because that is what the work is intended to do. The text that is in the background is actually some of the measures that were passed, excluding gay marriage, Measure 36 and the smaller icons that are below are the Patron saints such as St. Anthony of Padua or St. Patrick who are the patron saints of the oppressed people and excluded people. And the figures in fact, in the icons are homosexuals and its trying to draw lines between these and investigate the current political and religious climate.

LL: Does one of those figures work for Kate Brown, the senator?

SG: I am not familiar with that.

LL: Sure, you don't know the people you took naked pictures of?

SG: I know them very well but I don't know what they are doing now. I actually moved to St. Louis. I am attending graduate school.

LL: OK So here's the concern I have. Why would you show a ballot measure passed by Oregonians overwhelmingly torn up at the bottom of the picture like that?

SG: Well, it is actually not torn up. It's in its completion there is gold leafing over the entire image which I guess gives it an appearance of being torn.

LL: So it's not really torn up?

SG: No, it is not torn up. It is in its completion.

LL: It's in completion?

SG: All the text is there it is just that some of it is obscured with gold leaf.

LL: Okay, So it wasn't intended to look torn up.

SG: No

LL: Okay. Now the figures appear to be posed in a way that I thought it looked like icons like you'd seen in Russian icon, the little kind of circles around the head and a little gold leaf.

SG: Exactly

LL: So you are depicting homosexual figures in photos as saints.

SG: I am referencing Byzantine Icons and religion through those forms. I do not consider the objects to be venerated in any way. I am merely using visual language.

LL: No, now what's the visual language when you depict homosexual figures in a photo as saints?

SG: I am referencing the saint figures as well as drawing attention the fact there are saints within the religion such as St. Anthony of Padua for oppressed people yet the religion in of itself is oppressing individuals and saints themselves have been martyred. And...

LL: (Interrupts) How is religion oppressing homosexual people?

SG: Well, I mean it's pretty clear within the legislation

and in your show that all Christians should be offended by images like the ones I made.....

LL: Well no no, I am bothered by images if they if they if they are comments on religion by taking homosexual figures and portraying them as saints. I don't think any religion on earth makes people saints by their personal behavior or homosexual behavior. And I don't know how it is you think religion oppresses people with regard to their sexuality. You have a choice as to which religion you participate in. Tell me which religion oppresses homosexual people.

SG: Well right now Catholicism especially the Vatican is saying homosexuals cannot be ordained. I mean for example...

LL: Well well but that's the rules of their group. If you are a homosexual and you want to be ordained, you go to a different church.

SG: Well are you saying homosexuals should not be able to be Catholic?

LL: Well that's what the Catholic Church has decided. Does a church have the right to set the standards for its religion?

SG: I believe.....

LL: I mean for example. If... I like I like to drink whiskey on occasion. I try to do it in moderation and I try to do it only on the weekends with friends and when I am not going to drive. But if I wanted to join the Mormon Church Sean, I can guaran' damn tee you that the Mormons are not going to let me in as a whiskey drinker.If I say, well you ought to change your rules and let whiskey drinkers into the Mormon Church they'd say Lars, one of the tenants of our religion is that you don't drink booze. So why would a booze drinker want to join the Mormon Church? Why would a homosexual want to become ordained as a member of a church that doesn't... you know that does not believe that homosexuals should become priests?

SG: Well drinking whiskey Lars is a choice where I do not believe homosexuality is a choice and there are these people who have been brought up as Christians....

LL: No but joining a church is a choice, becoming a religion is a choice. Can we agree on that?

SG: Joining a religion is a choice..

LL: I could choose to become a Catholic tomorrow, I could choose to to convert to Judaism tomorrow so but why would I want to join a church that doesn't respect the way I conduct my life?

SG: Well possibly that was the church you were brought up in and that is the community you feel comfortable in and perhaps that is the faith you actually believe in yet it discriminates against you and you should still have the choice to join that religion, I believe.

LL: Do you think the people should be offended by your art work?

SG: If people are offended by my artwork I think that is fine. The work in of it's self is there to facilitate discussion and hopefully draw connections and get people to start thinking about that there are certain societal constructs that prohibit people from doing things and...

LL: You're trying to get people to think differently, right?

SG: I am trying to bring a different prospective to these issues that have intertwined through out history. I mean homosexuality in the church and art is nothing new. It has been there for an extremely long time.

LL: Good point. Sean I'm up against a clock but I appreciate your time sir. Thank you very much.

SG: Thank you very much.

ELUSIVE INTERSECTIONS

ELLIOT LONG

"Once I began passing as a man, new questions emerged. I want to live in a way that makes me comfortable with myself, but I can't help but feel that passing as a non-transgendered man erases my past as a woman, leaving me feeling just as frustrated and feeling just as false. Finding a place where my identity and my physical self reach a common ground has been a struggle, and it is something that I am still working toward. This essay will follow that ongoing struggle to unite my politics, my identity, and my physical self into a "me" with whom I feel comfortable."

Two years ago, with no clear end goal in sight, I began physically altering my body with testosterone to masculinize my physical appearance. Even now, I still don't know what to call this land that I inhabit. I wouldn't necessarily call myself a "man," though that is usually how people now perceive me. The vocabulary to describe living in a gender outside of the strict binary male and female genders is limited, relatively new, and still constantly evolving. Even when I attempt to describe my current identity, what comes out eventually contradicts itself and runs in circles. However, being referred to with male pronouns and a male name make me flinch less than going by female pronouns and a female name, so I usually put myself into the male category when forced to make a choice.

Let me explain a little about myself. I have – at various points in my life – passed as a woman, a man, and sometimes as gender ambiguous. Now, I struggle to settle into an identity, and I find myself drifting somewhere between transman and genderqueer. I resist describing myself as having had a "sex change," as that implies a clearly defined process for changing from one defined sex to another. I hesitate to even refer to what I have experienced as a "transition" unless I am referring to it as something that is still on-going. I *started* to transition in 2005 when I changed my name, started going by male pronouns, and began binding my chest flat. A few months later, I started injecting myself with testosterone. To date, I haven't undergone any surgeries – "top" or "bottom" – to alter my body.

As a transgender person, people often ask me, "What made you decide to start transitioning?" and "How did you *know*?" I am always at a loss of how to respond. Truth be told, even *I* don't know what my motivations were. I did know that I was unhappy with being female, and I had been living as fairly gender ambiguous for years. Living as a woman left me feeling like a fraud, and I imagined that there may be a better existence for me on the other side of the fence. Mostly, though, I was curious about the other possibilities. What would it be like to live as a man, to have a deeper voice, a new name, a completely flat chest, testosterone coursing through my veins? What would it be like to be an effeminate man as opposed to a masculine woman?

Over two years later, the same questions about my motivations continue to plague me. In particular, I struggled to reconcile my decision to not be a woman with my feminist beliefs. Once I began passing as a man, new questions emerged. I want to live in a way that makes me comfortable with myself, but I can't help but feel that passing as a non-transgendered man erases my past as a woman, leaving me feeling just as frustrated and feeling just as false. Finding a place where my identity and my physical self reach a common ground has been a struggle, and it is something that I am still working toward. This essay will follow that ongoing struggle to unite my politics, my identity, and my physical self into a "me" with whom I feel comfortable.

Becoming a Transfeminist

Prior to coming out as transgender, I was an outspoken radical dyke in my small Midwestern college town of Athens, Ohio. I became active in radical queer politics at Ohio University by staging protests, organizing events, planning and participating in street theater, and generally working for change. I marched in the hotly contested "women-only" Take Back the Night march, attended performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, served as the treasurer for several years of the aptly named "Swarm of Dykes" student organization, and participated in women-centric feminist events. Yet, despite my presence on campus as an out-and-proud dyke, I was internally struggling with my identity. I had been questioning my identity for years, but I lacked the vocabulary and exposure to ideas to know what I was questioning. Until that point, I had assumed that I was unhappy with the *kind* of woman that I was presenting. I flipped through several phases, one after the other, trying to find an identity and gender presentation that fit me. I went from a clueless nerdy girl to a goth to a hippie girl to a butch/androgynous dyke. As I continued to move further along the butch spectrum, I realized that even that didn't really fit. Eventually, I came to realize that my depression wasn't about what *kind* of woman I was; my depression was coming from being a woman in the first place.

As an outspoken feminist, I didn't know how to explain to my peers or myself that I wanted to explore a male gender identity. As a young girl, I understood feminism to mean that I could do everything that boys could do. I could be strong and fiercely intellectual. I would refuse to be meek and docile, and one day, I would serve as a strong female role model for young girls. When I began considering changing my gender, I found myself confronting many of the arguments posed by the radical lesbian separatists against female-to-male transsexuals. Even though I didn't know of Janice Raymond (who in 1979 claimed transwomen "rape women's bodies" and accused transmen of being traitors and "'the lost women' to other women") with the specific kind of separatist thinking she epitomized, the same kinds of thoughts and questions were crossing my mind when I was a young college student. If I was no longer presenting myself as a woman, would I be a "traitor" to the feminist cause? Did I want to be a man because I craved male privilege? Or, more to the point, was I just tired of appearing gender ambiguous and constantly being harassed by strangers and looking for a way out? According to radical lesbian separatists, I was supposed to take pride in my woman-specific differences, whether they were hardwired genetically or socialized culturally. However, try as I might, I could do nothing of the sort.

In searching for a way to align my identity with my politics, I happily came up with a very different set of conclusions than those of Janice Raymond. Through my exploration of gender and queer theories, I realized that my thinking about gender was still coming from a very gender binary perspective: male vs. female, men vs. women, oppressor vs. oppressed. I was overlooking all of the different ways to define "man" and "woman," let alone all of the space outside of and/or in between those two labels. By identifying myself as transgender and moving into a male gender identity, I didn't necessarily have to feed directly into the patriarchal system that I opposed. As Patrick Califia points out, "When transgendered men and women demand their right to define gender for themselves, they are simply taking one of the first lessons of feminism to heart and asking that it be implemented" (*Sex Changes* 100). By blurring the gender boundaries, I was taking control of my own life instead of letting gender dictate who I could be. Instead of just fighting the oppression of women, I discovered a different kind of feminism: fighting *all* gender oppression. Through transfeminism and transfeminist theorists, I realized that all gender expressions should be equally valued, regardless of whether they are female, male, both, or neither. If being a woman wasn't working for me, I could take strength in choosing to change that. Leaving behind a female identity wouldn't violate all of my feminist beliefs; in fact, it would embrace them.

Assimilating Into an FTM Transsexual Role

In considering transitioning, I knew from the beginning that there would be many limitations to how far I could go in passing as a normatively gendered man. I would always be 5 foot 4½ inches tall, have a small frame, wider hips than a typical male body, small hands and feet, and a youthful face. Surgical options, should I ever choose to pursue them, would still leave me with large scars and results that, in my opinion, came at too high a cost for a lack of quality and functionality. While I could legally change my name, I knew that my former name would still follow me around on job applications, background checks, and past accomplishments. When I returned to my childhood hometown to visit, I would not be able to escape all of the people I knew pre-transition, let alone my family. It would be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to have my legal sex on my Kansas birth certificate changed. Even if I *wanted* to do so, I would never be able to fully assimilate myself into a male gender role and appearance.

Also, as a dyke, I was not very butch. I spent my spare time knitting, and I was a classically trained clarinetist. I did not care for sports, and everything I knew about football came from marching band in high school. Cars did not interest me in the slightest. However, I knew plenty of men who had no interest in those things, either. I had no interest in upholding the ridiculous gender standards of being a "man," just as I had no interest in upholding the standards for being a "woman." And, as Judith Halberstam points out in *Female Masculinity*, FTM transsexuality is not just an extension of butchness by a matter of degree; gender identity and expressions of masculinity don't always follow an exact linear relationship (151). Becoming a man was not about butchness for me but something else entirely. I would need to construct my own queer version of masculinity, and as Halberstam states, "Masculinity, of course, is what we make it" (144). Consciously disregarding the pressures to fit into one gender mold or another allowed me

to construct a version of queer masculinity with which I could be comfortable.

And, truth be told, the idea of completely assimilating myself into a traditional male appearance and role scared me. I enjoyed the looks of confusion. I didn't want to look "normal" or pass as just another straight middle class white guy. I enjoyed having my radical politics assumed by my appearance, and I was afraid of losing that. I had spent years being harassed by straight white guys, and the last thing I wanted was to be assumed to be one of *them*.

By assimilation, I am referring to the erasure of all people that don't fit the white, upper-middle class, "we're just like you" mold of mainstream America. People of this mindset are concerned only with solving their own inequalities, often at the expense of others. As a queer transgender person, there are several layers of assimilation with which I must contend. First, there was the pressure to assimilate myself into the role of a "transsexual man." After I started to pass as a man, there was a pressure to assimilate into a normatively gendered man by changing my behaviors and presentation. And now, as a queer person, there is still the pressure from the gay community to assimilate into the heterosexual mainstream. I will explore each of these later in this essay.

Assimilation should not be overlooked as a minor problem in the system. Queer author and activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore observes:

> I can't tell you how many times I've been presented with the argument that fighting assimilation takes away from the 'real' battle, which is fighting anti-gay violence. This false dichotomy hides the fact that assimilation *is* violence, not just the violence of cultural erasure, but the violence of stepping on anyone more vulnerable than you in order to get ahead. (5)

As Bernstein points out, assimilation is a part of anti-gay violence, only it is directed at those with less power and privilege. Perpetuating this image of "we're just like you" causes the assimilationist gay movement to toss aside issues like "gender identity" in hate crime legislation because they think it will be less likely to pass, disregarding the fact that violence against transgender

people occurs at *much* higher rates than against sexual minorities. Assimilationist politics ignore those queers on the fringes – the genderqueers, the sex workers, queer people of color, the homeless queer youth – and leave them to fend for themselves. They ignore issues of race and class entirely. Inevitably, "assimilation" means "erasure" of every person that does not fit the most narrowly defined and privileged lesbian or gay man. In the end, assimilationists alienate people who could have been their allies and weaken their own movement though their exclusion. Just as transgender issues are often erased from the gay assimilationist agenda, genderqueer identities are often ignored from the transgender – or, more specifically, transsexual – agenda for legal protections and access to medical care.

For years, assimilating myself into a binary gender category had been out of the question. I had been living in a gender ambiguous state to some degree since my freshman year of high school when I cut my hair boyishly short. While working as a cashier at a retail store, customers would make rude remarks and small children would constantly ask if I was a girl or a boy. When I started college, professors of my classes would stumble awkwardly as they tried to figure out how best to refer to me. The inevitable searches at airports would always lead to confusion of who should search me – the male security guard or the female security guard. And, of course, people would stop me in the bathroom to tell me I was in the wrong one (or at least double check the door for themselves to make sure they hadn't made the mistake). At first, this questioning of my gender from others confused me. I wasn't *trying* to look gender ambiguous; I just happened to like having short hair and wearing comfortable clothes. As it started to happen more often, I started to find it incredibly amusing. Eventually, their confusion began to resonate with me. I felt more comfortable when people couldn't determine my gender or when they thought I was male. Every time that I was read as not-female in someone's head, I saw it as a personal victory. I started trying to look even more masculine. I started binding my chest as flat as possible when I was a junior in college, and I began passing more often as a boy. A few months

later, I started going by the name Elliot and asked people to use masculine pronouns when referring to me.

My main motivation in transitioning, though, was not about how other people perceived me or a desire to fit myself into a stereotypical binary male gender role; my goal was to become more comfortable with my perception of myself and to more closely align that with my physical body and presentation. While I knew the limits of physical transition, I was not determined to push myself "all the way" with surgeries and hormones. I knew that I was uncomfortable with my current self, and I wanted to explore the options of masculinizing my body. However, the medical establishment is not set up for experimenting with hormones and surgeries. In order to begin physically altering my body, I had to contend with the medical industry and the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care – the list of standard practices in the United States for working with transgender patients.

In order to get a prescription for testosterone, first I needed a psychologist's letter stating that I had been diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID), that I had been in therapy for at least three months, that I knew and understood the consequences of starting hormone treatment, and that I had no other mental illnesses that might be causing my "gender dysphoria." In order to get that letter, I stretched truths. I began going to my university's therapist when transitioning seemed like nothing but a vague possibility, just so I could start the three-month clock for the therapy requirement. While I was not entirely sure about whether or not I wanted chest surgery, I babbled on and on about how much I hated my body. I also had to submit to psychological testing to establish that I had no *additional* mental illnesses (as, clearly, I already had one in their minds). In short, assimilation into the role of a transsexual man was required before I could take control over physically altering my body.

Even within the FTM community itself, there is an underlying pressure in transitioning: in order to *really* be transgender, a person has to change their name, dress a particular way in order to maximize the ability to pass, begin hormone therapy, then, finally, have chest reconstruction surgery. Genital

surgery, because of the extremely high cost and poor results, is typically seen as optional rather than mandatory. I was sure that I wanted to change my name, but I felt uncertain about hormones and surgery. However, in order to prove myself, I felt that I should want these things, too.

While I was making up half-truths about my identity and my relation to my physical body, I was only thinking about my personal transition goals and not considering the wider implications of my actions. I said what I thought I needed to say in order to get that letter for testosterone. I was not considering how my actions were affecting my doctor's perception of all transgender people, especially the trans students who would be following me into that office in future years. The political implications of my actions didn't even enter into my realm of thought. When no one tells the truth and only feeds the medical industry what they want to hear, it's no wonder that doctors hesitate to offer services to someone who tells a different story for fear that they are not "trans enough"!

These choices about what to disclose to doctors have real consequences. When Lou Sullivan requested a phalloplasty in 1980 at the Gender Dysphoria Program in Palo Alto, he was denied on the basis of his sexual attraction to men. He could have easily lied about his sexual orientation by claiming to be a heterosexual man in order to be approved for surgery, but he chose not to as a political statement. In explaining himself, he stated:

> When I applied to your program, I knew I had an 80% chance of being rejected, but felt it was important to add my special circumstances to your list of statistics. . . It is unfortunate that your program cannot see the merit of each individual, regardless of their sexual orientation. The general human population is made up of many sexual persuasions – it is incredible that your Program requires all transsexuals to be of one fabric. I had even considered lying to you about my sexual preference of men, as I knew it would surely keep me out of your Program, but I felt it important to be straightforward, possibly paving the way for other female-to-male with homosexual orientations – and we do exist. (Stryker 68)

Sullivan knew that telling the truth would prevent him from getting the surgery that he desired, but he did so as a conscious political decision. In doing so, he helped make it easier for queer FTMs in the future to be out about their sexual orientations. He helped broaden the definition of what it meant to be FTM beyond a strict set of criteria that everyone has to meet.

Even now, 27 years later, assimilating into a narrow view of what "transgender" means is still an issue. In the essay "Mutilating Gender," Dean Spade chronicles his attempts at getting a psychologist's letter to allow him to have chest reconstruction surgery. Once again, he could have easily lied about wanting hormones, wanting to live as a normatively gendered man, but he made a political choice not to do so. Spade writes:

> The counselor at the L.A. Free Clinic decided I wasn't transsexual during the first (and only) session. When I told him what I wanted, and how I was starting counseling because I was trying to get some letters that I could give to a surgeon so that they would alter my chest, he said, "You should just go get breast reduction."… To this counselor, my failure to conform to the transsexuality he was expecting required my immediate expulsion from that world of meaning at any cost. My desire couldn't be for SRS [Sex Reassignment Surgery] because I wasn't a transsexual, so it must be for cosmetic surgery, something normal people get. (324-325)

Spade goes on to discuss conversations he had with other FTMs regarding his counseling experiences. Through his conversations, he found that many could relate to his story and his identity. However, all he received from these people were more ways of lying and ways of getting around the system, which he politically refused to do. In assimilating myself into a standard "transsexual male" role, I was perpetuating this erasure of genderqueer people who wish to alter our bodies. I was feeding into the same narrow definition of FTM that I detest. Through this erasure, I was doing violence to my own body and, even more so, my identity.

Despite my later moral qualms regarding my strategies, I did get my letter diagnosing me with GID (Gender Identity Disorder) and qualifying me for hormone treatment. Over the summer of 2005, I injected my first shot of testosterone with the intentions of only taking it a shot at a time. If I was unhappy with what was happening to my body, I would quit that instant and never do another shot again. I started at a half dose in an attempt to slow down the physical changes, and I gradually increased the dosage over the following year. I began to feel present in my body in a way that I had never

felt before. Like many other transmasculine people, I became fascinated with the changes and became aware of my appearance in a way that I had never experienced. After ignoring my body for so long, I was fascinated to watch my body fat distribution shift, my muscles strengthen, my shoulders grow broader, my stomach grow a "happy trail." My voice began to drop noticeably within months, quickly shifting the perception of me from a pre-adolescent boy to at least the teenage range. My facial shape began to shift, and facial hair slowly began to grow in. My first adolescence had left me feeling betrayed, but everything this time around was new and fascinating. Through testosterone injections, I found a way to claim ownership of my body.

After moving to a new city last year, I had to find a new doctor to prescribe me testosterone. I was asked many of the same questions that I had been asked by my therapist when I was first trying to get a GID diagnosis. This time, however, I didn't feel as inclined to lie. Perhaps it was because I was confident that, since I had already been on testosterone for the past two years, there would be no reason for her to withhold it from me now. However, when I answered that I hadn't really begun questioning my gender until I was 20 years old, my doctor seemed shocked.

"You mean you haven't *always* felt like you were a boy?" she asked.

"No," I answered honestly.

She asked several more pointed questions and was obviously uncomfortable with my answers. In the end, she reluctantly wrote me a prescription for one more vial. If I hadn't already been on testosterone for so long, I don't know if she would have given me the prescription. Through our dialogue, though, I can only hope that her idea of what it means to be transgender was called into question.

It is only by telling the truth and telling our stories that the medical industry will come to see that all trans people cannot be fit into a one-size-fits-all mold. People like Lou Sullivan and Dean Spade sacrificing their own desires as a political statement helped pave the way for others to not have to conform to a very narrow definition of FTM. Though I have already done

damage with my past actions by lying to the medical industry, I still control how I portray myself to the medical industry in the present and future. Rather than doing what I need for personal gain, I am beginning to consider the wider implications of my actions for both myself and others.

Assimilation Into Manhood

The pressure to assimilate myself into the role of a "transsexual man" is hardly comparable to the larger pressure to assimilate into the role of a normatively gendered man. As a transmasculine individual, I am supposed to want nothing more than the ability to pass as a man and hide my entire female past. In his essay "Look! No, Don't!" Jamison Green observes:

> We are not supposed to want attention as transsexuals; we are supposed to want to fit in as 'normal' men. We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies, pretend that the vestigial female parts some of us never lose were never there. In short, in order to be a good – or successful – transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. (120)

In other words, if I was *really* transsexual, then I would do everything I could to pass as a man and erase or rewrite my entire past prior to starting to transition. And, as Green points out, the ideal situation is the unattainable: to have never been transsexual in the first place. I played the role of a transsexual man in order to gain medical access, and now I have reached a point where I *can* pass as a non-transsexual man. However, I find myself recoiling from fully doing so for several reasons.

First, it would be easy to assimilate into the mainstream based on my whiteness, my perceived maleness, my mostly normatively-gendered appearance . . . but at what cost? Assimilating myself would mean denying my first 20 years of living as a "woman," dyke or otherwise. It means denying formative experiences, old friends, my experiences of sexism as a woman, the parts of dyke culture that have stuck with me through all of the physical changes. Making up lies about growing up as a boy or simply omitting a story

that comes to mind only make me feel as though I'm digging a deeper well of shame and secrecy within myself.

Even the act of legally changing my sex on my driver's license presented me with a moral and political dilemma. When I recently moved from one state to another, I took advantage of an ambivalent and/or inattentive Bureau of Motor Vehicles clerk. While my previous driver's license bore a very blatant "F" next to "Sex," my new license proudly reads "M." Initially, I was very excited. Now, I can get a passport that shows my legal sex as male. I can switch over the sex marker on some of my old school records if I want. Surface level interactions involving my identification such as buying beer, going out to clubs, and dealing with airport security no longer involve outing myself as transgender as long as I'm passing as male. After the initial excitement wore off, I reconsidered what I had just done: am I thwarting the system by changing my legal sex the "wrong way," redefining the idea of "man" in such a way that I can still possess female anatomy, resist surgically altering my body, and still legally be "male" in the eyes of the state? Or am I feeding into trans invisibility by seeking out a way to conceal my female past? These are difficult questions, to say the least, and I'm still not certain of the answers.

Even though I have physically changed toward the male end of the gender spectrum, I find that I am still in control of how much I pass as male or female to varying degrees. With biology working against me with my small stature and the tell-tale signs of my female past, a gender is often assigned to me by outsiders based on my body language, mannerisms, and intonation. When I follow the binary standards for male behavior, I am more likely to pass as a man, and usually a gay man at that. If I choose to ignore or disobey these rules by crossing my legs at the knees or gesturing too much, I still occasionally find myself designated to the "female" or the "too-androgynous-to-tell" box that makes people uncomfortable. While I felt pressured into fitting these behavior standards in order to pass at the beginning of transitioning, I am starting to resist that pressure and move back toward the middle ground of presentation.

I am finding a way of living comfortably with myself and my gender presentation without being forced to hide my female past in order to do so. Indeed, the only solution to becoming a whole person is to refuse to assimilate and to embrace the idea espoused in Sandy Stone's "Posttranssexual Manifesto." I must go beyond just trying to pass as a desired gender. The only way that things are going to change for transgender people is for us to be vocal and visible about being transgender. By being vocal about our transgendered selves rather than trying to assimilate into the role of either "man" or "woman" (thus becoming "posttranssexual"), trans people open new realms of possibilities of physicalities and identities. Claiming our histories – including those pre-transitioning – allows us to reclaim power in our bodies and to make space within established identities for ourselves to exist.

Of course, it is impractical to ask someone to be "out" 100% of the time in all situations. When I meet a person for the first time, I don't assault them with an in-depth discussion about my gender identity and how that relates to my presentation. As someone who works with at-risk elementary, middle, and high school students, I don't take the time to explain my sexuality and gender to every student who needs help with math homework. However, if students ask questions about me, I would like to answer honestly. Also, if I am expressing my gender in what feels true to me and that happens to coincide with a traditional male appearance, why should that be a problem? The key for me is to be out as transgender in social situations, out to my friends and family, and to be vocal about my trans politics when I need to speak up. I want to feel comfortable discussing my past and not feel stifled into a role as ill-fitting as the female role was for me before I started transitioning. I want to be in control of physically altering my body, regardless of how I identify, regardless of whether or not my body fits into a strictly-defined category. I don't want to be forced into obscuring my past in order to function in the world; I want to be a whole person.

Attraction Outside of the Binary

Even though my outer appearance may be able to conform more or less to a binary gender category, my physical body has moved into territory where it cannot be neatly classified as either male or female. My politics and identity as a transgender person play out most clearly in the changing physicality of my body and the way that I navigate this in sexual relationships.

After years of testosterone injections, I have a medically-constructed body that is unintelligible to a society upheld by a strict gender binary. How am I supposed to feel attractive and empowered in my body and sexuality when mainstream and gay cultures leave no space for bodies outside of the male/female binary? How do I describe my relationships in terms of the labels "gay" and "straight" when I am not firmly in one of those two categories? Sexual orientation binaries are just as impossible for me to navigate as gender binaries. Even the label "bisexual" implies that there are only two sexes from which to choose, thus excluding bodies like mine from the realm of attraction.

People are often fascinated by my physical body, but it is usually in a way that strips away any sexuality that I have. When people ask me questions about surgeries, it is rarely because they find it attractive or appealing. These questions are usually asked with freakish and desexualized overtones. Often, others try to reduce my identity to my physical body and sexed characteristics, specifically to whether or not I have a penis. After all, how can I even consider myself a "man" (or, at least, "not woman") when I don't have a dick? Even when these questions are asked with the implication of finding my non-binary body attractive, it is often in a fetishistic way – reducing me and my body to a fantasy waiting to be fulfilled. In the first case, I am stripped of having any sexuality; in the second, I become only a sexual object. Where is the happy medium?

Even *as a transperson* I am supposed to see my own body as non-attractive and deny my own sexuality, according to the traditional medical discourse. As Jason Cromwell argues in his essay "Queering the Binaries," "Within the narratives made available through the medico-psychological literature (and, for that matter, through published autobiographies), both MTF and FTM transsexuals are disgusted by and hate their genitalia, and, by implication, sexual acts of any kind are considered equally disgusting and abhorrent" (515). However, this model of self-repulsion hardly reflects my own experiences.

Before I started transitioning, I was admittedly less comfortable with my body. Rather than really thinking about my identity and its relation to my physical self, I survived by ignoring my physical body altogether. As I began exploring my gender identity, I started questioning my investment in my physical self. I began to really look at my body to see what it had to offer and what I wished to change. When I began testosterone injections, the gradual physical changes gave me a heightened sense of self-awareness that bordered on narcissistic. This obsession with my newly discovered body was spurred on by my testosterone-induced leap in libido. I became fixated on exploring my sexuality.

While I had an aversion to vaginal penetration before starting to transition, it fascinated me once I moved into a more male-identified gender. I had never slept with men as a woman, but I was more than ready to explore that territory with queer men with my altered body. My experience was similar to that of author and activist David Harrison: "The whole point of my gender transition was to free myself up. If something feels good to me, I'm not going to stop doing it because it doesn't fit someone else's notion of what a man is" (132). I had found a way to feel more comfortable and present in my body, and I was going to explore that in every way that I could.

I also found it easier to explore relationships and my sexuality once I began to transition. Rather than making it impossible for me to connect with people sexually, changing my body helped me become more confident and comfortable with myself. My confidence and comfort with my body went much further in establishing relationships with people than my discomfort with my strictly female body had allowed me to do.

A challenge in establishing relationships with partners, though, is dealing with labels and identities. By this point, I have dated partners coming from a variety of sexual identities: gay, lesbian, queer, straight, bisexual, and/or something else entirely. While labels can be useful in forming social movements or conceptualizing ideas, they can become an obstacle in forming relationships that aren't easily categorized. If a gay man is in a relationship with me, how does he negotiate his gay identity in relation to his attraction to my body? How much do outside forces, identity politics, and cultural norms play a role in his response to his attraction to me? Sometimes, the outside forces are too much to overcome and the relationship quickly falters. Other times, my partners have been readily accepting of and attracted to my physical body, regardless of the implications toward a specific identity label.

As a person outside of the male vs. female gender binary, I struggle to assert myself in a gay vs. straight world. I prefer fluid and inclusive sexuality labels like "queer," "pansexual," or "omnisexual" to describe myself and my sexuality in order to create space for bodies outside of the binary to be visible and desirable. By reclaiming our bodies as attractive through physical alterations that we initiate, we are able to create room for trans bodies to be attractive. I have reconstructed my body through testosterone injections in such a way that I am comfortable in living in it, and presenting my nonconforming body as one that can be sexually desired is a political act within itself. In refusing to assimilate my body into the idea of what a man's body or a woman's body should look like, I am challenging society's ideas of gender and sexuality on a very personal level.

Intersections

Coming out as transgender did not mean that I had to toss out my feminist politics; to the contrary, coming out as trans helped me to become a better feminist by becoming aware of a new layer of gender oppression based

around a gender binary system. While some of my actions have been damaging, such as lying to the medical industry in order to reach my personal objectives, I have become aware of the problems with these actions in the perception of transgender people as a whole. Through accurately presenting myself to the medical industry instead of assimilating into a strictly defined role, I continue to complicate and expand any narrow definition of what it means to be transgender. Rather than choosing to pass as a "man" in all facets of my life, it is important to me that I continue to out myself – to become "posttranssexual" – in order to effectively challenge the oppressive gender system instead of reinforcing it. By claiming ownership of my trans identity and my non-normative body, I am able to become empowered in myself and to reclaim my sexuality.

Even though I may not know precisely where my journey is taking me, it is important for me to continue living my life in a way that feels truthful to how I see myself and to my political beliefs. I have yet to find a place where I feel entirely comfortable, but I have been moving progressively closer since I chose to begin addressing my identity issues. As I navigate my way through different gender expressions, I hope to get closer to that elusive place where my identity, my politics, and my physical self converge.

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SISSY

MARK D. SNYDER

"I got drunk with some of the other students, and began to cry. I cried for four hours throughout the night. I mourned the trauma of my childhood, and I cried with joy for my escape. And by morning I was ready to create a new life for myself, one in which I would never return to live at home, and one in which I would keep my 8th grade promise to myself - that when I left our rural community, I would do everything I could to fight discrimination."

The sun's summer rays and the shadows from the trees danced on the wooden floor of my parent's bedroom. I stood in the doorway of my mother's closet, which used to be a section of the hayloft when our house was still a barn. I carefully studied each dress, blouse, and of course the shoes. She is a hearty, countrified woman, so as I slid my scrawny little body into the world of clothing in front of me, I had to navigate through an endless array of disheveled tapered jeans, plad flannels, and sweatshirts.

In the dark, back corner of the closet, I found a flowered dress. And after a tireless search, I located a pair of matching heels. I threw the ensemble on the bed and headed towards her dresser for a braw and pantyhose. Soon I was dwarfed in a flowing summer dress and heels. I skated into the bathroom, without lifting a foot, so I could see myself in the mirror. I smiled. I danced in place. I lip-synced to New Kinds on The Block. I took off the heels, and twirled around so the air would blow the dress in every direction. I lifted the dress up to create skirts, tied belts around it, and transformed it into a variety of styles, modeling each one for the mirror.

That is when I heard the bellow of my name from downstairs. "Luuuuunch is reaaaddddy," never sounded more terrifying. Within seconds, the outfit was returned, and I arrived at the table in my favorite pair of short purple shorts. Legs crossed, foot swinging up and down, I delicately ate and discussed the day with my mom. After lunch, I went outside to play with my animals and explore the woods.

I had to feed and take care of the chickens and pot-bellied pigs. The lamb needed bottle fed, and she cried so loudly for her meal you could hear her down the lane. My imaginative world involved quite a bit of responsibility! I had to give my imaginary "tourists" rides on my bicycle "tram" to show them the mountainside and the local "zoo." I had to give them talent shows on my swing set, and introduce them to the delicious fresh watercress growing in the stream. The days flew by, each ending with a joyous skip through the yard and into the house for dinner.

And then fall would sweep across the countryside. It brought with it cool, crisp air touched with the scent of falling leaves. The fields turned brown, and the animals retreated to their warm stalls. School busses zoomed across the curvy roads slowing down only for the occasional horse-and-buggy, and the dust from the dirt roads swirled and dirtied everything.

In fall, brute men in orange, camouflage styled coats and hats would invade my quiet refuge on the mountain. I promised my animals I would do my best to protect them. My dog was grey, tan, and white, and I had always feared that he would be mistaken for a deer. We had school vacation for the first day of each hunting season – doe, buck, bear… Then, on my way down the mountain to wait for the school bus each morning after, my father and I would see the prized animals they killed, bloodily hanging from metal poles in front of hunting cabins.

I would sometimes tremble from the moment I left my house 'till the moment I returned back home. I was always the first child on the bus, and as each student boarded I felt more isolated. They did not talk like me, or dress like me. While they showed off their hunting fashions and gadgets, and their sports gear I would try to sleep or finish my homework. Little spit balls

would hit the back of my head, occasionally accompanied with a "City boy!", "Fag," or "Sissy."

I kept to myself most of the time, trying to both not read as particularly feminine while also not repressing it too deeply. I was surrounded by an aura of androgyny for much of my schooling – but that is enough to get you killed where I am from. As I grew older, I struggled to strike a balance between being myself and avoiding harassment. I tried some of the less aggressive sports, but failed miserably. I tried fishing, but I quit after one season. I took two kinds of karate, and quit once I knew how to defend myself.

My high school years began in seventh grade, and they were wrought with torment. My lockers and desks were defaced. I was spit on, kicked, punched, mock raped, choked, and – worst of all – excluded from the few friendships I had maintained throughout elementary school.

In the autumn of my ninth grade year things began to change. The day was like any other – a boy had been kicking the back of my heels between classes as I walked through the halls. Another had taken a gulp of water from the fountain and spit it into my hair. I sat with my head down during study hall, and finally the bell rang, giving us permission to board the bus. I sat in the middle so that I was close enough to the driver for safety, but far enough away not to be tagged as one of the dorks. I wasn't one of the dorks, after all. I was the fag.

My dad forgot to pick me up at the bottom of the mountain, so I walked slowly uphill towards my house. I took the shortcut through the woods, and my dog greeted me halfway there. I walked into the house and found it was empty and quiet. As if a string was pulling me in the direction of my parent's bedroom, I headed up the stairs. This time, my gaze was locked onto my father's side of the closet. It was tidy. Each dress-shirt was perfectly ironed and organized by color. I reached above them and pulled a small wooden box from the shelf.

I sat on the edge of their bed and removed the black pistol from the box, along with a bullet. The gun was loaded and I held it to my head as tears streamed down my cheek. I could smell my mother's scent on the bed, and

see my father's ties hanging on his closet door. My mind ping ponged between a longing for nurturing and understanding from my parents, and the torment of my school life. I imagined my funeral, what my family would be doing - crying and praying. I imagined what might happen if I failed, relegated to a life in a florescent-filled hospital room.

I put the gun back. My animals were outside crying to be fed, and so I ran outside to tend to them like I would have any other day.

Weeks passed, and the mountain was soon covered in white. The trees hung over the lane. The icicles flirted dangerously with scratching our cars. I was allowed to skip school more often because of the dangerous driving conditions on the mountain, and one day I announced to my parents that I would quit at the end of ninth grade unless we could think of another option. My parents reacted as they did to everything – with no visible emotion whatsoever, but with support and logic in their tone. "The school doesn't provide college preparation," my mother quipped, "we should look for another school." For the next few months, I toured other nearby schools with my parents. I was willing to try a Christian school, because I thought that maybe the kids would be nerdier, and therefore more accepting. In addition, I figured that their uniforms would help me to conceal my penchant for "city clothes." However, I soon learned that the Christian schools were very strict about whom they let attend – and my Lutheran parents were interrogated about their liberal theological philosophy.

We decided the best choice would be for me to attend a public school about an hour's drive from my home. Lewisburg High School was in a small, quaint college town. Heavily republican, but much more "refined." The students knew what the GAP was, and there was even an active choir program. The board of my first school eagerly approved my departure, and the board of the new school welcomed my arrival (they were going to make about $9,000 from the deal). So for the next two years, my parents paid their taxes to my first public school, and a fee to my second.

I kept to myself, and quietly formed friendships with my cousin and her friends. I had someone to eat lunch with for the first time in years. They even

let me talk about fashion and pop music with them! But the new school was not without its challenges. The jocks and the hunters were still there – ready to pounce if I was ever in a group of less than two people.

On Valentine's Day, I was called to the office to receive my rose from a secret admirer. I knew when the boys started laughing that it was from them. When I returned to my desk there was a picture laying on it. A boy had drawn it just for me – a bloody deer head next to the words "Hunting is Life." My friend Jenny helped me draw a retaliation picture, a humorous spoof of a PETA ad, and we put it in his locker. The next week there was a death threat on my car windshield.

Once I turned sixteen, I drove myself to and from school. I never went to any school dances, sporting events, or the likes. I preferred to get into my car, lock the doors, and turn on my music for the drive home to the seclusion of my mountain. At home, I devised a plan to "get out." I took my SAT and wrote an essay to Emerson College in Boston explaining my need for the safety of a diverse city life. They accepted me into their school, and my parents accepted and supported my plan.

The first week of college in the "big city" was a total culture shock. The ruffling of leaves was replaced with sirens, and people screaming. The number of students in my dormitory rivaled the population of my hometown. Like many students, one of the first things I did was get wasted. I got drunk with some of the other students, and began to cry. I cried for four hours throughout the night. I mourned the trauma of my childhood, and I cried with joy for my escape. And by morning I was ready to create a new life for myself, one in which I would never return to live at home, and one in which I would keep my 8th grade promise to myself - that when I left our rural community, I would do everything I could to fight discrimination.

That Bostonian autumn was a beautiful one. It represented for me not just the onset of another season, but the potential for hope. I attended a local training about how to share your life as an LGBT person to others. At the training people shared stories not too different from mine. A boy behind

me told me about a support group in Boston for young LGBT People – BAGLY.

My first meeting at BAGLY was *terrifying*. It was the first time I had sat in a room filled with other gay people, not to mention gay people my own age. My self-imposed androgynous cover of my femininity reared its ugly head. I can't say I tried to be masculine because I knew from my failed attempts at sports that would be more disastrous than just staying under the radar.I was afraid to cross my legs in the men's meeting. I did not talk much. When I did, I lowered my voice a little.

I continued to attend their meetings each week, though, and -- ever so slowly – I began to let go of my gendered conditioning and allow my feminine spirit to shine through again. The more strength I drew from my femininity, the happier and more empowered I felt. I made real, true, long lasting friends at BAGLY and at my school. And I allowed my activist self to blossom. And so I completed my senior year of high school and freshmen year of college, returning home to graduate that summer.

In 2001, I launched QueerToday.com, which quickly became known as the prominent direct-action, outspoken queer activist group in Boston. We have received worldwide headlines for staging a protest at the Arch Diocese in Boston, and recently we formed the largest ever protest against James Dobson's anti-gay Love Won Out Conference.

Today, I identify as genderqueer and I revel in my childhood memories of rebellious genderfuckery. Being a sissy, while obviously a source of great pain, also gave me strength to survive. It has brought me to where I am today, and will take me to where I go tomorrow. It has given me the gift of queerness that has brought me close to a community of friends, activists, and support. From my inner femininity I have always drawn my creativity, my strength, and my compassion. When I sit in stillness it is my femininity that holds my spirit together.

Like many other sissy's and queers, I've developed a close bond with other gender variant and queer people – my chosen family. Together, we bring with us our histories of oppression, and our current struggles for

liberation. We reminisce about the good times in the 70s (even though we weren't around). We lay naked smoking weed on the beaches of Provincetown. We wear big sunglasses, and pretend to be famous. We listen to Pink Floyd and the Scissor Sisters. We believe in sexual liberation, and we are often quick to remind everyone so. We go dancing, and do our best to patronize every single gay restaurant and bar so we can at least say we tried it. We complain that the gay neighborhoods have lost their rainbows to high-end condos, and that the sissies are overlooked by the "muscle-marys." We take long bus trips to Washington DC to march against the war. And we're constantly planning our next protest, direct action, or campaign for social justice.

I like to think we prove that young people are not complacent. And every day, I show that being a sissy is not a sign of weakness but an endless well that I pull my strength and motivation from.

Life for me now, post-college, is at once exhilarating and exhausting, and there is nothing that can stop it. Not the shouts of "faggot" from car windows, or people pretending to throw-up when they see me and my boyfriend holding hands. Not the bigots protesting at the statehouse *against* gay marriage, or the upper-class gay elite fighting *for* gay marriage. Not the corporate warmongers… not even the hunters!

This fall in Boston I expect will be like most. I will return home to the orange, camouflage-invaded mountains and eat Thanksgiving tofurkey next to my loveable, hick of a brother. I will even take part in the target shooting competition. Then I will lift my shirt to reveal to the family my very first tattoo: *sissy*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Snyder is the founder of QueerToday.com, an organization of activists and bloggers that seeks to continue the legacy of queer resistance of our dominant culture through media campaigns and protests. Mark is a former employee of The Boston Alliance of LGBT Youth, and currently serves on the Board of Directors for Greater Boston PFLAG. Through BAGLY, PFLAG, and SpeakOut Boston, Mark has shared his childhood struggle to overcome homophobia and oppression with thousands of students, teachers, and community leaders.

TARHEELS AND TRANSFAGS

JOSHUA BASTIAN COLE

"Rather than hurting my chances of passing, however, my newfound confidence in gender performance as a femme, along with the remarkable physical changes of the 'T,' allowed me to pass as male 100% of the time. The major difference now, though, was that when I dropped the macho routine, most people just thought I was a fag. Before, if my routine ever 'slipped,' I immediately stopped passing and people thought I was a dyke."

"You are a butch woman, you dyke."
"How dare you co-opt our male only space?"
"You came up in my search for females, you fag."

The first line is from when I attempted to join a trannyfags blog community. There was tremendous response to my post about being shunned from a transfags group because I do not identify as a male, but as simply, FTM (female-to-male transgender). I was told by a group of individuals that I deserved to be excluded, and in this crude manner, told I am not a "real" transman, but instead, a woman pretending to be one. They agreed with the transfags group that told me I was trying to enter a space in which I didn't belong.

The last line came from a confused boy looking for girls online. I list myself as female if it is absolutely necessary to be listed at all, not because I am female-identified, necessarily, but because I'm not male-identified. I look like a male with my clothes on, but in one particular way, I'm still more like a female. And I'm alright with that.

I have been on testosterone now for 6 years – or, as it's more commonly referred to as, "T." I "pass" as male full-time, without question or doubt. And yet, because I don't self-identify as a male, I, by my mere existence, threaten many transmen. My refusal to identify as male scares many transmen I've met so much that they are pushed to going out of their way to take me down. My identity, they feel, somehow undermines their safety. You see, I look just like other physically transitioned (those who have undergone medical transition) transmen. While my experience has been similar to their own, I am not like the "stealth" transmen who are not out as trans but living full-time as male and don't disclose the trans identity. If it can be true that I, differently self-identified, can transition the same way, then maybe male-identified, closeted transmen can be like me, but who I am is not a person those in the closet for any reason can allow themselves to be.

It isn't as if I fuck with gender on so much of a presentation level that they can separate from me. I don't wear dresses or makeup – or even glitter. I wear men's clothes and I wear them the way most men wear them. I don't bind my chest, my breasts are small enough to make that unnecessary. Without much effort, I pass exceedingly well, 100 percent of the time. The effect of the "T" is all that society needed for me to be read as male.

To many, I am a big scary monster. I look like them, but underneath lies the spawn of the devil, someone who reads as male because of hormones but doesn't identify as a male and, therefore, in the mentality of this group of people and its highly pressure-driven definitions, cannot actually be a transman. Simply put (and it is very clear to them), transman equals male. What seems to baffle and miff them is the idea that in a broader sense, transman can include masculinity that is not necessarily male. Okay, now, hold on right here. Am I crazy, or isn't that what FTM transgender is? An FTM can be a man who is not male. Doesn't that make sense? Well, those who believe that I am not a transman because I am not male-identified also believe I am not trans at all, but am actually a butch woman who has arrived to steal away the experience of transmen, invade their trans-only space, and co-opt their language. To call myself trans irritates them because they feel

I've taken a word that I don't rightfully own.

Without fail, the accusation is of actually being a butch, which is something I have never been – even when I did identify as a queer woman. On the contrary, I identify as femme, but that would just blow their minds if I even mentioned it! In some people's minds, identifying as femme would just make me even *more* of a woman, or at least, less of a man. Traditionally feminine characteristics, be they performed outwardly or in my case, lived in my emotional experience, particularly as a partner (boyfriend,) are highly looked down upon by much of the trans-masculine community. I've known quite a few who have attempted to remove themselves from anything remotely related to women, even in the most distant way, just in case whatever remained might "give them away." I've heard comments that relate to things like "if I were a girl, but I'm not so what do I know?" or "I don't wear dresses, I'm not a cross-dresser." These may be valid points, but they devalue the history of living as a woman and having at least some, if strained, understanding of that social experience. Personally, I'm no use matching eyeliner to stockings, but the fact is I never was good at that. That doesn't mean that I was never a woman. But this is my experience. Some transmen believe they were always men. I, unlike those who identify that way, was actually a woman for a little while. I was awkward and uncomfortable, and preferred to be a man the whole while, but a woman I was.

One of the transmen with this mentality of male-identified-only transsexualism told the genderqueer/trans group I belong to that he would like to educate me because apparently he knows how it all works. Having written, spoken, performed, filmed, photographed and – oh yeah – *lived* as trans obviously does not qualify me as knowledgeable on the subject. He harassed me and humiliated me to the transmen listserv he moderates. That group, of course, all agreed with him. In their world, transmen get top surgery (removal of breasts to create a visibly male chest) and the idea that someone would not bind their chest before surgery, or even not get top surgery at all, is not only unfathomable, but angering as well. Men don't have breasts! Well, *this* man does (kind of!)

Of the many, probably about 100 members, of that listserv, I had only one supporter, which unfortunately didn't do much good. These guys don't want to diversify their thought. They still believe in only men and only women and there is exactly one way to be either. I finally had the opportunity to meet this individual, the listserv moderator, in person about a year after the entire ordeal. When he saw me, and saw how well I pass, how presentationally masculine I am, and heard my baritone voice, he apologized to me. I accepted, but only after the fact do I feel that it was because of my outward appearance. I have a feeling he feels the same way he did about my identity, but accepts me now as a transman because he knows I look like one. Or maybe he does get it, but that doesn't mean his group of followers do. There are many that remain who will not accept that a man doesn't have to be a male.

Okay, enough bitching!

When I was first coming out in 2000, I quickly accumulated a large network of FTM (female to male transgender) friends and became close with many of them. I thought that a whole new world of friends was opening up for me. Everything was suddenly simple, whereas before it had seemed so complex. We were boys, and that was all. Nothing complicated there. Finally, I had found a community that made sense. I could finally be happy and have friends and a community who truly understood me and my experiences.

But, like many identity-based communities, my newfound home came with its own set of rules and regulations. These constrictions mostly related to hair, clothes, posture, vocal inflection, and general behavior (particularly in relation to interaction with people whose genders match their assigned sexes). I was suddenly expected to wear big baggy pants (preferably cargo) to hide my hips, big square polo shirts to give me a rectangular torso shape and hide my chest, cut my hair short but add just a bit of gel, stand slouched, shoulders curved to further hide my chest, hands in pockets, to emphasize the squared off posture, and drop the ends of sentences instead of doing what women and gay men do, raise them.

When I look at pictures and videos of me and my friends from that time, I'm shocked to discover that we were clones. Literally, we wore the same shirt in different colors and we all had the exact same hair cut. At the time, I found comfort in our similarity. I felt like it was okay to be this way because others were now like me (or, perhaps, I was like others,) and, certainly, I wanted to remain included.

All these things – the clothes, the hair, and the voice – helped me to start passing when before I even started taking "T." I wanted to pass as a man and I also wanted to take testosterone, but years later, when I was on "T," and I was able to pass, I became much more comfortable in my femme identity. I didn't worry about doing all those "masculine" things – like speaking in a monotone voice and standing, shoulders hunched, with my hands in my pockets – because nobody questioned my masculinity anymore. Rather than hurting my chances of passing, however, my newfound confidence in gender performance as a femme, along with the remarkable physical changes of the "T," allowed me to pass as male 100% of the time. The major difference now, though, was that when I dropped the macho routine, most people just thought I was a fag. Before, if my routine ever "slipped," I immediately stopped passing and people thought I was a dyke.

Initially, I did feel that I had to exaggerate some things to get my point across. However, after the most significant part of the physical transition was over, I was able to relax. Many transmen I know, though, never relax, and they never let themselves take a break from the macho routine. While it may come natural to some, I know that for others it is a conscious choice – a choice often made to survive. To many of these people, my decision to let go and embrace a femme identity is threatening. Unlike hyper-masculine transmen, I can survive as femme. But, because it is scary, it angers many of them. They become disgusted and are publicly rude to me.

I'm not exactly a raging queen or anything. I don't prance around tossing glitter out of a basket (I do, however, cry during "chick flicks" and dramatic musicals!) My version of femme is not that I'm feminine. I'm quite masculine, really. I'm just a different kind of man; a more sensitive, quieter,

and better dressed kind of man than what is expected and accepted by this culture. But I'm very comfortable being out as trans and I don't hide the fact that I don't bind. This concept can get sticky, though. I am too out for the stealth transmen, but I'm not out enough for the genderqueers. My comfort level lies somewhere in between – I like passing, but I also like remaining visibly queer. I would like to be read as a transman most of the time, but there are exceptions, like in bathrooms, gas stations, or on busses – or, for that matter, anytime when strangers are within earshot. In most places, after all, a visible transsexual is more likely to disgust someone than to get a nod of approval from them.

Also, it's not always appropriate to discuss body parts (which is the first thing many non-trans people think of when they hear the word "transsexual") in the general public. Saying very loudly "I'm a transsexual" in the wide open isn't exactly socially acceptable. It is also potentially dangerous. At the very least, it is asking for odd stares.

At the same time, if I were to exclaim this, my body would become immediately cross-examined. "Ah yeah! Small hands! There's the proof." Or "I can see your boobs today." (Both of these are comments that have actually been made to me, amongst other similar statements). Where they didn't notice before, now there may be obvious "clues" and "giveaways" as if they were little Where's Waldos. While I don't mind it being known that I'm trans (in fact I prefer that,) it would certainly make me uncomfortable if someone were to, upon learning that I am female, stare at my chest, searching for breasts or looking at my pants for a bulge (which is actually there because I pack with a prosthetic). The biggest confusion for many on-lookers is my developed Adam's apple. I have one, and this is, for many, my proof of maleness.

It's one thing to be checked out by an admirer and another thing to be ogled as a freak. Many people don't mind being stared at, the whole "subvert the dominant paradigm" thing. I consider myself far from the heteronormative culture, but it's a conundrum really. I don't want to be invisible, but I do want to pass. I guess that there's a line between visibility,

on the one hand, and sticking out like a sore thumb, on the other. I just want to be treated with respect and dignity – I want to be treated like a human; an adult not a child; responsible not immature; a person not a sinner. The "sore-thumb-sticker-outters" are often blatantly discriminated against and harassed. While I admire their bravery, I don't have the energy for dealing with constant harassment -- especially when I get so much of it from my fellow transmen. This doesn't make me weak, as some quite visibly queer folks I've encountered have scoffed.

It's not just transmen, however, that have been hostile to my identity. Even some people I've met in the radical punk community have reacted negatively to my medical transition and inevitable "passability." Interestingly, I often get the same response from lesbians – butches in particular. Some have accused me of selling out for white male privilege because, I pass 100% of the time and I'm no longer harassed for sticking out. I don't look "different" anymore. Some people think that it takes "sticking out" to be a trans activist. Personally, I think I'm pretty damned radical – whether or not I pass. I've lived two genders, and one in between, and I talk about it freely and honestly. That's pretty radical, if you ask me.

Curiously, my father and male friends (both gay and straight) have been similarly opposed to transition – but for the completely opposite reason. Instead of accusing me of trying to fly under the radar by passing, they believed that I was transitioning because I was *seeking out* attention. I thought that this was utterly ridiculous; I wasn't sporting gauged body jewelry or a 3-foot pink mohawk. There really wasn't anything visually spectacular about me – well, except for my rakish good looks, of course! Besides that, however, I looked pretty "normal." I looked like a regular boy. Contrary to what my father believed, I was someone who, rather suddenly, *didn't* draw much attention to himself at all.

As if my world wasn't small and lonely enough, some of the worst reactions have come not from the trans-masculine community at large, but from amidst the growing sub-culture of gay transmen. I boldly took on the self-identity of transfag for a brief time before I was told I was co-opting gay

transmen space because I don't also identify as a male. I identify as FTM, but apparently this did not appease them. FTM, to many people, means the transition from female to male, starting in one place and ending at another. It is not intended as a place to stay, but is only the transition, the midway. The idea here is that the point of being FTM is to become a male, eventually.

For me, that is not my goal. I don't want to be a male, and I know I could never be one anyway, because who I am is a transman, completely. I have the body of a trans person, the mind of a trans person, the experience of a trans person, the sexual interaction of a trans person, and all things trans, not male. I was completely excluded from the space after brutal verbal abuse from the moderator of a gay trans group and many of the members. Much of the controversy surrounded the fact that I am exclusive to dating transmen, and I don't date non-trans men. This group of transmen found this offensive because they believe to be considered different than non-trans men emasculating and devaluing. What they don't understand is that I highly value and prefer the masculinity of transmen, mainly because it is chosen and continues to be chosen at each injection day (and every day in between). We are men because we consciously want to be all the time (or most of the time or some of the time). But what it comes down to is this question: are all men the same, or are transmen different? People disagree.

There are differing schools of thought on being trans. To me, these opposing schools are as different from each other as creationism is to Darwinism. Some have argued that being a transman is exactly like being a male-born man in every way, except for the surgery. The idea is that we have always been males born into the "wrong" bodies, and after a few snips here and there, we're back to "normal." This kind of thinking would have you believe that transmen have the minds of men, the thoughts, feelings, desires, emotions, and therefore the experiences of men. Folks who believe this, think that there is no difference between male-born men and transmen; we are equal in every way: psychologically, sexually, emotionally, socially, and physiologically.

The other, and I think more sound school of thought seeks to respect the masculinities of all those who identify as men, male-assigned at birth or not, but also recognizes the vast differences in the way boys and girls are socialized from an early age. Experiencing the world as a woman, even if it was only for a matter of years, gives us transmen wholly different perspectives – not to mention different kinds of bodies. While non-trans men and transmen share secondary male characteristics, there are things that each of us knows that the other will not (and perhaps cannot) know. It's kind of like understanding the misery of menstrual cramps or knowing exactly how awful a kick in the balls feels, for example.

Because our bodies as transmen are different, the way we have sex is also very different from non-trans men. We may all have dicks of differing varieties, but some transmen's biological equipment can have limitations in terms of penetration and ejaculation. On the upside, we are much more likely to be multi-orgasmic than a non-trans man! And for those of us who bottom, we've got what some refer to as a "bonus hole" that has muscular contractions at different areas and not just the one sphincter muscle. Many of us also have smaller hands than non-trans men which allows for easier fingering and fisting.

But truly, besides all of the physical stuff, there's a kind of bond that I can achieve with my fellow transmen because of our shared experience. They just "get it" without ever having to explain myself. While I certainly know some really cool, respectful, and validating male-born men, our connection just isn't the same. I feel a comfort with transmen that I do not share with male-born men. Other transmen I know have, of course, completely different experiences. Some feel "more trans" when they're around other transmen and that makes them uncomfortable. They prefer male-born men because, with them, they feel "more male," – more "real." Unlike these guys, though, I feel that way when I'm with other transmen. In the presence of a male-born man, I feel constantly aware of my physiological difference from him, making me feel inadequate and insecure.

The point is people see masculinity in different ways, but because I consider the trans-masculine experience unique and remove it, if only slightly, from the non-trans experience, I've been harassed by fellow transmen. I've even been told before that I was transphobic, that I was certainly not trans myself, and that I dangerously fetishize transmen because I prefer to date them over non-trans men. My preference for transmen has been the cause of tremendous offense on more than one occasion. I shouldn't have to really explain why I don't want to date non-trans men; I'm simply not sexually attracted to them when it comes down to it. I've tried. I just don't get hot.

I was told by this group that I can't be a transfag because, even though I pass full-time and live as a man, I don't identify as a male (FTM isn't male enough to this group of transsexuals). Also because I don't date non-trans men, I'm not really gay. They graciously allowed me to retain the use of the label "trannyfag." Apparently, this term includes genderqueers and transmen who date transmen, so I already felt more comfortable affiliating with it.

More recently, a similar group of transmen treated me much the same. These guys aren't gay, but are of the same generation and hold the same belief of being born in the wrong body (a concept I completely respect, by the way. I never quite understood the level of anger that came my way when I really never put anything out there except my existence.)

This time, the argument wasn't about who I date, but how I present my body. I pass full-time as male, without question, but because I don't bind or want top surgery, another uproar ensued. Again, I was accused of not being trans. It didn't really occur to this group that I don't need to bind because I'm very small-chested. It didn't really matter, though, because these guys flew into fury before I could mention that part. In their world, one must get top surgery or plan to get top surgery to truly become a "real man." To them, a man simply does not have breasts.

However, no one asked me how I see my chest. No one cared to listen to me say that I don't consider my chest female at all, and that I've never met any problems with partners or strangers. The only people who've had problems with my chest were a handful of loud transmen who tried to make

me feel ashamed for not binding because they were insecure with their own bodies and projected it to me.

What all of these people, groups and individuals, failed to consider was that my identity, my masculinity, my presentation, my transition, was all just that: MINE. I transitioned for no other reason than because I wanted to and have always wanted to. I wasn't really considering the social ramifications, which are of course, important, but the most important thing was my own personal mental health and emotional well-being. Perception by others is a big part of it, but secondary to self-image.

After the fact of passing, I was more able to concentrate on my slide through social structures. I observe my position as a white man (perceived as gay and straight in different arenas) carefully, and am fully aware of it in every space I enter.

I make conscious decisions about things like how much space I take up, how loud I speak and how often. Personally, I believe this is how I can be a responsible man, accountable for the privilege handed to me. I try often to turn it away, but many times, it's just there, and it is, to be honest, easy.

But I remember not having it.

And I won't forget.

The trans-masculine community will continue to have great divides as long as there are those who only accept trans people who transition (or don't) in exactly the same way as their own sub-culture does (or doesn't). As any marginalized group, we all look for comfort, safety, and support, but the majority of my experiences with many transsexuals and genderqueers have been anything but comfortable, safe, or supportive – simply because I don't label myself as male and because I'm not desperately seeking top surgery. Regardless of all of my similarities, my differences (which I consider comparably minor) excludes and shuns me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua Bastian Cole is a yankee transplant to the South. After graduating from James Madison University's School of Theatre and Dance, Cole moved to southern Virginia and now currently lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but he will always have Brooklyn in his blood. Cole is pursuing a Masters Degree in History & Culture with a specialization in Queer Theory and Performance from the Union Institute and University. He is a femme-identified trannyfag performance artist and playwright who uses performance as a medium for activism and trans awareness. Cole has been published and seen and heard in newspapers, books, magazines, ezines, photo series, films, radio, and podcasts. His website is: http://jbastiancole.sridout.com

II. DESIRE, SEX, & SEXUALITY

GAYS AND THE GAZE

HAMMAD AHMED

"In the end, the complexities of lived experience, of gawking and exhibiting, sometimes feel 'un-theorizable.' In order to make sense of my feelings of invisibility and anonymity in France and, to some extent, throughout my life, I'd have to think not just who wields the gaze, but who wants the gaze, who wants to gaze, and how race and gender affect this desire to see and be seen."

While studying abroad in Paris last fall, I finally learned the value of eye contact. In that city of millions of people and grand boulevards, appearing in public is all about being seen. Caught up in the day-to-day "métro, boulot, dodo," one has so many opportunities to go on exhibit, or steal a fleeting glimpse. The advertisements on billboards and trains only seem to encourage this voyeurism through the attractive bodies constantly on display. People-watching is a sort of municipal pastime. This could have been all well and good for me, had I not felt absolutely invisible. Even with millions of Parisians around me, practically no one, I thought, looked at me. Aside from a few matched stares in the predominantly gay Marais neighborhood, there were no mutual glimpses that I could interpret as human, let alone sexual, interest.

Part of the problem might have been that if anyone was looking, it was women—and I never noticed because I was not looking at them. It's not likely, and since I am not prone to self-flattery, I'll stick with my initial observation. Were Parisian men just not attracted to me? Were they attracted, but for whatever reason unwilling to look due to some dangerous significance of the stare that I was too American to understand? Was I just not looking in the right places? And why, for the love of Edith Piaf, did I care so much? I mean, I had a boyfriend back in the states and I had both American and Parisian friends in France. Yet, the anonymity which I felt on Paris's boulevards became not liberating, but painful, somehow, since I was never acknowledged by the gaze of another.

I marveled at the way the female American students that had come with me to Paris garnered no shortage of attention, and I wondered whether mine was a problem particular to gay men. Was it only women that got noticed in the public? Men, the common story goes, are the lookers. It is, after all, Peeping Tom and not Peeping Jane. Men are supposed to whistle and cat-call in public, while women walk demurely by. Women are the spectacle to be seen, while men are ones with the roving eyes. It is how the vast majority of little boys are socialized, and one of the ways that girls and boys are raised differently. .

But when I asked those same American girls how they felt about men's eyes on them in the streets, they expressed discomfort. "It's like we're objects," some would say. Aha, I thought. That's a familiar concept for me—objectification through sight. It's a theoretical concept that writers of modern cultural theory (and their feminist groupies) call *the gaze*, that particular ability of the eye to explore, know, and consume. They write that who wields the gaze and who is subject to it can tell us a lot about privilege, power, and objectification.

Or… can it? There are so many cracks in the theory: Is the gazer always in power? What about blind people? And the queer gaze? In the end, the complexities of lived experience, of gawking and exhibiting, sometimes feel "un-theorizable." In order to make sense of my feelings of invisibility and anonymity in France and, to some extent, throughout my life, I'd have to think not just who wields the gaze, but who *wants* the gaze, who wants *to* gaze, and how race and gender affect this desire to see and be seen.

What the Foucault?

Paris proved to be an oddly appropriate setting for my thinking about these issues since, for one reason or another, many of the influential social theories about the gaze first saw the light of day in France. In no way can I do justice to the entire Pantheon of French philosophy on this issue, but I'd like to revisit some of the notable theories if only to show that none of them have ever hit the bull's eye for me.

The famed French Freudian psychologist Jacques Lacan watched infants looking at mirrors and thought that there was a profit to be turned in writing about it. So he defined *le regard*—the gaze—as an awareness that what is looking back in the mirror at us is ourselves. Sort of a tough concept to swallow if you're still teething. But later on, he thought, the gaze develops into this sense that what we are looking at is looking back at us with an uncanny consciousness, whether it's our reflection in the mirror or a pigeon in the park. For all his perhaps underwhelming insight, he was among the first to write about the power and mystery that pure staring could encompass.

It took a little while longer for Michel Foucault, that theory queer *par excellence* and alleged lover of bondage, to write about the cruel power of the gaze. Inspired by the Victorian era prisons, hospitals, and other places of "treatment," he described a cold, all-knowing "clinical gaze" that modern doctors use in his groundbreaking book *The Birth of the Clinic*. He writes that it is a kind of stare that confers all the power upon the doctor to know his subject and to cure that subject. So in other words, whoever wields the gaze has the ability to control and dominate the one being looked at. And this is almost certainly true of Victorian prisons at least, but I've always felt that this is a poor mirror for day-to-day life among strangers. It's worthwhile remembering how the stare *can* be frighteningly oppressive, but also important not to take this idea too far.

Which is perhaps just what some feminist scholars in the 1970s and 80s, such as Laura Mulvey, did. Building off the ideas of Foucault and Lacan, they

criticized the fact that men control the gaze, that they do all the looking and that women act as passive screens for their fantasies. They argued that images of women in the media and in pornography consistently demeaned the female form, and that men were socialized to stare at women as objects in order to control them and prevent them from talking or, well, looking back.

Were the feminists right? To an extent, yes, but less so as time has gone on. Certainly, the prevalence of men as objects-to-be-seen alongside women has increased dramatically, as exemplified in advertising and in popular culture. In fact, where I went to school, the men's water polo team—and not the women's—posted flyers of themselves all lined up wearing speedos as a gimmick, urging people to come to their games, presumably to see their sexualized bodies in action. So, at least from where I'm standing, I don't see that men are never the objects of the gaze.

Newer feminist critics have taken account of these complexities. Indeed, the question has moved out of academia and into popular culture. "The Female Gaze" <http://the-female-gaze.blogspot.com/> is a weblog that attempts to reverse the direction of the classically defined male gaze, for example. But what still often goes uncontested is the notion that the gaze objectifies its target and empowers its owner; in other words, watching is better than being watched. And unfortunately, most analyses focus primarily, if not solely, on heterosexual gazing between men and women.

Fortunately, there's some hope for gay men in this realm of academia. Of the few writings that talk about the queer gaze, Brian Pranger's work sheds some light on what it means to be gay and looking. He writes in *The Arena of Masculinity* that "gay men are able to subtly communicate their shared worldview by a special gaze that seems to be unique to them." A special gaze, huh? Sounds intriguing. He continues, "Most gay men develop a canny ability to instantly discern from the returned look of another man whether or not he is gay." Now don't we wish! Despite his valiant attempt, Pranger is a little too confident in the reliability of his sources. If it were so easy to tell who was gay, we'd never have to ask! But what's a little more concerning, at least to me, is that Pranger flattens the diversity within queer populations by referring

to a "shared worldview." What about race, class, and all the other divisions within LGBT populations? Let's not forget about questioning and closeted folk. It seems like Pranger is living and writing in a little exclusive world of gaydom that I've never entered.

Enough theory. The gay male gaze, I think, is not a singular gaze shared by all. I certainly had *no* idea where to begin when trying to identify gay men in Paris. Honestly, if I were still in the states, they would all have been gay to me. Those tight little pants, those pointy shoes, that hair done just-so—and the scarves! It just didn't mesh with my idea of a decidedly straight man. So as a queer, South Asian-American, theory-loving male spending an academic quarter studying abroad in Paris, where did all this theory and practice put me?

Despite what Foucault might have argued, I didn't feel that being watched would put me under a microscope, having each crevice of my exterior scanned meticulously until it became all there was of me. Perhaps, à la Lacan, I was only looking for myself in the eyes of others; but I wasn't aiming to reduce them to reflections, I was trying to validate my own existence. And, apologies to the feminist scholars of yore, but I might have preferred being treated like a passive screen for male cat-callers over feeling like an anonymous shadow. But, the harder I tried to believe that it shouldn't matter whether or not some guy's gaze found me, it did. The sheer lack of eye contact and connection demoralized me after a while. Buying outlandish and eye-catching fashions could have been the answer if I weren't the re-incarnation of Ebenezer Scrooge—and I gave up on trying to feel a part of Paris.

Averting the gaze

After my stay in City of Light came to a close, I returned to California for school and, almost immediately, I was shocked to feel the eyes of men again

roaming my body. My god! It was like I was living in a colony of peeping toms! And no, after my attention drought in Paris, their stares weren't unwelcome. But it wasn't totally sexual, either. At college, mutual glimpses occur more frequently partly because students often know each other or share assumptions about who we are—it's hard to be perfectly anonymous on an insular campus, what with the advent of social networking websites like Facebook and Myspace.

Back at school in California, I reaffirmed the suspicion that the gaze works differently, and means differently, in varying contexts for all these reasons (density, culture, familiarity). Whereas in the Parisian metro, a mutual gaze might have foreshadowed an awkward moment or served as a sort of come-on, in college it might have initiated a conversation about the high prices of meal plans. And when a look *is* sexual on campus, it's not quite as easy to tell as it seemed in Paris.

Given the difference in the meaning of the gaze in these two places, you'd expect me to behave differently in both settings. And you'd be right. Being invisible in Paris made me want to stare (conspicuously, even) at everyone who I found attractive, if only to see if they would react. On campus, though, things are different. As a rule of thumb, I won't stare at conspicuously pretty (or, at least, "legally blonde" pretty) girls because I do not want to seem like the straight male jerk. It is perhaps a perk of being gay that I am not stunned by their charms. Another rule of thumb, more difficult to follow, is the no-staring-at-shirtless-men-in-the-dorm rule. I don't care who they are, if their door is open and their chest is bare, then I won't look at them – even if they're looking at me. Yeah, maybe I'll throw a glance in their direction if their back is turned, or if their gaze is reliably averted. But for some reason, I will not stare at them if they are looking back.

In the California culture that I'm familiar with, I am conscious of the power of the person who is the so-called "object of the gaze." Roaming the hallways, it is I who feels like an object around Mr. Dorm Hunk, who regularly leaves his door open at all hours and is often typing or reading or lazily pawing at his bare torso. In my head, I'm thinking, "This guy doesn't

need any more ego boosting. The last thing I want is for him to run off to his jock buddies and brag that he's got faggots ogling his body." Whether Mr. Dorm Hunk would really run back to his friends and giddily share such gossip, I'm not sure. It might be that my burning good looks would radically threaten that shirtless male's psyche, causing an identity crisis and making him feel powerless before my gaze. But that doesn't that sound very convincing. I just don't want to feed the fire that makes this person very obviously an avid exhibitionist.

Why can't I just enjoy it? I should be able to look, to savor with my eyes the sight that excites me because I am a man and—after all—men like to watch, right? I am aware that men make up this enormous audience with an insatiable appetite for pornography and visual pleasures. Not only is porn primarily consumed by men, but it is also primarily made for men. Even *Playgirl*, whose readership should ostensibly be female, has a fifty-percent male readership according to Mark Graff, president of Trans Digital. There's just a serious male bias when it comes to the voyeurism industry. And yet, I can't just sit back and enjoy it for at least two reasons: 1) *whose* body is on display & *when* is always conflictual and 2) my eyes don't have sex all by themselves.

The intrusion of bodies

Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Dorm Hunk was to send out pictures of himself to the dorm email list. I don't know that I would enjoy looking at them terribly much, at least based on my history. In the past, when people have sent me pictures of the newest *Dieux du Stade* calendar or forwarded me a sexy picture of a man, I've been conflicted. I'm aroused. I'm jealous. I'm curious, but I'm distracted from whatever else I was doing. Suddenly, my gaze is arrested by images I'm not sure I ever had much desire to see.

That's a part of sexuality that comes up too rarely in theory and in day-to-day talk. Even if I "desire" someone (as if complex feelings of sexuality can be summarized in the verb "desire"), I might not necessarily *want* to desire them. *The Science of Sleep* does a great job of setting up this tension. Stéphane, Gael Garcia-Bernal's character, wants to love his artistic neighbor, but spends a good deal of the time being enamored with her best friend instead. He discovers that there can be a gap between his partner of choice and the person who has his attention at a particular moment. I can sympathize with that, as I've often wanted to love the people who don't get any. Should I, then, indulge in all my wayward attractions, follow my gaze where it leads me the way that men are "supposed" to do?

I think not. Being *that* unreflective and lacking in self-doubt makes for very poor social harmony, at the least. Desire has a way of being borne from—and perpetuating—jealousy, inequality, and other social ills. But there's this lingering suspicion in my mind that I'm somehow following a road to Puritanism. I grew up in a Muslim household, more or less, where we prayed on Friday, fasted during Ramadan, and even went to Islamic camp during one particularly surreal summer between sixth and seventh grade. I was totally into the sex-is-unclean mindset until I went the way of secular gay-dom around the end of high school. Some Qur'anic remnant, some residual scripture poorly interpreted might have stayed with me, however, and I find myself mistrusting my desires at times. I want to ignore or even cover up the attractive bodies of strangers, and in a way I find myself identifying with my cousins who wear the *hijab* (headscarf) for their own complex reasons.

But even beyond the remnants of religiosity, there's this intrusiveness of the sexual object that still perplexes me. That is, the gaze can be forcibly drawn—away from this essay I'm writing, for example, and onto your desktop background of Brazilian supermodel Rafael Verga—in a way that's unwelcome. For someone married to a jealous spouse, this can be an obvious problem. But even for single people, the imperative not to be drawn like a fly to light whenever a cute stranger walks by might exist if they have other goals than simply enjoying eye candy.

I'm not saying that closing one's eyes or covering up attractive bodies is an ethical, or even an effective, strategy. Lord knows that the objects meant to conceal often acquire a spectral sexuality of their own—like lingerie or masks. What I'm arguing is that while veiling women might seem like objectifying them, the real objectification is *not giving them a choice in the matter*. When society (read: men) insist that women dress modestly, I think they are trying to transcend their own particular feelings of objectification as well.

Maybe sometimes I'd rather Mr. Dorm Hunk threw on a sweatshirt instead of laying around half-naked all the time. I'm torn, however, because he *is* enticing, after all. But I don't want to be enticed by him—not just because it's distracting and intrusive. It also has something to do with the fact that Mr. Dorm Hunk is generally a white, muscular man. Skin color and race have become less of a factor of attraction for me, but I remember wondering some years back why I was so consistently attracted to white guys. I thought that, maybe if I just tried looking at the other brownish-beige folks all around, I'd discover that I like them, too. But this didn't work when I was in the closet trying to like girls, and it only barely worked to spur my interest in non-white men.

Really, I had to be put in an environment where people of color asserted their sexuality more clearly through their image and their expression. Like a Latin dance club, or maybe a Persian wrestling match. It's not entirely possible for someone to change their sexuality—but I think it's possible for someone to discover a new part of it when they find themselves in a new context. When slowly I noticed being fond of certain "other colors" too, I became more comfortable with my sexuality. And I still resist the white Adonis sort of aesthetic, if only because I think that somehow gives away too much power. I need to retain control over my gaze in this particular arena. It's a difficult, ongoing process, but an important one.

Even though the appearance of sexualized bodies can sometimes be intrusive, it can also sometimes be welcome. Like when you go watch the Bourne movies simply because Matt Damon is cute. There is certainly a time and a place for attraction. But even then, I feel a certain level of discomfort

with my gaze. The reason that I don't always want to gaze at sexualized bodies is that my eyes can not touch. Looking at people—but not touching them—seems rather prohibitive. I've always thought that museums suck for precisely this reason. I want to touch all the exhibits! I want to touch the pots and the paintings and the spectators—and even the museum guards. I'd be much happier sometimes, I think, if I were able to close my eyes and feel my way around the mess of bodies that I lived among. There's this increased communication, this heightened intersubjectivity, when two bodies touch that just gazing simply cannot compete with.

Looking Forward

We all struggle with our sexuality at times. Gay or straight, male or female, black, white, brown, green or fuchsia. But it's a particularly interesting puzzle, this question about how the act of looking at someone sexually can be unwelcome or desirable for either party. What gets really complicated is when we try to take control of our desire by controlling our gaze—by choosing to look away. As I've tried to discuss, and as I continue to learn in my life, there are merits to this approach. And then there are times, as in Paris, when you want to push someone just to have them look at you in the face.

I no longer wonder why some women feel objectified when men stare at them—because I realize that their experience is so vastly different from mine. They suffer from a real overdose of attention, whereas I have often wondered whether it's even safe to look at a man with any hint of interest. That difference in being able to look is a fundamental inequality between hetero society and queer society. I can understand what some feminists tried to argue when they called the gaze a weapon, even as I see that it applies very little to my experience.

Moving forward from that line of argument, I feel we should understand the gaze not always as a masculine weapon, but as one way of

initiating other kinds of sensual communication, whether sexual or not. What I come away wondering is, in the future, as images of queer people become more mainstream, and images of non-white queers become more sexualized, will we always be willing to follow our gaze because we'll be comfortable with whatever it is we're attracted to? I don't think it will be quite so linear. Self-doubt and jealousy will probably still constrain the eye's path, but I think more individuals will be able to take pleasure from their gaze and more people will take pleasure in being seen. Let's just hope we don't overdose from all that attention.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A SINGLE PROBLEM

JASON DILTS

"Looking for and finding love, it turns out, isn't quite so easy. The romance narrative – found in movies, book, and magazines – is built on the idea that you're no one until someone loves you. Without love, life isn't even worth living. This trope is constantly re-enforced by social institutions (including religion and government), families, peers, and most of all, popular culture."

For years, I had a single problem. From the moment I stepped out of the closet and admitted to myself that I was gay, I immediately began to feel insecure about not having a man in my life as a romantic partner. What began as simple adolescent insecurity developed into a complex as I grew into early adulthood. The older I got, the more deficient I felt for not having someone to love me. I was excelling academically in college, building a solid and successful career in politics, and establishing and developing very meaningful friendships. I had it all, or at least as much as anyone in their early twenties could expect to have. Yet, I felt as though my life was lacking in some way. No matter how good life was, this problem – this *single* problem – persisted.

I assumed that it would go away the minute I found someone to love me. All of my insecurities about my life, my looks, and my place in the world would be fixed the moment "prince charming" came in and swept me off my feet. Like so many young girls find themselves doing, I was waiting on the fairytale narrative to give my life meaning (as if a life without love was also one devoid of this alleged "meaning"). Never mind that I enjoyed my college classes and soaked up all the new theories and concepts I was learning. Never mind that I loved my job managing and directing a local grassroots political party. Never mind the very deep and connected friendships I had built over the years. Never mind the fact that I actually liked living by myself, alone, in my own eclectically decorated and perfectly organized apartment. I was convinced that all these elements that made up my version of the "good life" were insignificant and meaningless. Under the ever-anticipated glow of love, I expected all my insecurities would just melt away.

What a crock!

Looking for and finding love, it turns out, isn't quite so easy. The romance narrative – found in movies, book, and magazines – is built on the idea that you're no one until someone loves you. Without love, life isn't even worth living. This trope is constantly re-enforced by social institutions (including religion and government), families, peers, and most of all, popular culture. Most of us are taught unquestionably from a very young age that getting married and having children is something of a rite of passage into becoming a full-fledged "grown up."

Our society constructs rituals and celebrations around this idea and exalts couplehood above all other forms of existence. It begins when we are young – when middle school dances and later high school proms are highlights of the academic year for many teenagers. Dating is all the rage among young peer groups as adolescent pairing off often equates to popularity and self-validation. This celebration of coupledom continues into adulthood when married people are thrown lavish parties to celebrate their dual partnerships, and when parents are rewarded with showers of gifts for their ability to reproduce. The celebration of couples is everywhere! Couples get parties – single people get pity!

Along the way, we are constantly reminded by popular culture that single equals deficient. There's Celine Dion, who docilely sings "I'm everything I am because you loved me", suggesting that all of our accomplishments are the result of someone else having romantic feelings for us. Avril Lavigne also doesn't seem to be able to accomplish much on her own, at least not according to her song *When You're Gone*, as she confesses

that when her lover is away, "I can hardly breathe I need to feel you here with me." Jessica Simpson seems to think she can't even stand up with out a man, as she confesses in the lyrics of her song, *With You*: "I can let my hair down / I can say anything crazy / I know you'll catch me right before I hit the ground / With nothing but a t-shirt on / I never felt so beautiful. Baby as I do now / Now that I'm with you." LeAnn Rimes takes the cake, though, in *How Do I Live*, lamenting that she simply cannot physically live without her man. "How do I live with out you; I want to know; How do I breathe without you / If you ever go / How do I ever, ever survive / How do I / How do I / Oh, how do I live". We can only hope that Ms. Rimes current relationship will never dissolve because she will apparently be dead if it does!

While these over-the-top lyrics might be dismissed as mere examples of a much larger genre of sappy pop-songs, they work in tandem with society at large to re-enforce the notion that a single person is not of equal value as a couple. Gradually, we learn and internalize the notion that what we accomplish on our own pales in comparison to what we accomplish by falling in love and tying the proverbial knot.

I tacitly adopted this ideology for years without realizing it. Throughout my late teens and early twenties, I developed intense crushes on a handful of guys that I desperately wanted to turn into romantic partners. None of them showed any real, substantive interest in me, though – yet I hoped that, by pining after them, somehow they would see just how great of a guy I really was. When efforts to "catch" the current object of my desire failed, I resorted to looking anywhere I could for companionship. I tried Internet chat rooms, on-line dating services, gay social organizations, and gay dance clubs. I didn't find anyone who interested me in any of those places, though I did manage to snatch up a few dates.

One of these dates was with a guy named Kevin, who I met in an internet chat room in 2005. Kevin was an accounting major and worked in the business administration department of a local meat processing company. He was extremely attractive, and I was excited about the possible relationship that could develop between the two of us… That is, until he started talking.

His job seemed extremely boring to me, and he had absolutely no passion for it. Work was just something he did to make money.. He thought politics was frivolous. He also thought being an activist was futile. "I've never understood people who thought they could change the world," he once confessed to me. "You're just one person. Accept your place, make the best of it, and stop worrying about things you can't control."

As for his own hobbies and interests, he was pretty passionate about making money, he liked to party on the weekends, and he spent a lot of time at dance clubs. He didn't open up much about his personal life; his style was more surface. He wasn't interested in having deep conversations about art, literature, or world affairs. I had a hard time identifying with him. He didn't "get" me at all, which was made perfectly clear when he referred to a women's studies course I was taking at the time (and very passionately talking to him about) as a "lesbian class." About the only thing we had in common was that we were both gay. Sharing the same sexual orientation is not exactly grounds for engaging in a life-long love affair. Needless to say, Kevin and I soon parted ways.

A few months later, there was Shaun, a tall, dark, and handsome nurse, whose body filled out a pair of scrubs in a way that made me want to instantly orgasm. We had an immediate physical connection. Unfortunately, everything else about him made me want to recoil. First, there were his politics. He was a member of the NRA, frequently complained about the "ugly, uncouth black kids" in his neighborhood, and didn't understand why "gays were always complaining about not having any rights." Like Kevin, he though politics was a stupid, meaningless game and that feminism was just a crutch for people who couldn't get laid. Then there were his interests. He was an avid sports fan, loved to go hunting, and had an affinity for action films and slasher flicks. As someone who has to be reminded that the Super Bowl is a football game, loathes the thought of handling a gun or shooting anything, and has my Tivo permanently set to record every zany, envelope-pushing, obscure indie movie on the Independent Film Channel, it was hard to find common ground . Despite the fact that we didn't relate to each other

at all, my self-worth was so low that I continued to see him for an agonizing month.

Obviously, a big part of dating is getting to know the other person, and there are lots of facets that make up who we are as individuals. To that end, I invited him to my favorite restaurant on one of our first dates. I wanted to take him somewhere that was quintessentially "me." We ate at the Green Mill, a bar and grill that had what I considered to be the best chicken wings in town and a place myself and my best friends had spent many nights in high school talking, laughing, connecting, and enjoying each other's company. More than the food, it was the memories that made this restaurant special. During dinner, I recounted stories about my friends, our nights out, and why this particular place was so special to me – but I could tell he was bored and uninterested. He also complained about the food. After dinner, I took him for a walk downtown, along the river. This was also a special place for me, because I loved the scenery and had many good memories of times spent there with friends, as well as by myself reading or studying for classes in college. Despite my attempts to explain its significance, he remained underwhelmed. He was barely even listening.

Despite this, I wanted to give him a chance. On our next date, I asked him to take me to some of his favorite places. For dinner, he took me to Denny's. I'll confess that I'm not the biggest fan, but I wanted to get to know him – and supposedly this place was going to tell me something about who he was. I tried to stay open minded. When our dinner conversation began to lag, I finally asked him what made him choose Denny's. I was hoping for a nostalgic story about late night dinners here with friends or memories of times spent eating here with his family. But as it turned out, he just liked thier onion rings. While I could appreciate his taste for fried food, I couldn't help but feel that relationships weren't exactly built on shared side dishes. Our "romantic night out" continued with a baseball game, where he said we could "spend time together." Instead, I spent most of the game listening to him cheer and holler, only briefly separated by his futile attempts to answer my ignorant questions about what was going on in the field. After the game, he

capped it all off with a "nice night at home," watching a slasher flick and eating beef jerky. That was the last night we ever spent together.

Despite my repeated attempts to find it, loved, it seemed, was rather illusive. I left these dead-end, haphazardly unromantic encounters feeling as though there was something wrong with me, and wondering why I couldn't find a guy with whom I could connect. While out on dates, I found myself fantasizing about being at home, alone, on my couch and watching whatever TV to DVD series I was obsessing over at the moment. Even the few moments that I did enjoy, I still thought to myself, albeit sheepishly, "I kind of like being alone better."

I had to question, though: Was my desire for singlehood truly authentic? Or had it been self-manufactured as a survival mechanism? When I accepted being gay, I had to accept the fact that I would never have a family. Marriage for same-sex couples was a distant dream, and I knew that adopting children would be a long, arduous, and expensive process, complicated even further by the fact that there would be two men involved. I understood that I could have a "partner" and make a "special family", but those terms seemed condescending. I wanted to be embraced and accepted. Along with that, I wanted to be able to use the same language to describe my relationship that everyone else gets to use! Marriage has certain social connotations that bring with it a level of respect to couples who enter in to these legal nuptials. I knew I would never have the real deal, and that my "partnership" with another man would never be accepted and celebrated like my heterosexual peer's marriages.

Then came a magical day in late fall of 2003. The Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts had declared that preventing same sex couples from getting married was both discriminatory and unconstitutional. In an instant, a new door opened that I never could have imagined. Writing for the court's majority, Justice C. J. Marshall exclaimed that, "Without the right to marry--or more properly, the right to choose to marry--one is excluded from the full range of human experience and denied full protection of the laws for one's "avowed commitment to an intimate and lasting human relationship." For

me, it was that right to *choose* to marry that was most important. Although it was limited to just one state, and despite the fact that not a single state has granted full marriage rights since this decision, I can now choose to be married.

It was very important for LGBT people to have this choice. All of us want to know that the circumstances of our lives are a result of us having made our own decisions that brought us to the place we are in the present. Absent a choice, it is easy to categorize as deficient and less than desirable a life we can never have. Having access to marriage meant that this idea was now open for me to explore, and for a time I craved and hungered to live that life that everyone else had been living for so long. I looked for more dates and tried out more men, hoping that I would find the magical one who would whisk me away to the mythic land of Massachusetts where we would live happily ever after. Alas – my magic man never came, and I stayed grounded in my home, the heartland of Kansas. I had the right t choose, but no one seemed to want to choose me!

Throughout my quest for companionship, my aborted attempts at relationships, and later my rabid desire to exercise my new-found civil right to marry, there persisted a constant belief that it was my fault that no one loved me. I assumed that there must be something internally deficient within me that repelled people away and made me of no desire to other men. Ultimately, it was my body where I laid the most blame, and over time I grew to hate it. That hatred eventually manifested itself in the form of an eating disorder, and for an entire year I was quite literally starving for love. I thought that if I changed my body and became thin, my luck would change. I succeeded in losing weight – eighty pounds over 12 months to be specific – but even though the new lean and slender me took up less space, I still wasn't able to find someone who wanted to make room for loving me.

As my twenty-fourth birthday approached, I found myself increasingly unhappy and less fulfilled than ever. I discounted all of the wonderful things that I did have in my life, which by this time included a college degree, a great paying job, a nice apartment, and more friends than I ever could have

imagined, and pinned all of my despair on the one thing that I didn't possess. I agonized at the thought of another year passing without love, and bemoaned the idea that the next year could possibly be a repeat of all years prior. When my best friends took me out to dinner for my birthday, I wasn't really in a mood to celebrate. I was too perplexed by my single problem.

There's a funny thing about friendship, though. Sometimes it's the one thing you have that can bring you back to yourself. That night at dinner, after rehashing my standard monologue about how meaningless my life was without a man, my friends Edey and Mary firmly and assertively pointed out that I was missing the point about what mattered in life. There I was, having dinner with two people I had known since I was in high school. We had gone through ups and downs, crazy angst-ridden adventures, personal growth experience, parental conflicts, friendship drama, and shared just about everything with each other that people can share. We'd kept our friendship together through good times and bad, and knew each other better that we knew anyone else. Yet, I refused to recognize that the best of me was seated at that table. Who I am, the "me" that makes me is forever infused in these two people, and that's a powerful concept, more potent than the idea that another person's love completes you.

It didn't all come together that night, and I had many more months to go in my journey, but gradually I began to understand my *real* problem – and it had nothing to do with a personal deficiency. I realized that my problem would not be solved by a boy's affections – nor would it be solved by dieting myself to death. My problem was that I didn't truly love and value myself. I had no self-affirming identity. I had a world full of joy and satisfaction in both my personal and professional life that I had worked very hard to create; yet I refused to acknowledge just how powerful the things that are our own creation can be. I bought into the paradigm that love completes and that coupling is an essential part of the human experience. I began to question long held assumptions and beliefs about my life, and in doing so I became liberated. I became free to appreciate all that I did have, and began to evaluate my life in terms of my own happiness, and not by our society's

cultural norms and standards. My single problem wasn't that I was single; it was that I devalued all the beauty that being single brings.

There is so much to celebrate about the single existence, and it's about time that we take notice: More people are living single than ever before, many delaying marriage for quite some time and some forgoing it all together. Even many of those who do marry will spend at least part of their life not in a romantic relationship, and they ought to realize that those years can be valued and enjoyed. The joys that living a life on your own terms bring – a life that is unconstrained by the whims, desires, or demands of anyone else – can amount to unparalleled happiness. The valuing of your own accomplishments, the education you claim, the career you forge, the community ties you build, the good you do for other people, and the enriching you do for society is a splendor like nothing else. The ties that bind you through friendship and the unparalleled satisfaction you get by having another person understand, value, and love who you are and conversely the feels of belonging that you get from having these same sentiments for others is an extraordinarily beautiful experience.

Once I learned to place value on all of this-- all the good that comes with being single-- I realized that I no longer had a single problem; in fact I had no real problem at all. All those years I hungered for love, both figuratively and literally, I was really just starving for an identity. I was craving someone to validate my existence by loving me. I was looking to find the person I am inside another human being. I was attempting to scapegoat the significance of my own path in life by finding someone else to give it meaning. Before this unyielding, uncomfortable longing could go away, I had to ultimately realize just how significant I am as an individual.

Finally, my identity is rooted in me, and all the good things and good people that make my life worth living. I can grow to love a man romantically and that can be a beautiful thing. If I want to, and if I want it to be. We could get married in Massachusetts, or any other land that will take us as equal and full participating members of society. If I decide that I want to choose that life for myself. Regardless, I'll always have me – a solo, self-respecting,

uninhibited individual. I have a lot of love to give, to many people in many different ways. However, I was born into this world one person, single. I shouldn't feel ashamed for living my life that way. I should feel proud!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Dilts lives in Wichita, KS and is a graduate of Wichita State University, where he earned his Bachelor's Degree in Political Science with a minor in Sociology. He has been the Executive Director of the Sedgwick County Democratic Party since he was 19 years old. He is also the President of the Kansas Democratic Party LGBT Caucus. He is an ardent feminist activist, avid reader and writer, and plans to pursue a Master's Degree in Gender Studies. He loves his life as a single gay man and enjoys spending quality time with his amazing friends.

WHY I'D FAIL A PLETHYSMOGRAPH AND WHY I DON'T CARE

PATRICK JULIUS

"The fact that I would 'prefer' in some abstract sense to be partnered with a man for the rest of my life does not render it completely impossible that I should end up with a woman, though it may indeed be less likely. And what about the converse; might my physiological inclination towards women make it more difficult to settle down with a man? I don't know; maybe it already has. That might be a reason to change it (which way?), were there any evidence that such a voluntary change is possible; I have studied the relevant psychology enough to say that no such evidence exists."

Ever heard of a penile plethysmograph? It's a medical testing device, basically a blood-pressure cuff (sometimes a strip of strain-sensitive metal) that is wrapped around one's penis; it measures the volume and pressure of the erectile tissue of the *corpus cavernosum*, and thereby detects erection. It's meant to measure physiological arousal, a task at which it is good but not perfect (most men can suppress our erections voluntarily, making it appear as if we are not as aroused as we are; some of us can also do the opposite); it is often used, however, for the far grander task of determining sexual orientation and predicting future sexual behavior.

I think I would fail a penile plethysmograph. I think any measure of my erectile pressure under particular stimuli would give a pitifully incomplete—and thus, if taken as definitive, profoundly inaccurate—indication of my sexual orientation. I don't think I would show up as the bisexual I know I am, if (as in the typical experimental profile) you presented me with varying types of porn and measured the blood pressure in my penis as I watched it. I already know fairly confidently that I would respond most to the heterosexual pornography, including that which displays and glorifies the female while essentially reducing the male to a disembodied penis. I would show a weaker response to lesbian sex and solo females, and a weaker response still to the vast majority of pornography involving gay sex and solo males. (Actually if you used furry pornography, I would probably show a much stronger response to males and a much more equal response to males and females—and frankly I have no idea what accounts for the difference or what it says about my sexuality.) I would show no response or a negative response to fetishism such as urolagnia or sadomasochism, and I would be positively disturbed by eroticized violence or rape.

I know this of course because all of these sorts of material are readily available on the Internet, I am of sufficient age to legally view them in my jurisdiction, and I on occasion avail myself of this opportunity. I therefore know from my own experience how my own body responds to these different stimuli. That's at least what happens visually; I haven't systematically analyzed other sensory modalities—I think my tactile and olfactory systems are a good bit more egalitarian than my optical and aural; in embarrassed honesty I must admit I have a lot more experience with the latter than the former—but it's quite possible that even under these other circumstances I would be on average more physiologically aroused by specifically heterosexual stimuli.

Given this, some might wonder why I call myself "bisexual" at all. If I freely recognize that at least the majority of my visually-induced physiological arousal is triggered by females, why not consider myself straight? There are many reasons—not least that I have no desire to support, even tacitly, the repression and patriarchy of institutionalized heterosexuality—but the most important above all is that *arousal is not orientation.* Many people (nearly all of them straight, but far too many with Ph.D. or M.D. after their name) have often argued in favor of a theory of sexual orientation that makes arousal the primary—or even sole—factor involved in sexual orientation; others have asserted that arousal is orientation for males, but not for females, and so

on—but the fact of the matter is that things are much more complicated than that. What I feel, what I like, what I want, what I need; these things are related to, but not limited by, the intensity of physiological response produced by my body.

According to Fritz Klein, sexual orientation is composed of eight distinct dimensions, which need not be correlated (but often are). Since two are purely self-identification, one is behavioral, and two are social, I would like to focus on the three that I would truly consider to comprise "orientation," by which I mean one's personal sense of desire or preference for persons of a particular sex or gender. Though others use different names, I call these three dimensions the "erotic," which relates to the desire for sexual activity *per se*; the "romantic," including intimate relationships and long-term partnership; and the "platonic," which includes friendship and general social association. Of course, these three spheres are not wholly distinct, and we can imagine that there may be some grey areas, but I think they provide a useful tool for understanding.

The problem with science trying to measure the culmination of these three things—my "aggregate sexuality," as it were—is that most measures available focus almost exclusively on one dimension or another. For instance, a plethysmograph (that penis-measuring device I mentioned earlier) can *at best* only describe my erotic orientation; even at this it isn't perfect, since I might still be most erotically drawn to something other than what produces the strongest physical response. Still, it's not a bad measure: Given that I respond most strongly to heterosexual porn, it might be reasonable on this basis to say that I am probably to some degree heteroerotic. But this is only of incidental relevance to my *romantic* orientation, which describes the sort of persons that I would most prefer to enter a relationship with and maintain consistently as a life partner. As it turns out, I must consider myself *homo*romantic to some degree, because I would rather that my life partner be physically male and psychologically somewhat masculine. (Platonic orientation usually doesn't bother people as much; as it turns out I happen to be fairly biplatonic, with relatively equal distribution between male and female friendship.)

But wait—how can I be heteroerotic, on the one hand, and homoromantic, on the other? Does it mean that I couldn't possibly have a relationship with a woman, or that in a relationship with a man I couldn't possibly enjoy sex? No, it doesn't *Tendencies are not absolutes*, an idea we'd all do well to internalize. Gay men can love women, and straight men can love men. It's unfortunate that most people don't understand this, and indeed may well be shocked by the idea; but that doesn't change the truth. The fact that I would "prefer" in some abstract sense to be partnered with a man for the rest of my life does not render it completely impossible that I should end up with a woman, though it may indeed be less likely. And what about the converse; might my physiological inclination towards women make it more difficult to settle down with a man? I don't know; maybe it already has. That might be a reason to change it (which way?), were there any evidence that such a voluntary change is possible; I have studied the relevant psychology enough to say that no such evidence exists. I think on some level my erotic response is more based on sex (anatomy, biology, that sort of thing), and my romantic response is more based on gender (identity, social identity, personality)—so perhaps a transman would be a good fit for me? If so, why does that not seem especially appealing right now?

And to complicate matters further, there remains a question of whether sexual orientation is constant throughout one's life—or even from day to day. I honestly don't know; the answer might actually depend what you mean by the words "sexual orientation." My own intuition is that there is some underlying core orientation that stays largely constant, but that the specifics can be significantly modulated by moods and experiences day to day and year to year. Was I gayer this morning than last Thursday, or did it just feel that way? What if I was gayer for visual stimuli and straighter for smells? I can't say for sure, and I really don't know how one would even go about finding out—or if it really matters anyway.

I belie all of this complexity when I label myself "bisexual;" this I do mostly for my own convenience. Rather than pulling out a brochure for the Klein continuum and delivering an hour-long lecture explaining my own

multidimensional sexuality, it's easier for me to simply use a pre-existing label and present an image of someone who doesn't particularly care about the sex or gender of my partner. I can always explain the specifics later if it happens to come up. In the same way, I'm sure it's easier for a mostly homoerotic and heteroromantic young man who is presently just looking for sex to say that he is "gay" so it's clear what sort of person he's interested in right now. If such a man grows up and marries a woman, has that man sold out? Is he closeted? Maybe not; maybe the only thing that has changed is the particular face of his identity that is most salient in his life. Or maybe these things really can change at a deeper level, but the ways they change remain mysterious to us.

In any case, it's nowhere near as simple as we make it out to be. *Nor should we expect it to be!* Part of the problem is that we are bothering to taxonomize our sexuality in the first place. There are no psychologists charting out the percentage of people who prefer broccoli to asparagus, no pastors decrying the sinfulness of enjoying chocolate rather than vanilla. I have little doubt that these preferences are equally complicated as sexual orientation (broccoli goes better with stir-fry, but what about barbecued in tin-foil? Normally I like chocolate, but the other day, vanilla really hit the spot), but we simply don't bother to categorize people that way. We don't even do the same thing in other kinds of sexual preference: there isn't a word for someone who prefers blondes to brunettes, and there aren't political organizations dedicated to destroying or upholding the rights of foot-fetishists. For some reason, we see sexual orientation differently; grand institutions have been built around defining vaginal sex between one male and one female as the only acceptable sort of sexual behavior and all other sorts of sex as not merely distinct, but so much so that one is good, holy, even obligatory and the other is evil, degenerate, even unforgivable. Even if we grant them roughly equal ethical status (as most LGBT people and allies probably would), we still tend to see some profound distinction between these two kinds of sex, and by analogy between the sorts of people who choose to engage in them. Speaking as a biological scientist, this is not a

completely arbitrary distinction to make—obviously, male-female vaginal sex is the only kind of sex that ever produces children, and there are epidemiological differences as well—but it distorts and oversimplifies the issue immensely, elevating real but minor differences to absolute categories.

Ultimately, I think this is why it is so difficult to pin down a simple, accurate, measurable concept of sexual orientation: sexual orientation is not a concept we discovered, it is a concept we invented. It is imposed upon the world, not found within it; and except as a very broad generalization it does not accurately reflect the true state of human affairs. Maybe it is a convenient notion for certain circumstances (in a gay bar, I can expect to find men who are interested in men, at least in that particular context, at that particular moment in their lives); but we must be willing to abandon our convenient notions when they become oppressive.

So yes, I call myself "bisexual." It's easier, quicker this way; there is a little pink-purple-blue flag I can wear (that at least most LGBT people seem to recognize, though straights are typically befuddled); I have something to say when someone asks whether I like men or women. I have an identity label I can use when I speak on coming-out panels. And yes, I do all this even though my sexuality is vastly more complicated than the label makes it sound, so much so that indeed I'd probably fail a plethysmograph.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Julius is 20 years old, finishing out his second year (with junior status) of Brain, Behavior, and Cognitive Science in the Residential College and Honors Program at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Patrick is an Ann Arbor native, born and raised; his parents still live in town, but he refuses to commute. He writes for Beyond Masculinity wearing the label of "bisexual" (fairly accurate, yet incomplete, as his essay will describe), which he also wears on coming-out panels for the Speaker's Bureau of the University of Michigan Spectrum Center. He knows four languages (English, Latin, Arabic, and some Japanese), has written a book on special relativity, and is currently working on an invention that provides cardiovascular exercise and reduces carbon dioxide emissions at the same time.

PENIS. VAGINA. PENETRATION. THE END.

BRIAN LOBEL

"Sentimental survivorship stories be damned, I headed back to my college home of Ann Arbor, Michigan with but one item on my agenda: lose heterosexual virginity before ejaculations become retrograde and the threat of knocking up a woman becomes mere fantasy. I think my only possible rationale for trying to lose my virginity to a woman was that I was friends with Third Wave feminists and Second Wave lesbians, exclusively, in Ann Arbor and I really wanted to prove that I could have sex just like them."

Boy, girl, penis, vagina, penetration, the end. I was a queer virgin on a mission. I simply could not experience life without experiencing sex as most defined it – I just *couldn't*. But in order to remove the metastasized testicular cancer from my abdomen and finally enter the world of cancer survivorship and LiveStrong bracelets, one final hurdle was placed before me – the abdominal surgery which would potentially leave me with a life sans ejaculations.

Sentimental survivorship stories be damned, I headed back to my college home of Ann Arbor, Michigan with but one item on my agenda: lose heterosexual virginity before ejaculations become retrograde and the threat of knocking up a woman becomes mere fantasy. I think my only possible rationale for trying to lose my virginity to a woman was that I was friends with Third Wave feminists and Second Wave lesbians, exclusively, in Ann Arbor and I really wanted to prove that I could have sex just like them. Or as close as I could get. Regardless of the plan's logic, I arrived raring to go.

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Like the beginning of some stupid joke, I was a virgin on a crashing plane, looking in all directions for someone to do me one last wish. One dying wish… Oh, and I would also see some friends who were worried that I had died in the four months since leaving college, assuring them that I was alive and breathing after my chemotherapy. Admittedly, seeing those friends was not truly my week's primary goal. I never shared my cherry-popping agenda with anyone, though – anyone – for fear that I would lose my status as esteemed cancer patient and just be judged as an emaciated, hairless leach.

After I arrived back at my pre-cancer home, Ruth's Co-op, I began conceiving my plan. Which woman was the easiest? Most attractive? Most noteworthy? Was there anyone I actually cared about? I didn't care about caring, though… I didn't have time to care about caring - nor about attractiveness, cup size or reputation. I evaluated each of my potential lifesavers in an efficient, misogynistic and desperate cost-benefit analysis; how much money-slash-time-slash-emotional self would I be required to spend in order to have sex with any given woman.

I first turned to Raquelle Staffler, who had attempted to take my virginity four months earlier. Raquelle was my academic and artistic colleague at the University of Michigan, and, more importantly, the only other virgin I knew. We spent countless hours talking about our virginities on the steps of her Co-op, generally while smoking cloves or something similarly pretentious. (Please note that I didn't have cancer at this time, so my smoking wasn't offensive just yet.) We weren't prudes, just choosy, and figured that since we had waited long enough, it was best just to keep waiting. She was a fabulous, French-speaking Jewess with starlet hair who always threw elegant affairs, with good booze and a range of guests that included jocks, bookish-scientists and men comfortable enough with their masculinity that they wore butterfly wings on Halloween.

Four months before the pressures of boy, girl, penis, vagina, when she first heard of my diagnosis, Raquelle was quickly moved to action. On the eve of my departure from Ann Arbor, at the start of my cancer, I was packing at 2 AM, when I heard pebbles being thrown at my second story

window at Ruth's Co-op. At first I thought it might be my 8-day-gone right testicle, finding its way home like a faithful St. Bernard to my scrotum… And instead I saw her, Raquelle - the next best thing. I motioned her up and within seconds we were kissing, groping and feverishly dry humping. I fumbled with her shirt and black bra, grabbing and feeling around what was still a relatively uncharted area of the human body to me.

What Raquelle didn't know, however, was that for the past three days I had been making regular and somewhat painful trips to the area sperm bank before receiving a fertility-destroying dose of chemotherapy, and that getting my blood to even enter my shaft's erectile tissue, as she desired, was a near-impossible task… or maybe I just didn't really want to have sex with her. For the first time since my diagnosis, I pulled away and lowered my head, lips pursed. My cancer-face inspired immediate attention. She was powerless to its pathos. Raquelle quickly buttoned up her shirt, kissed my freshly shaven head, and wished me the best of luck.

Presuming a similar passion for my maidenhead, I figured that Raquelle, four months later, would be the easiest, breeziest – and that's exactly what I had time for. Boyfriend. Over coffee, she enthusiastically divulged that she now had a boyfriend… who? The guy with the butterfly wings. She had lost her virginity a few weeks earlier – and apparently, sex was amazing. Amazing. Yeah, I bet.

With no time to lose and less time to dwell, I quickly turned to Sandra. Beautiful, talented, intelligent, and she had a shady record that no one quite understood, which therefore meant that she could have been a major dl hooch, or a virgin like myself. Either one would work for my specific purposes. Lunch date, Cosi. We chatted for a while, but after a few minutes over matching Asian chicken salads, I realized that she was acting earnest as opposed to flirtatious as I had hoped -- I was an idiot to think that getting laid by a woman was that simple. I wallowed in my inability and lack of game with women and then tried to pass off the lunch as shop-talk about theater and art (which I of course didn't care about at all during this week-long jaunt in Ann Arbor). I was on a mission. A precious and now wasted 90 minutes

later, Sandra hugged me gently -- lest I break-- and after brief pecks on cheeks, we were on our way.

And then, somehow, my head became disconnected from my hands and I began typing the e-mail address that I had tried to erase from my bodily consciousness. The name I had sworn never to write or speak of again, after receiving an e-mail from him saying that he never wanted to speak again and that what had happened between us was never to be spoken of. Ever. I received this e-mail approximately 14 hours after my first experience with a man. This man. My former graduate student instructor, to be exact, , who I ended up instructing about many things one dark January night.

Immediately after he dropped me off a block from my freshman dorm during an ice storm, he wrote me an enthusiastic e-mail exclaiming how we should definitely hang out again… how this was weird but wonderful…and then, 14 hours later, his complete 180. I wasn't shocked. I mean, he was straight after all, and a former member of the Ukrainian secret service, so I wasn't going to fuck with him. I just decided that I hated him and that I never wanted to utter his name again. And, yet, here I was, almost a year to the day since that fateful night, typing him a casual, yet potent, e-mail.

Moments later I'm on a commuter bus and I am there, his apartment -- the same place as a year before. But this time during the day, right after he had taught one of his freshman honors seminars. We exchanged only a few words. He presented me with a meek apology about his disappearance because of how weirded out he was, and then that he had noticed that it had been months since he'd seen me on campus. I wanted to say that it had probably been four months, since it was roughly four months ago that I was diagnosed with cancer. I bit my lip, cancer's not appropriate at a time like this. This unexpected diversion was not, by the way, on my virginity-losing mission, especially because that journey was about sexual conquest, not apathetic reaffirmation of self-loathing.

I left all my clothes on except for my little white knitted cap, which would easily get hot and feel overwhelming atop my hairless head. He put his hand and forced my head where he wanted it to go – but he stopped for a

moment, only a brief moment, looked me in the eye and smiled. He told me how nice and smooth my head was. He told me "I always wanted to shave his head all the way with a razor, just like you, Brian." I pulled my lips shut, lest I reveal the sobering secret to my beauty. "I've always wanted a shaved head. I just never had the balls to do it." Again I bit my lip, cancer's not appropriate at a time like this.

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Is it inappropriate to talk about the virginity of someone who's dead? I'm pretty sure Lina would, in fact, mind and most likely be offended. She barely ever spoke -- she was shy about her heavy Russian accent, so she preferred spending time with her violin. I guess I'd never know whether she'd be offended or not. With her quiet brown hair, average build and closed-mouth smile, she rarely approached or was approached by others. To most, and often to me, she appeared unknowable.

Lina used to dance with me in Tzamarot, an Israeli folk dance troupe that was the center of my high school social life. It was rampantly queer (without knowing it), unabashedly Zionist (and proud of it), and every Wednesday from eight to nine-thirty. I don't know why Lina was in the class – she hated dancing and the ridiculous girls in the class. But, it was our social life, a place where intermingling was expected and closely monitored.

I found her fascinating. Maybe it was her accent, or the fact that she was a brilliant violinist. I don't know what it was, but Lina and I became fast friends. Fast friends? Well, acquaintances, really. We e-mailed and saw each other when I came home from Ann Arbor… and then one day she had cancer. A bad cancer.

My mother called me and told me. Since my mom wasn't working, she had offered to drive Lina to and from treatments, which everyone knew would never help. I called once or twice – we weren't best friends. I think I sent her a small stuffed animal that I later saw on her rack of small stuffed

animals, all gifts from other well-meaning clueless empathizers. This was months before my own cancer diagnosis, so I was still a newbie to cancer empathy.

When I finally got home from Ann Arbor so I could see her, her house smelled stale, full of death, and her neck…her neck was no longer there. The freak esophageal tumor bulged like a Seinfeld-ian joke, but it wasn't funny. It was going to kill her. Seeing as how I was 19 and not a bereavement counselor, we just sat and talked about music, classes and her comfort. Thankfully, I'm arrogant enough to fill conversation with things about me, as she was "doing" very little. I visited her every few days for a few weeks, until one day the stale smell was almost overwhelming. A fog of death had preemptively set. It was a feeling my mother always tried to air out of her car by rolling down the windows after she would drop Lina home from the hospital – a palpable feeling of mortality.

I knew that this was it – so I decided to reach across the divide between life and death and I'm pretty sure I mis-kissed Lina on the lips. It was nothing, devoid of sexual energy, just a simple interpersonal connection;. As a drop of her sweat lingered on my upper lip, I realized that, more likely than not, based on what I knew of her, Lina was going to die without sex. Or maybe she had had sex. Maybe I just didn't know about it because she's discreet and we weren't best friends. I hope she had had sex – or I guess I don't really care if she had had, at least not in the way others later cared about me dying a virgin. If she cared or not, no one would ever know. Only survivors get to tell their stories.

Whether or not I died a virgin was the first thing to enter Raquelle's mind – Raquelle who had come to make me come before I left Michigan to start my chemotherapy, afraid I would never come again. As if penetration were a proper part of my last rites. As if penetration were a proper part of everyone's last rites.

Is it inappropriate to talk about the virginity of someone's who dead? At the time, the last drop of sweat stayed on my upper lip – I couldn't wipe her away. I just wanted to wait until Lina had evaporated and I was once

again free from her mortality. And Lina, the presumed virgin, died the next morning.

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Eight months after Lina's death. Five months after diagnosis. Four days to lose my virginity before I had my surgery. It didn't help that my week-long sojourn in Ann Arbor coincided with the week of V-Day, Eve Ensler's vagina-friendly national campaign to stop violence against women, which made me feel guilty about both being a queer man who still prowled for sex from a straight woman and, more importantly, for distracting my already-busy lesbian friends from their vaginal activism. They seemed all-too-happy to spend time with me, buy me cookies and cuddle me, but I knew their hearts and vaginas were elsewhere – maybe this really wasn't the week I'd get to bag an unassuming woman…

But this plane was going to crash, and in the ensuing fire, my virginity would look at me, laugh, and bring me face-to-face with all the wouldas, couldas and the shouldas. So I made my way to The University of Michigan's largest theater for their V-Day show stopping spectacular – the Vagina Monologues – hoping to find a woman empowered by her own sexuality.

My most favorite lesbian, Johanna, was playing the Angry Vagina (you know, the really dyke-y, man-hating one). I couldn't have been more proud. We all entered with rainbow shirts, large decoupage-d placards proclaiming "We love your Angry Vagina Joh!" and sat down to form a row of almost-exclusively lesbians. Robinette, Lara and I, we were all happy and in love with vaginas. We wanted them in our lives -- albeit for different reasons. They wanted to scream Vagina, CUNT and be empowered in their sex lives, and I wanted desperately to meet a woman, get her to fall in love (or at least lust) with me and have sex in the next 96 hours… The countdown to my surgery had begun. The women shouted CUNT! And I responded "Please?"

CUNT! "Please?" CUNT! "Please!" I looked around, CUNT! "Where?" Water water all around and not a drop to drink!

And then, between Vagina Workshop and The Little Coochie-Snorcher That Could, I saw him – Adam Rubin. The king of the Co-op-ers who I'd never met before but whose reputation preceded him. Beautiful, crunchy, crunchily beautiful. He had that suburban smile that shone perfectly through his perma-stubble. He sat down next to me in the middle of the third or fourth vagina monologue – apparently also a friend of the Ann Arbor lesbians. We rubbed forearms, I thought accidentally. He smiled and looked right at me. He smiled beautifully, but strangely. I had never seen that smile used before.

He kept his forearm pressed against mine, ribbed turtleneck on ribbed turtleneck, for an amount of time that belied his "straightness," of which I had so oft heard. He was incredibly beautiful. Although I've since turned away from liking men who don't shower, the oil on Adam's face made him luminous in that theater against a sea of empowered women and reluctantly-present boyfriends. And he kept staring at me – looking and smiling, looking away, like a coy schoolgirl – and that smile, it was so foreign. His smile didn't communicate that he wanted to hang out sometime, it was a smile that said he wanted to take me home. He wanted to have sex with me.

Wait, stop. Boy, girl, penis, vagina, penetration, the end. The traditional definition of virginity had suddenly changed. It flipped, flopped, and broke apart, as perhaps it should have done much earlier in my life. I never said that I was straight – why had I wasted so much time begging to bone a broad? No time to reflect on that now, 96 hours left – full steam ahead. While the confessionals of empowered women repeated in the background, I was suddenly in another world – he wants to have sex with me tonight. Adam wants to have sex with me tonight.

A touch on the hand confirmed this and I began to smile back. Smile, turn away, just like he was doing. While we dutifully listened to retellings of war and rape in Afghanistan, our eyes continued to exchange clandestine moments – our dimples blew kisses at each other. Keep the forearms in

contact… perfect. The lights were mostly down and we shared this moment, just Adam and me, it was going to happen.

Maybe we'll even fall in love – that smile, the way he shyly looks away, he loves me. He loves me. I knew I felt it – It was such a beautiful feeling. I had never felt anything that strong… until a moment later when I was instantly bursting to pee. Ohhhh! I needed to pee! Because the chemotherapy I had recently taken left me a little short on the warning time in these kinds of moments, I unexpectedly popped up from my chair. I'm still a cancer patient at this point, prowling for sex at The Vagina Monologues, yes. – but a cancer patient, nonetheless. I squeezed my body in front of Adam's, Robinette's and Lara's and raced to the bathroom. My head spun around to see if Adam was looking, and I caught his eye just returning to the stage… This is it – I didn't know how it would fit in my journey or life story, but I did know that I would go home with Adam and have sex with him… the way he looked at me….

The instant I walked into the bathroom, I saw why he was looking at me,. I looked at myself in the mirror and there it was. There I was. An it. A cancer patient. 6'1, 120 pounds, with no hair and eyes severely sunken into my head. I was death. I was a walking symbol of death. I was mortality – and Adam was smiling nervously at mortality, not at a cute boy. Who would want this? And if anyone did want this, wouldn't I think that they were disgusting? The image of myself in the mirror would not let go – it suddenly became the image of the man on the crashing plane… swiftly going down without anyone to take his virginity. But there wasn't a convenient punch-line on such a grotesque and depressing sight.

That coy smile wasn't coy; it was fear. It was deep pity as shown behind a plate glass window, afraid that my mortality would leap the foot that separated us and spread to him too. I'm sure that he didn't know what it was that I had, but I'm sure he didn't want it. I wondered if he ran home and threw his clothes quickly into the wash, lest my mortality stain his carefree college life.

I couldn't stay for the rest of the Vagina Monologues. I left the bathroom, walked back to Ruth's Co-op and gave myself what I thought might be my last orgasm before I went to bed.

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Five weeks after my abdominal surgery and I still hadn't had an orgasm. I got worried the doctors may have been wrong. My surgeon had said that he didn't need to cut the nerve that facilitates ejaculation during the surgery, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe I had lost my chance forever. Maybe they thought I just wouldn't notice. Or they figured that no one but my-virgin-self would notice and therefore, the problem would be contained… My abdomen was bulbous, with what felt like a zipper of staples straight down the center. I sat on the recliner at my house, watching Seasons 1, 2 and 3 of *Sex and the City* on a loop – living vicariously through the sex lives of Carrie, Charlotte, Samantha and (my favorite), Miranda, none of whom ever appeared to lose their orgasms. And I did little else. I feared maybe the doctors were wrong. I had missed my chance, with Sandra, Raquelle, Adam, anyone and I would, assuredly, die sans penetrative sex with another person.

I was sleeping on my back, since showering had proved too difficult with the staples; I had gone 5 weeks without a proper shower; and I was in more of a haze than I was in actual sleep. And then, out of the blue, I see it: my classic wet dream image from adolescence, developing with Polaroid-like steadiness. There is a red-headed woman underwater with a front-clasp bikini. I looked closer, trying to make out her face. Was it Raquelle? No, no, no, Adam? No, Sandra? Rolando? Maybe it was one of my many lesbian gal-pals I loved and adored. Still no. Maybe it was my old babysitter, Heather, whose body and visage had originally inspired the original recurring dream.

I didn't know who it was, but I knew what would happen. Water all around, sunlight above, sand glistening in the distance… Maybe they were right, maybe I could do it, maybe I could do it, I could have penetrative sex… My dreaming eyes closed and re-opened, thereby taking in my muse. MIRANDA. Ohhhhhhhh….. Ahhhhhh…....Oh…. Ahhhh…. Oh… Ah… Ahhhhhh….. I'm not sure if that's the gayest person to get off to, or the straightest – but I do know that getting off to Cynthia Nixon officially makes me a lesbian.

For the first time, I didn't rush to wipe off my masturbated cum opting instead to lay in it, soaking in it, basking in all its glory: proud, hopeful… The virgin would not die in a ball of fire. I realized that, because I couldn't shower with my stitches, I wouldn't be able to wash the since-dried-cum on my abdomen for another few weeks. But I knew, positively, that there could and would be a future.

And there was a future. Six months later, on my first date with Nikki, it happened. Boy, girl, penis, vagina, penetration, the end. Well, it was better than that – actually kind of nice. As we lay on the floor - an awkward one-balled queer and a 26-year-old art historian/tattoo artist, I revealed to Nikki that I had just lost my virginity. Ahhh…. Conquest. Nikki quickly dressed, made me dress, apologized and sent me home. Hmm?

The next morning, I received a frantic phone call from her, begging me to join her at Espresso Royale, where Nikki had gotten us a table. Over our mochas, she leaned in with a face I had hitherto known as only the cancer-face, serious and well-intentioned and asked "Did I rape you last night?"

It was a serious question with a serious face attached to it and I smiled, "No Nikki, No. You did not rape me last night. You have no idea how long I waited for that to happen." And she smiled, relieved that she hadn't ruined the life of a cancer survivor – and after that, it was all behind us. Or at least my virginity was behind us. Or my virginity was behind me. Err, mostly.

The End.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Lobel is a writer/performer and theater director originally from Delmar, New York. His plays BALL and Other Funny Stories About Cancer and Festival of Lights Alive have been produced in Chicago (at the Bailiwick Repertory Theatre and Live Bait Theater) as well as at over 50 theaters, universities and medical schools around the world. Brian is the recipient of the 2004 Hopwood Drama Award for BALL and a 2006 CAAP Grant from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs to develop Other Funny Stories. You can find his website at http://www.brianlobel.com

TOP TO BOTTOM

J. MACEY

"It wasn't too long ago that I discovered the scores of gay bio guys on craigslist looking for gay trans guys. When I began transition in high school, and later when I discovered the existence of trans guys who like other guys, and even later when I realized my existence as a trans guy who likes every gender (but never blonde), I by no means thought I'd live to see the day that FTMs were fetishized. For better or worse, everyone knows about transgender women, but female-to-male might as well mean unicorn-to-leprechaun; the general population doesn't understand we exist, let alone how cool we are."

After sitting in a cubicle all week, there's nothing I enjoy more than disco. Away from my boring breeding co-workers, a night spent dancing with a group of sweaty, shirtless, gregarious, and generally hot guys is relaxing and reminds me that there's light at the end of the workweek. Even if most of the people in the club are strangers, there's a sense of commonality that I have neither experienced nor witnessed at straight clubs; straight guys fight, queer guys vogue. That's why having our own separate space is so important.

As a toned 20-something with a thick head of hair and a flattering wardrobe, and especially as a top, I get my fair share of attention at the clubs. But even if I happen to be single at the time, and even if the potential suitor appears to fit my ridiculously narrow parameters for potential boyfriends, I'm rarely interested in allowing anything to develop. It took awhile to not feel like a loser dancing only with friends, or alone, but it also took me a long time to learn that I look better without rings on half my fingers and a silver chain beneath my chest hair.

One drunken Saturday night, after the friends I'd come with had hooked up with other people, I decided to approach a guy who'd thrown me a couple glances. We had a great time. He me all the prerequisites: height (not too tall); hair (full and dark), and position (bottom, bottom, bottom!). When he yell-whispered into my ear the precise kink that consumes my fantasies, I almost took him home.

But take him home I didn't. I told him to wait for me while I went to use the bathroom. But I never came back. Instead, my buddies and I stumbled to the 24-hour greasy diner requisite of a proper gay night out and made our way home, completing another gloriously repetitive night. Needless to say, the next day I felt like a complete asshole.

For me, casually dating or fucking guys is a lot of work. In fact, to the surprise of many, I find that it can be harder with men than with women. We've all heard the line about bisexuality being sensible because it increases one's prospective dating pool, and while that's still true for me, the numbers don't increase for a female-to-male transsexual top the way they do for non-trans tops.

It wasn't too long ago that I discovered the scores of gay bio guys on craigslist looking for gay trans guys. When I began transition in high school, and later when I discovered the existence of trans guys who like other guys, and even later when I realized my existence as a trans guy who likes every gender (but never blonde), I by no means thought I'd live to see the day that FTMs were fetishized. For better or worse, everyone knows about transgender women, but female-to-male might as well mean unicorn-to-leprechaun; the general population doesn't understand we exist, let alone how cool we are. (Well, some of us.) Now that more and more gay guys are realizing that they can enjoy dating and fucking us, the lives of biomen-loving-transguys are changing.

However, with appreciated exception, almost every FTM-chasing fag is looking for a bottom. There are a lot of FTM-chasing tops and FTM bottoms, and I'll bet they're having a lot of hot sex as you read this. Good for all of them. But back to me: What's a transguy top to do? I can't speak

from personal experience, but suspect that most bioguys would rather hear that I have crabs than about the pimped out equipment I carry below my belt.

Due to this frustrating reality, I don't sleep around, and I am discriminating about whom I'll pursue. At this point in my life, as a young, untethered, self-sufficient, and generally confidant and content man, I don't pursue anyone I don't have reason to believe is worth the hassle. Bottoms are a lot of work, whether they love you or not. I don't like to waste my time or anyone else's.

I'm not one of those FTMs who thinks that we should deny the benefits of the tranny bonus hole; far from it. As someone who loves and appreciates bottoms, and sort of relies upon them to have real sex, I think it's great when other transmen are able to fully utilize the complexities of their bodies while retaining their sense of masculinity and integrity. Smoke 'em if you've got 'em.

I, however, am not a bottom. This seems to leave guys confused as to what, exactly, I expect to do with them. For example, there's the closet-case who bottomed with every other guy he was with, who I handcuffed and spanked, who still thought I was a bottom. After untying him, he nervously moved between my legs, furrowed his brow, and took aim before I realized his intentions.

It's not just the prospect of having sex with me that seems to confuse guys, though. Then there's the guy I met at a club and went out with a few times. He was gorgeous, and on our first date unexpectedly told me, "I will cook for you, I will clean for you, but I am keeping my job! Now watch the movie." Upon learning what makes me so interesting, he looked devastated and said that he had to go home to take a nap. I never saw him again, and needless to say, that's a good thing.

I've been talking tranny to friends, enemies, schools, co-workers, and medical and social service providers for years now. Though I've gained insight and otherwise benefited from doing so, that game for me is as played out as the phrase played out. Once tragically desperate to discuss gender

until I lost the energy to lift my perfectly pomaded head, eventually it seems that I said everything I had to say – repeatedly – to varying reactions. Thus, in an effort to preempt more talk (any short, dark haired, funny vegetarian bottoms reading this?), let me cover some of the important stuff right here – some of the stuff I'm tired of explaining. You'll notice that I am most tired of explaining the physical mechanics of my body, as other aspects of transgender life are at least more likely to avoid me repeating myself. Hopefully if I hit on you you'll know what to look forward to having read this.

Foremost, before getting to the flesh and bolts, know that my masculinity is not debatable. If you're having a hard time seeing me as a man, deal with it. I'm probably having a hard time seeing you as interesting. Don't explain to me the conditions under which you will accept my masculinity, or those under which you will not ("Well, as long as you stand up…"). Remember that heterosexism questionnaire that delighted you the first five times you read it? The one that asks how people know they're straight if they've never made sweet, sweet love to someone of the same sex? Well, I've lived as a woman. I've seen the 'other' side (though we all know gender isn't *really* binary, right?) and know in my heart that I am not one. Most men know that without ever having lived as a woman; I at least made the effort to do the research. If there were only so much masculinity to go around, who would be more deserving: the guy who hardly noticed his, or the one who dwelled on it, paid countless dollars, lost the support of supposedly supportive people, and generally took great risks to be who he is?

As are many FTMs, I am passable. Unless you have seen many, many transguys, (seriously, a lot of transguys) you'd assume I was born male if I approached you at a bar. I am officially average height for an American man, tragically hairy, and last month I was called "straight-acting" by a guy who seemed to think I would find it a compliment. As are many FTMs, I have a muscular chest with surgical scars - which I'd prefer were absent, or at least less prominent, but the fact is that I was stacked, and I'm grateful that the

surgeon got the topography right. Being able to just put on a t-shirt and rush out the door is a luxury I now try to remember to not take for granted.

There are many reasons that transguys often choose not to have bottom surgery. Amongst them are access to proper medical care, the monetary cost, and dangerously varying results. My reason, however, is that after top surgery and the better part of a decade on testosterone, my body is already awesome.

The clitoris has over 8,000 nerve fibers, more than any other organ in the body of any sex, and exists solely for sexual pleasure. Mine is on steroids. Time permitting, I can orgasm about five times a day and never once make a mess. Impotence isn't anything for me to worry about (my impotence, that is). Partners with sensitive gag reflexes have no problem with me, but can feel in their mouths the difference between erection and post-erection. If I am so horny that my vision blurs, I can slip my hands into my jeans and bring myself sexual relief without the sounds or evidence typical of bio males. There's no need for a jock strap, because my equipment doesn't flop all over the place (rude!). Then there's my opinion that a flaccid penis tends to appear depressed and resigned, as though the subject of an insufferable country song. If I want to piss standing up, or bend a hot guy over the couch and fuck him, I have attachments that will do the trick – any size, shape, or color, electric or standard, so long as we both shall live. Transguys and our appendages have come a long, long way together. And if the health of a particular appendage was to come into question, it could be replaced much more easily than one permanently attached to my body.

To take this thorough analysis one step further, men-loving-bio men: If you assume your partner needs a dick to give you a good time in bed, you are unimaginative and uninspired and possibly not doing it right. Necessity breeds creativity, and I've learned how to get what I want and fulfill my partner at the same time. If you're dependent upon something up your ass to get off, great; you can suck off your FTM top and have him bend you over within moments – we don't take nearly as long to recharge. More bang for your buck.

I could have explained all this to the hot guy at the disco that night, and maybe I should have. But I wasn't obligated to share so much about myself after a little dancing and groping, or give an impromptu workshop on tranny loving, or – worst case scenario – have to defend myself in any way. I shouldn't have to, because I'm not wearing a disguise. What you see is what you get, and if you're seeing things that aren't there, you need to watch more *Priscilla*. Assumption is the mother of all fuck ups, baby. Maybe I could have taken home that hot, dark-haired bottom, pushed him down, and gotten right to business without giving him the chance to be a jerk. Maybe he'd spent years dating FTM tops and hoped I was one. How the hell do I know?

The moral of the story is that there's often more to transmen than meets the inexperienced eye. We were never the elusive unicorns that we are sometimes made out to be, though we played the part of something that felt comparably foreign. Take it from a top, guys: If you come across a hot transguy whilst cruising the bars, consider whether you are reading his sexuality correctly. If you make the right moves, he, like a leprechaun, may just bring you good luck. You might not be used to our charms, but they're delicious.

Well, mine are, at least.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Macey lives in a liberal city in an otherwise unmentionable state and has eyesight permanently damaged from long evenings spent writing at an old wooden desk in an older brick apartment building. The author's angry housecat recently mutilated a handsome antique captains chair that rests its pleather body upon genuine mahogany legs; it was his favorite piece of furniture. It is nearly impossible to find quality pleather furniture, so if you do, defend it from said tabby. She is 11" tall and does not answer to anything.

III. NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

SHAKING OUR SHELLS: CHEROKEE TWO-SPIRITS REBALANCING THE WORLD

QWO-LI DRISKILL

"This story—in the form of a Stomp Dance—emerges from conversations and experiences with other Cherokee Two-Spirits, as well as from other Native Two-Spirit people. Over the years, my Cherokee Two-Spirit friends and I have been imagining who we are through conversations with each other and through a commitment to decolonial projects. Cherokee Two-Spirit people are currently involved in a complex process of asserting our identities through strengthening memories of our past, committing to who we in our present, and imagining who we want to be in the future."

Sagwu / One: A Call to Assemble

On the White Path home
dark soil gifts our dances back.
Songs rise up like corn,
turtle shell shackles shake history.

White and purple beads weave us to remember
strength that gifts our dances back.
From our ancestors' bodies
we rise up like corn.

The White Path home
gifts back our dances.
Hope, rise up
like corn.

Come on all you Two-Spirit people. Hurry!

In Oklahoma, Stomp Dance is a central ceremonial practice for Cherokees and other Native people from the Southeastern "United States." The Stomp Dance is performed to maintain *duyuktv*—balance, truth, justice—a central idea to traditional Cherokee worldviews. Wilma Mankiller tells us, "There is an old Cherokee prophecy which instructs us that as long as the Cherokees continue traditional dances, the world will remain as it is, but when the dances stop, the world will come to an end" (29, 1993). This essay is modeled on a Stomp Dance, based on descriptions by Cherokee ethnomusicologist Charlotte Heth. Stomp Dances begin with a call to assemble, and so I would like to call us together, as Cherokee Two-Spirit people, to reflect on and imagine what it means to be who we are. Specifically, because of the nature of this collection, I want to call together male-embodied Cherokee Two-Spirits to think about the very important obligations we have to rebalance gender systems through working to end sexism, transphobia, and queerphobia in our communities.

As we assemble, I know that there are non-Cherokees and non-Two-Spirit people who are also with us, listening to this story. I would like to ask our guests to sit and just listen from a distance, understanding that because I'm speaking to other Cherokee Two-Spirits/GLBTQ folks, that there are many questions, issues, and terms that I won't be explaining here. And since I brought up terminology, I would like to say to other Cherokee Two-Spirit people that we need to remember that gender systems before invasion and colonization were not the same as they are now. While we subsume same-sex relationships and gender "non-conformity" under the umbrella of "Two-Spirit," it is difficult to say if these identities were linked together in the past.

There are numerous experiences and identities that we shove under terms like "Two-Spirit" or "Queer" or "GLBT." I've heard several different terms to talk about these identities in Cherokee, but I am going to use "Two-Spirit" as my umbrella term here, knowing that not all of us use this term for ourselves any more than all of us use any of the other terms available to us in English. All of these terms and ideas are slippery and complicated, but "Two-Spirit" carries with it a particular commitment to decolonization and Indigenous histories and identities that is at the center of this particular telling.

This story—in the form of a Stomp Dance—emerges from conversations and experiences with other Cherokee Two-Spirits, as well as from other Native Two-Spirit people. Over the years, my Cherokee Two-Spirit friends and I have been imagining who we are through conversations with each other and through a commitment to decolonial projects. Cherokee Two-Spirit people are currently involved in a complex process of asserting our identities through strengthening memories of our past, committing to who we in our present, and imagining who we want to be in the future.

Because I weave wampum records, I find the metaphor of re-weaving a wampum belt a useful way to think about this particular point in the recovery, creation, and maintenance of who we are as Cherokee Two-Spirits. While many Cherokees have forgotten the importance of wampum records, at one time they were central to Cherokee diplomatic relationships, legal agreements, and record-keeping. There are seven wampum belts that remain important to Cherokee Stomp Dance communities, and they are used to remember and transmit central religious teachings. One of these belts depicts a white path against a field of purple beads, symbolizing the importance of walking *duyuktv*, of moving through life on a path of peace, justice, and balance.

During the chaos of the past 460 years since De Soto invaded our lands, Cherokee Two-Spirits have been largely erased and hidden. It's as if the story of who we are and our place in the world was woven into a beautiful wampum belt. And then

hate's long knives
tore through
deerskin, sinew

Purple and
white beads flew
through air
thick with
smoke
from burning
townhouses

Beads scattered into
undergrowth
pushed deep
into feet-bloodied paths

Beads hidden
high in caves
by the escaped

Everything
sliced
into pieces.

We've internalized unbalanced power relationships between men and women, between Two-Spirit people and others. Our work as Two-Spirit Cherokees is to mend these relationships and aid our communities in healing. We must weave the pieces of our story back together.

Given the brutal history of the past several hundred years, it should come as no surprise that many Cherokees have tried to suppress Two-Spirit people and histories, or that many Cherokee Two-Spirits struggle with

making sense of who we are within our tribal traditions. Sometimes all we have left are fragments.

But sit still.
Listen close.
Look: four white beads there in your right hand,
three purple beads here in mine.

We can travel back over
removal routes
gathering beads.

Some of us have large pieces of the belt.
Some of us only have scraps of singed deerskin.

But we begin
to remember
the pattern.

Come on all you Cherokee Two-Spirits!
We are assembled here to continue
our story.

Each of us
has a piece.

Tal' / Two: Daksi, Daksi, Daksi Alegwui / Come on All You Shell Shakers

Crickets hum a heartbeat rhythm under a hot Oklahoma night. Women wearing turtle shell or milk can leg shackles are called to dance. The figures of women are silhouetted against the light of the sacred fire, answering the call.

At the Stomp Dance, we are called to the fire to sing, to dance, to honor Creation. It is part of men's responsibilities to sing songs, and women's responsibilities to shake shells. Stomp Dances cannot take place without shell shakers: our lifeways are dependent on them. Brian Joseph Gilley's book *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* mentions the fact that some male-embodied Two-Spirit Cherokees are shaking shells as a reflection of their place within ceremonial communities and traditions (141-143, 2006). At this particular time in our history Cherokee Two-Spirit people of all genders are calling each other out of hiding, out of the confines of white notions of who we are. We are being called to take our place within our communities, to "shell shake" our traditions in order to restore *duyuktv*. The responsibilities we have as male-embodied Two-Spirit Cherokees—to sustain our lifeways and cultures—is like shell shaking. We have the responsibility to restore and maintain *duyuktv* through practicing Cherokee lifeways and ending gender oppressions.

Two-Spirit liberation is part of a larger process of decolonization. Many of the current conversations and activism in both radical Queer and Trans communities as well as mainstream GLBT movements tend to ignore the colonial realities and contexts that are the center of struggles for Two-Spirit people. As Native feminists such as Beth Brant, Chrystos, and Andrea Smith have pointed out, current systems of gender oppression and homophobia in the Americas are part of ongoing colonization and genocide against Native people. Non-Native Queer movements often place sexuality and gender as oppositional to heteronormative practices, and with good

reason. While similar politics certainly come into play in Two-Spirit movements, the more central argument that we are making is that our lives and identities—including, but not limited to issues of sexuality and gender—are integral to Indigenous struggles for decolonization, self-determination, and cultural continuance. Taking this stance isn't a "mainstreaming" tactic, but instead is a radical act against colonial mindsets and empires that surround us, trying to dissolve our claim on these continents. Two-Spirit people are not asking our tribal communities to accept us as "just like" straight gendered people. We are asking our communities to remember who we, as nations, are. And, just as importantly, we are asking our communities to imagine who we want to be. Two-Spirit people can change patterns in our communities that are damaging. We are looking to our core values to imagine the places we should have in our communities. Two-Spirit Cherokees are calling each other out of shadows to participate in the rebalancing of the world. And it is through living up to our responsibilities as Cherokees, particularly as Two-Spirits, that we "shell shake." We are insisting that we have a place in the circle and that our lives and work in the world is absolutely and uncompromisingly necessary to the continuance of Cherokee traditions.

Daksi, daksi, daksi alegwui!
Come on all you shell shakers! Hurry!

Tso / Three: Friendship Dance

Shell shakers begin shuffling out a rhythm as men in cowboy hats and baseball caps sing. Some of us are elders, some of us are young, some of us use canes. We are all part of the circle.

Now that shell shakers and song leaders are assembled, we can begin a Friendship Dance. The Friendship Dance, like all performances during the Stomp Dance, reflects a balance between genders, and I think that it is a useful way to think about traditional Cherokee relationships with gender.

Before European invasions and concerted efforts by missionaries to disrupt our culture, Cherokee gender systems reflected *duyuktv*. Two-Spirit people in the Southeast have been a target of colonial violence since the Spanish invasion. Patriarchal Spain— perpetuating an Inquisition in Europe and continuing the Inquisition in the Americas—customarily murdered gender non-conforming people. Women's central place within Cherokee life was looked at with fascination and derision by European invaders, who mockingly labeled our nation a "petticoat government" and misinterpreted Cherokee female warriors as "amazons."

When European invaders and missionaries began toppling Cherokee gender roles, all of *duyuktv* was disrupted. Before this, women had jurisdiction over their children, homes, and community agriculture. They had authority over our homelands. Colonial powers, in an effort to gain control of our landbases, toppled Cherokee women's traditional roles as leaders and diplomats and almost destroyed our matrifocal clan system. Through violent enforcement of patriarchy, gender relationships made a dramatic shift. Rather than seeing the roles of men and women as always in *duyuktv*, Christian European patriarchy enforced ideas of male supremacy, rigid gender categories, and sexuality as something to be suppressed and controlled.

I was recently talking with a Cherokee Two-Spirit friend of mine about how Two-Spirit people embody *duyuktv*. Two-Spirit people have an intimate relationship with, and obligation to, *duyuktv* because of our specific relationships with gender. Healing from our history entails recognizing how damaging colonial gender is to lives. We must claim gender as a Friendship Dance that places us all within the circle of our communities, rather than allowing gender to be site of violence and tool of oppression. While masculine-identified straight males may gain societal privilege because of their genders and sexualities, we know that their gender experiences are often filled with abuse and violence from childhood in order to inscribe patriarchal values—and a fear of stepping outside of them—onto their psyches. Those of us socialized as male know the very real physical, emotional, and psychological dangers of that process. The internalization and manifestations of patriarchy move Cherokees further away from *duyuktv,* undermine struggles for decolonization, and buoy the power of colonial regimes. Remembering who we are as Cherokees entails unlearning colonial gender systems.

As a male-embodied Two-Spirit, part of my work is to move back and forth between different gendered spaces, taking information about those experiences with me and sharing them with others. People see me as countless genders including a Queer man, as Gay guy who wears skirts, a Queer woman, a straight woman, a drag queen, a Trans woman, a Trans man, a transvestite, a cross-dresser, an androgynous person, and a straight man. Moving through these spaces has taught me that most of them are deadly dangerous. One of the gifts of experiencing gender from multiple angles is gaining knowledge to work against sexism and gender regimes in all of our communities. Transforming this knowledge into radical, non-violent action against sexism and transphobia is a Friendship Dance that helps restore *duyuktv* to gender systems. As male-socialized people, we are just as responsible for ending sexist oppression as straight men. Seeing gender as a Friendship Dance involves constant examination of the ways we are both injured and privileged because of being born male in a patriarchal country.

Native women have long called Native men to work in solidarity with them against sexist oppression. Male-embodied Two-Spirit people must answer that call and aid in dismantling gender and sexual oppression. This is part of our responsibility in restoring *duyuktv*. We must shell shake and sing a Friendship Dance to mend the damage done to Cherokee gender through invasion, genocide, and removal.

Nvgi / Four: Stomp Dance

Our songs weave with Cricket's, with Turtle's, with the songs of our grandmothers and grandfathers. They sing of loss and love, of our stubborn and gorgeous survival, of our determination to continue.

Stomp dancing is central to the continuance of our traditions, and remembering who we are as Two-Spirit people is a part of that continuance. When I meet other Cherokee Two-Spirits it isn't long before we are piecing together bits of information that each of us carry about what it means to be who we are. Through sharing our stories, what we've taught ourselves, what we've learned from traditionalists and elders, and what we have pieced together from books and dreams, we create the living archives of our history. We are stomp dancing our story back to us.

Almost all of the Two-Spirit people I know are deeply committed to carrying on our lifeways, reviving traditions that have gone dormant if necessary. I think that this is a logical path for Two-Spirit people to follow. For example, I've had to search for what my gender-sexuality has meant in the past so that I can understand what it means in the present and future. Through this journey I've become deeply invested in also relearning our language, songs, dances, and arts. This process of cultural revitalization, for all of us, is like a stomp dance. It is through this work that we rebalance the world.

Each Cherokee Two-Spirit must listen closely to ourselves and remember what work we are meant to do in this world. Some of us are deeply committed to the Cherokee language. Others of us are invested in learning and teaching particular arts. There are Two-Spirit Cherokees dedicated to ceremonial communities, and those who are uncovering our histories through research and scholarship. Many of us work for the well-being of our environment or fight against the numerous forms of oppression that face us daily. Through this stomp dance we ensure our survival. And, like a stomp dance song, our actions call out to other Cherokees who respond through their own singing and shell shaking, spiraling around the center of who we are.

Hisgi / Five: Old Folks' Dance

Dawn is arriving. Shell shakers and singers have danced all night long, ensuring the continuance of the world. At dawn we will end our cycle of dances with the Old Folks Dance.

I want to think about the Old Folks Dance as a way of looking to our elders and ancestors to mend our story and understand who we are in the present. Even though traditions that we are now calling "Two-Spirit" are not as well documented for Cherokees as they are in other tribes, we do have a past and a history, and it is important to remember that there are as many different ways of being Cherokee and Two-Spirit as there are Cherokee Two-Spirits.

Like so many Two-Spirit people I know, as I have come to understand my sexuality and genders, I have hungered to understand who people like us may have been to our communities in the past in order to help imagine who we are now. Cherokees don't have the luxury of some Two-Spirit people to have both very clear documentation and voluminous living memory of who we have been within our tribal traditions. Certainly all Two-Spirit people are

currently in a process of uncovering this history, but I think that for some Native people—including Cherokees—that this process is more challanging than it is for others. I've encountered very little reference to Cherokee Two-Spirit people in historical accounts, though such references do exist. As part of this Old Folks Dance, I want to share some of the references I have come across to Two-Spirit people in Cherokee tradition, and ask you to listen to what these stories might mean to us now. The purpose of this is simply to provide information to other Cherokee Two-Spirits who are searching for these fragments. I am certainly not the only Cherokee Two-Spirit person involved with uncovering these histories, and I am sure that there is more documentation, published and not, than these brief mentions that I am pointing to here. And, much of this knowledge is held by traditional people and not in written records. Written documentation of our past is often based on European colonists' reactions to Cherokee gender, who thought that *all* of our genders were "variant." Colonists likely saw female warriors or women in positions of leadership as living as men, even though these were acceptable—and important—roles for women in Cherokee gender systems. Trying to glean from colonial accounts which of these female-embodied people might now be called "Two-Spirit" and which were simply acting in accordance with Cherokee traditions for women is very difficult. We must remember these kinds of complexities as we continue to uncover our past and re-weave our present. I would like to spend some time talking about a few references to Cherokee Two-Spirit histories from published texts and from my archival research, offering them as wampum beads to other Cherokees that we can use to weave our story back together.

In Sarah H. Hill's excellent book *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Women and Their Basketry,* I found a brief mention of male-embodied Two-Spirit people that suggests that males who lived as women were as respected members of their communities as other women:

> Pardo…saw among those subsequently known as Cherokees a man who "went among the Indian women, wearing an apron like they did." The startled Spaniard summoned his interpreters and "many soldiers" to ask the local chief about him.

> The man was his brother, the chief explained, and was not "a man for war." With neither elaboration nor scorn for the scribe to record, the chief said his brother "went about in that manner like a woman," doing "all that is given to a woman to do." It is a slender thread of history suggesting that among Cherokees, as among many native peoples, gender and labor interwove to create identity (66, 1997).

Theda Perdue's *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* also has some discussion of males and females we might now call Two-Spirit, though I disagree about her conclusions about male-embodied Two-Spirits. While she writes that it is "difficult to ascertain" Cherokee responses to gender "anomalies," some of her information can be coupled with the brief mention of male-embodied Two-Spirits made by Hill and perhaps shift Perdue's conclusions (Perdue 37, 1998). While there is very useful information for Two-Spirit people in Perdue's book, she asserts that male-embodied Two-Spirits were not well respected because of a lack blood rites via war or menstruation (Perdue 39, 1998). This does not take into account the possibility of other blood rites existing for male-embodied Two-Spirits via ritual scratching, tattooing, or other kinds of activities. If blood rites defined Cherokee gender roles during this period, it only makes sense that blood rites existed for male-embodied Two-Spirits to ensure they remained part of the community. One must at least consider the possibility that male-embodied Two-Spirit people who lived as women would still have a warrior tradition open to them, just as it was open to other women. Purdue draws conclusions about Cherokee gender constructions based on gender in other tribes, but lacks this sort of analysis when it comes to male-embodied Cherokee Two-Spirit people. While broad generalizations cannot be made, the fact that in some traditions male-embodied Two-Spirits engaged in simulated menstruation could suggest that similar practices may have existed among Cherokees (Gay American Indians & Roscoe 38, 1988). Certainly many contemporary Two-Spirit Cherokees go to great length to ensure their physical bodies reflect their gender identities. Regardless of Perdue's interpretation, her book provides important information about Cherokee Two-Spirits that we can use to understand who we are in the present.

Walter L. Williams' *The Spirit and the Flesh* only marginally speaks about Cherokees, but he cites a manuscript by C.C. Trowbridge that mentions male-embodied Two-Spirits. Williams quotes this excerpt from the Trowbridge manuscript: "There were among them formerly, men who assumed the dress and performed all the duties of women and who lived their whole lives in this manner" (4, 1992). During the roundtable "Indigenous Politics and the Question of Same-Sex Marriage" at *What's Next for Native American and Indigenous Studies?* David Cornsilk mentioned that this particular document goes on to suggest that marriage was practiced by all Cherokees, including Two-Spirit people (Kauanui 2007).

In my own archival research, I stumbled across a reference to Cherokee same-sex union ceremonies in John Howard Payne's manuscript on Cherokee life. John Howard Payne was a EuroAmerican actor and playwright who lived for a period of time with Chief John Ross in order to document Cherokee customs. Payne mentions this union ceremony more than once in his manuscript, which describes a particular performance to formalize "perpetual friendship." I am including a long excerpt from his account in order to offer this information to other Cherokee Two-Spirits uncovering our histories. Seeing the process of looking to our past as an Old Folks Dance not only means looking to our histories and elders, it also means sharing that information with other Two-Spirit people as an act of reciprocity. Payne documents the following same-sex union ceremony:

> Taking an opportunity sometime during that feast, when the people were seated in the council house, they arose, walked toward the fire, and then turned and commenced dancing around the fire…each having on his best clothes. While dancing, in the presence of all the people, who looking, they exchanged one garment after another till each had given the other his entire dress, even to legings, mocasins etc. and thus each of them publicly received the other as himself, & became thus pledged to regard and treat him as himself while he lived. Sometimes two women, and sometimes a man and a woman contracted this friendship. Thus when a young man and woman fell in love with each other but were hindered from marrying, either by relation or by being of the same clan, they bound themselves in perpetual friendship. While dancing round the fire as above stated, the man threw his blanket over the woman, and the woman as soon as convenient threw hers to the man. The man also, having prepared a cane sieve, & hung it by a string over his shoulder, gave her that. He also presented her with a pestle to pound corn with. The mortar he had for her at home (Volume III, 49-50, ca 1835).

While Payne makes sense of this as a friendship ceremony, I doubt very much that it was a ceremony only to cement a "friendship." The fact that Payne mentions opposite-sex couples in love, but not able to have children because of clan laws, suggests that the same-sex couples were likewise in love. Perhaps what was common to both opposite-sex and same-sex couples in this arrangement was the fact that they would not be bearing biological children. The fact that the opposite-sex ceremony is not terribly different than contemporary "traditional" Cherokee marriage ceremonies leads me to think that the same-sex ceremonies were likewise a public ceremony to define a loving, romantic, same-sex relationship.

What does all of this mean to us now? I think we must decide that in our own lives and communities. Should I ever have a public union ceremony, for instance, I certainly would want to incorporate aspects of this older same-sex union. It is my hope that uncovering this bit of information will be useful to Cherokee Two-Spirit people who are part of ceremonial communities in re-weaving our places within our traditions, and for those who are working to document both same-sex relationships and complex gender systems in Cherokee traditions in order to work against the internalization of dominant culture's values around these issues. Putting aspects of our past into practice is part of an ongoing Old Folks Dance that honors our history and rebalances our present and future.

Another way of thinking about our work as an Old Folks Dance is to look at the values contained in our traditional stories. Cherokee stories talk about beings that were the most hated, (like Buzzard), the most mocked, (like Water Spider) and sometimes the most feared (like Uktena and Stonecoat), and how they were the ones that created the world, our lifeways, and formed the landscapes of our homelands. It is important to remember people from our history (like Sequoyah) and present (like Wilma Mankiller), who have had to overcome skepticism, prejudice, and disdain—and how important they are to our survival and identity as a people. These stories are precedent for our identities as Cherokee Two-Spirit people.

Aside from historical accounts of Cherokee Two-Spirit people and traditional stories, we also have artists and writers who have gone before us, like the playwright Rollie Lynn Riggs, whose play *Green Grow the Lilacs* was the basis for the musical Oklahoma, or the late Vickie Sears, a writer / activist / psychotherapist and author of *Simple Songs: Stories.* We are also blessed to have living writers and scholars such as Daniel Heath Justice. Justice's fantasy series *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* creates a central place for Two-Spirit people, and his scholarship honors our intellectual and artistic history. Cherokee Two-Spirits are building places our future by looking to our past, dancing an Old Folks Dance to rebalance the present.

Sudal' / Six: Prayer

Unetlanvhi,
Wa'do for all the blessings you give us.
Wa'do for our food, our water, our homes, our friends, our family.
Wa'do for bringing us to this place and time to do this work.

Help us not be afraid.
Help us walk duyuktv.
Help us continue our language and our lifeways.
Help us do the work that we need to do to heal ourselves, our communities, and our world.

Wa'do

Gal'quog' / Seven: Going Home

After the sun rises and we return to our homes, we carry the power of community with us. Cherokee Two-Spirit folks are telling each other stories as we weave ourselves back together. We pull together the strands that our elders have given us, the traditions that have ensured our survival, carefully replace the beads that have become lost or broken, and re-imagine the pattern of our lives. We carry the memory of who we are, the memory of our songs and dances, back to our homelands and throughout the Cherokee diaspora.

Many Cherokee Two-Spirits live away from Cherokee lands, and many of us are not involved with ceremonial communities. Further, Cherokee Two-Spirits (like most Cherokees) are Christians. And, I've talked to many Cherokee Two-Spirit people who—while they love our people and want to remain connected to our communities—have no desire to live in the conservative areas of the country where our homelands are located. Perhaps just as important as being home is to find ways to honor our traditions away from home. Regardless of where we are, we can certainly learn our language, learn our traditional arts, and learn our songs. And we can work to ensure that we walk *duyuktv* in our own lives through intentional and careful work to dismantle sexism, transphobia, and queerphobia from our psyches and lives. We can teach other Two-Spirit people how to come home to themselves and each other, shaking the shells of resistance and healing in order to repair the world. We can bring our story back together. Each of us has a piece.

Crickets. Heartbeats. Healing. Fire. Turtle shell shackles shake stories.

We sing.

We dance.

We heal.

We remember.

Wa'do *we say as dawn's light touches the tops of trees.* Wa'do *we say to the shell shakers, to each other, to the fire, to the song leaders, to Creation…*

Wa'do.

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IN THE LIFE ON THE DOWN LOW: WHERE'S A BLACK GAY MAN TO GO?

KEITH HARRIS

"Now understand that this descriptor, 'in the life,' was not a negation, perhaps a self segregation, but not a negation. By this, I mean that the dialog of being in the life was not with whiteness, in opposition to or negation of 'gay,' as much as it was in dialog with black communities. Being in the life signified a collectivity, a subtle way to unquiet sex and life practices kept quiet by larger community strictures, kept quiet for the sake of survival."

Author's Note: This essay is a provocation, an experiment in rhetoric, and, by all means, at this point, it is a work in progress.

This essay was envisioned as a polemic, an elaborate exercise in argumentative controversy.[1] The title suggests that identitarian politics would have been at play. Instead, I decided to keep the title and temper the rhetoric in order to elaborate the problematic of being that is identified in the title, "In the life on the down low." What is of concern to me is how is it that being on the down low, how is it that this descriptor, this way of life, how is it that this has become the image of black gay men? Let me begin by way of a quick contemporary literary history of things.

In 1986, the anthology, *In the Life*, edited by Joseph Beam was released. This anthology was subtitled, *Writings by Black Gay Men*, and served to launch, in retrospect, a black gay renaissance. *In the Life* introduced the young, curious, somewhat clandestine audience to some voices that resonated throughout the late 80s and into the 90s, voices like Essex Hemphill, Craig Harris, Blackberri, Donald Woods, Assotto Saint or already heard voices like Melvin Dixon and Samuel Delaney. Some never heard before and some never heard again.

Beam's anthology emerged when Gay Related Immune Deficiency (G.R.I.D.) had fast become the AIDS crisis and was both perceived and received as white, back when ACT-UP had to be integrated. *In the life* was dedicated to those who were "in the life," a community identity in which men, specifically black gay men, or homosexuals, were known as such, lived as such, and contributed to the communities at large as such. These men had devised ways, albeit not easy ways, in which their sexual identity was acknowledged, respected for what it was because it was about community, because if one were "in the life," one was in a community. Now understand that this descriptor, "in the life," was not a negation, perhaps a self segregation, but not a negation. By this, I mean that the dialog of being in the life was not with whiteness, in opposition to or negation of "gay," as much as it was in dialog with black communities. Being in the life signified a collectivity, a subtle way to unquiet sex and life practices kept quiet by larger community strictures, kept quiet for the sake of survival. In the late 80s, early 90s climate of *In the life*, work like the anthology of poetry, edited by Assotto Saint, entitled *The Road Before Us*, the anthologies *Tongues Untied* and *Brother to Brother*, the journal *Another Country* or the video poetry of Marlon Riggs, or the stories of Randall Kenan, or more work of Hemphill or Melvin Dixon appears voicing a timeliness, an urgency in the need to be heard, an urgency in the need for community acceptance and an urgency in the need for cultural and community action, because most of these men would be dead by 1995.

In August of 2003, "Double lives on the down low" appears in the *New York Times Magazine*, but before I address that, let's look at the "in between" of 1986 and 2003. I want to use the release of *In the life* and the publication of "Double lives on the down low" as markers, as bookends to an admittedly constructed period of time and cultural production.

[1] This essay was originally delivered at Media and Visual Culture: Reading the Black Male Body, at Wheelock College, April 28, 2006.

Therefore, in quick summary, not exhaustive summary, in summary of the happenings between 1986 and 2003:

Crack has a pop cultural black face by 1986
Rockefeller drug laws bring it home
and the levels of incarceration among black folk
reaches new highs

Easy E
Arthur Ashe
Max Robinson
Patrick Kelly
Willi Smith
die from complications
due to AIDS
Magic Johnson reveals his HIV status

Pam Grier is back and "better than ever"
Thelma Golden scores twice
Will Smith does not kiss the white boy
in *Six Degrees of Separation*,
on the advice of Denzel
The Cosby Show delimits the black televisual future
New Black Cinema and the hood film rise and kill each other
Spike Lee's *She Gotta Have It* to *Bamboozled* become
the markers of a generation
Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence and Wesley Snipes get paid for doing drag
Issac Julien looks for *Langston* and gives us a queer look with *Young Soul Rebels*
Marlon Riggs, Marlon Riggs
Paris burned, we cried for Venus, and then we laughed
Spin City and *Six Feet Under* have black, gay characters
HBO becomes the site of the visualization
of sex, sexual difference and indifference
but let's not forget Mapplethorpe
and what he did to us
Papa Bush's "Man in a Leisure Suit" was Willie Horton
We went digital but the cops were still analog:
Rodney King, over and over again

Time magazine's was O.J. Simpson
who we should have seen coming
following Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas and
that damned high tech lynching
with desktop publishing
the zines, *Thing*, out of Chicago, and *BLK*, out of LA,
let us know what was going on in black gay communities
and a Million Black Men
march on Washington
Pan Africanism goes Diasporic
and who can forget House music
and the arrival on these shores of dance hall
Oprah builds an empire
and the 2000 census told us that
the black population was shrinking:
I came out during the time of "the endangered black man,"
the speciation of race and gender
in the statistics of death and incarceration
RuPaul, oddly enough, introduced me to Zen
there was that brief moment in NY when
men wore skirts
Brad Pitt appears on the cover of *Vanity Fair*
in a sequenced cocktail dress
Nixon
Reagan
Jackie O
are finally put to rest
Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Peace Prize
Meshell Ndegeocello asked for *Peace beyond Passion*
and in a familiar fashion there was a marked migration
pattern of black folk from the north to the south
Jesse ran twice and Clinton was the first
black president
hip hop diversified and commodified
Tupac
Biggie
Pat Parker
Audre Lourde
June Jordan and
Barbara Christian
they all die

Prince became a slave
transmogrified into a symbol
and Michael Jackson became our problem
Jeffrey Dahmer ate white hustlers, latinos, black men,
and two Laotian boys
memory will never serve that correct
Dinkins tells us that the melting pot
is a mosaic
New York crumbles and burns, like something out of the movies, with faces
of the dead and missing plastered on the subway walls
from Chambers Street, all the way to Penn Station
Baby Bush turns on his constituency, friends and the world
the talented tenth becomes home
for the new black public intellectual
Apartheid ends
Georgia enforces its long forgotten sodomy laws
Abner Louima is sodomized by the law
Amadou Diallo mis-interpellates and reaches for his id
Halle Berry
and Denzel Washington
win best actress and best actor
at the Academy
this is just a sample
a few of the things that happened
between 1986 and 2003

I give this rough and ready sampling to demonstrate that there were things—some good, some bad, some indifferent—happening at the end of the long century and the beginning of the new millennium. Black folk, we were as always, in our given cultural, national state of being, in the field of vision, as it were, still operating in the visual poles of endangerment and entertainment. What is of interest to me is that in this quick summary, we see, particularly in the late 80s and early 90s, a visual cultural presence of black gay men that arguably does not exist anymore. Part of the reason for this, as I mentioned earlier, is that two generations of black gay men, mine and the one before me, have been decimated by AIDS. Another reason may be that in the political climate of the gay and lesbian movement, with its

heterosexualization of homosexuality in domesticity, domestic partnership, the language and imagery of marriage, family and equality—black gay men cannot be representative. By this I mean that when we think of the visual rhetoric of things like gay marriage, gay families and partnerships, the legacies of the endangered black man, the always already dysfunctional black family, these things disallow the articulation of gay black men, coupled or not, as the gay and lesbian neo-liberal norm.

Another reason for this decrease in visual presence may have to do with black men's entrée into the men's movement in the 90s, most representative in the Million Man March. Both the political and visual rhetoric of the march were straight (though arguably not intentionally or exclusively straight), but inevitably in the religiosity and spirituality of the Million Man March, men's movements, etc., again, the black gay male as image is disallowed, unable to signify within the political agenda of "unity, atonement and brotherhood." And the religiosity of black folk, perhaps in response to the AIDS crisis, perhaps in the recuperation of black masculinity as family responsibility, has no place for black gay men like me. It is in this miasma of presence, absence, and permission that the communitarian, cultural production of the "in the life" identity is lost and the down low rises.

In August of 2003, I sat in my kitchen reading my email, sifting through any number of forwarded emails containing this exposé. I did not read the article for a number of days. I was familiar with the "down low," with being on the down low, this identity of discretion, privacy, and secrecy, as is often self-described. I remember it first came to my attention with internet and chat rooms in the mid-90s. I would find myself in chat rooms, speaking to black men talking about being on the down low, and when I would ask, "What is 'on the down low,'" rightfully so the response would be, "If you don't know, then you're not on the down low." I, therefore, had no involvement with it, which is not to say that I have no involvement with black men who did not identify as gay or that I was always willing to be a black man that identified as gay. However, I had no interest in reading this

article because I had been out since I was twenty, and very simply, at forty, I really did not have the time or energy to deal with it.

But then my mother asked me about it. And she asked me about it because she read it as being about gay men (and also because the article begins with the discussion of men on the "down low" living in Cleveland, and I had just moved to Ohio). So I read it. And I followed it on the news. I watched J.L. King, the author of the bestselling exposé *On the down low: A journey into the lives of "straight" black men who sleep with men*, watched him on *Oprah* and *CNN* and became increasingly infuriated by the willful participation, willful life and living of these black men in the discursive (and at this point typical, if not traditional) space of the pathological. Gone was the passionate, political, progressive poetry of black gay men and the black gay renaissance; instead we have the language of ethnography in an article like "Double lives on the down low" or the contradictory, often times confusing, faux jeremiad, faux journey of self discovery, return and redemption found in J. L. King, saying things like:

> DL men cannot and will not be associated with anything that would raise questions about his [*sic*] sexuality. They will not say they are gay, because those three little letters evoke so much fear. Those three letters have them afraid of being ostracized by their community, by their church, by their family. If they tell the truth and say they're gay or bisexual, they will be called a 'fag.' That's the worst word you can call a black man. When a man is called a fag, it hurts. It basically strips away his manhood (21-22).

King is disingenuous at best. What is basically received from this description is an identity of denial, admittedly, but also one of victimicity, deliberate victimicity, and intractable pathology. Furthermore, King's DL is positioned quite violently in opposition to other men, other black men who may reveal them or, worse yet, who may identify themselves as gay or queer or same gender loving or bisexual or simply sexual freewheeling without the internalized burdens of race, without the pathology of blackness and with the courage, fortitude and integrity of self awareness and self definition and

political intention. And herein lies the problem: the opposition laid out between black gay men and men on the DL is one that has to be violently maintained because it is a question of manhood, of black manhood, of masculinity and the maintenance of that masculinity.

Now I am a very simple man about certain things: I remember being beaten up, me and a friend of mine, one night on Fulton Mall in Brooklyn, New York, running into a late night chicken joint, asking someone to call the police, being followed into the chicken joint by this young black kid who's trying to kill us, having another black man intervene, trying to help out, only to step aside, when our pursuer turns to him to say, "But they are faggots," and then this black man sits down, watches me take a bottle in the face. Again, I am simple about certain things: a fag bashing comes with the territory; the attacker, was a young kid, as was the friend with whom I had been walking, and really the exchange was between them. But when I saw that motherfucker that had gotten up to help and then sat down to watch, when I saw that motherfucker in a porn shop in Times Square, maybe a week later, in a booth in a porn shop, with his dick hanging out, I asked him why he sat down, and quite frankly he told me, and I quote, "I didn't want to help no faggot": a statement which really did not make any sense to me: my identity was not that of a faggot, and both of us were standing in the porn shop—he exposing and me looking, for the same thing: on the down low is straight up low down.

That incident happened about six or seven years ago, and I have not yet let it go, because in the recent, spectral appearance of those on the down low and the death and disappearance of those in the life, I, and so many like me, remain. I am not arguing that we are excluded from black communities, that we have it harder than other groups in black communities, but I do want to suggest that we be careful how we assess, represent, and interrogate this down low phenomenon—a phenomenon and identity in which there is the negation of pleasure. Because of the amount of disavowal, the sexual identity of someone on the DL can only be about risk, not about community, not about collective politics, not about progressive self-determination. And I do

want to suggest that, at best, the DL, being on the down low is perhaps the greatest act of cowardice in contemporary identity politics. Do we really think that the worst thing that can happen to a black man is that he be called a faggot?

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THE MAKING OF A SOUTHERN FAGGOT

TREVOR HOPPE

"Being so damn nelly, in my experience, obviated telling anybody that I was queer. My closet came without a door. Grocery store clerks knew. Elderly couples walking past me in the mall knew. Hell, even telemarketers knew. And they didn't like one bit of it. Attitude or not, as a queer in the South I was destined to be a social pariah."

My gender has always been markedly different from most boys I've known. Even when I was eight, I remember being much more content playing at my friend Becky's house with her dolls than playing t-ball with the neighborhood boys. At school, I was always the proverbial last kid picked for sports. I didn't really mind. I hated sports. Nothing scared me more than a small, spherical object hurling towards my face. Of course, I kept all of this to myself. Even then, I knew that others would disapprove of my not-so-masculine preferences.

After faring well academically in elementary school, I decided to ship myself off to an "International Baccalaureate" public middle school program to further my academic pursuits. I was, admittedly, a bit of an overachiever. This accelerated program, almost entirely white, was housed in a neighborhood school where 99% of the students were Black. My mother, who taught science at a nearby public elementary school, dropped me off on her way to work. It took about 30 minutes to drive from our home in the wealthy, predominately white suburbs of South Charlotte to my new school, tucked away in a working class neighborhood just a few minutes from I-77. Strip clubs and long-abandoned drive-in movie theatres peppered our daily commute.

I was a happy-go-lucky little boy, unabashedly feminine in the way that young boys can be when masculinity isn't yet quite so hegemonic. I would run and jump and skip on my way to class, unaware that this was no longer appropriate for boys in middle school. After a few days of 7th grade, a few of guys came over, laughing, and asked me if I could dance for them again. They were referencing my playful way of skipping and whistling that had become habit. Sheltered in the suburbs, I had no way to comprehend my new environment, clouded by racial tension and a kind of masculinity regimen. Middle school was bad enough as it was; the stark segregation between the school's programs didn't help matters.

Not too long after the dancing debacle, I was crouching down at my locker, fiddling with my books and deciding whether or not I needed my protractor, when a class began to file out of the room to my immediate right. As they began to walk past me, I heard some of the guys in the group laughing. I didn't think anything of it; I had already gotten used to kids laughing at me – which, in middle school, is what you assume anyone is doing when they laugh with your back turned to them. Without warning, one of the guys kicked me square in the back, knocking the wind out of me and slamming my forehead against the metal locker. Shocked, I looked up as the guys were walking away laughing, mumbling something about "Yea, he's a total fag." Out of what was I'm sure a combination of both kindness and pity, one of the girls walking behind them stopped to let me know I had something on my back. It was a yellow post-it with "Kick me if you think I'm gay" scribbled on it in black felt-tip ink.

At this time in my young life, I was a confused conservative child who argued with his seventh grade English teacher about abortion – a product of my father's penchant for Rush Limbaugh. I didn't actually understand any of the arguments, but I was familiar with the talking points. Similarly, I had heard many people use the word "gay" to describe people, but I had no way to comprehend what that meant. From what I had heard on the radio, it seemed that being "gay" had something to do with having sex with animals, pedophilia, and generally being morally bankrupt. It came as something of a

surprise then, when I found a sticker attached to my back that labeled me as such.

I was quite sure that I wasn't interested in sex with animals or children. I did, however, feel a peculiar attraction to other boys. When I was 12, my mother stumbled across my collection of steamy man-on-man porn pictures that I had spent hours downloading and printing out on our home computer while my parents were out. I kept them stashed in the lining under my cat's pink bed. Needless to say, such a thing is hot when you're alone in your bunk bed, but decidedly not when you see it dangling between your mother's fingertips. The photos were, shall we say, well worn. My personal favorite was a picture of a hot three-way going on in front of a fireplace. All the men were dripping wet with sweat as they fucked each other silly. Now, clutched in my mother's hands, even the sexiest picture looked dirty and shameful.

My exploration of the Internet was not curbed by her unwelcome discovery. Since I had first happened upon them while cruising around Prodigy (one of the first dial-up Internet providers in the US), I had been fascinated by "M4M" (men for men) chatrooms. I was so fascinated, in fact, that I had logged countless hours reading the endless chit-chat that scrolled down the computer monitor. When two of my friends came over to spend the night, I decided to divulge to them my experiences with these strange cyber-rooms filled with mysterious men. Why I thought it prudent to share with them my curiosity, I'm not sure. As if discovering my porn collection wasn't enough for the mother of a 12-year old to try to wrap her head around, dear old mom overheard our entire late-night conversation. When she approached me a few days later to talk about it, I managed to negotiate my way out unscathed by telling her that we should simply cancel the service. Out of sight, out of mind, I hoped. Confronted with the damning nature of my actions, I was just as freaked out as she was.

Luckily, I was not alone in my outsider status in middle school. While no one in my "advanced program for white people" was in such a lowly situation as to give me – the class faggot – the time of day, I found solace in the company of three lovely misfits from the "regular" program. While none

of us was "officially" queer, most of us fit the bill by middle school standards. There was Pablo, the boisterous, decidedly fey Latino boy who adored Annie Lennox ("Oh, ANNIE!"). Then there was Stephen, the quiet, pear-shaped white kid who probably would have passed as a girl if he put on a wig. The informal leader of our little pack, though, was Sherry. Sherry was a stick-thin black girl who, while somewhat quiet and reserved, was terribly amused by our antics.

I didn't know it at the time, but it was through this motley group of players that I first came into my queer sensibilities. You might say that they gave me my first taste of faggotry. I not only learned to like Annie Lennox from Pablo, but to truly *adore* her. Simply "liking" her was not enough; hyperbole and dramatics was requisite. Stephen was perhaps Pablo's theatrical opposite. His countenance was deadpan, never betraying his surreal will to suppress any expression of joy or pleasure. He could not be *bothered*. If any 12 year old could ever be described as jaded, it would have been him. Sherry, meanwhile, wasn't afraid to point out our idiosyncrasies. She one time pulled back the bangs of my unfortunate bowl cut, giggled, and exclaimed in her near-whisper of a voice, "Look what's hiding behind the curtains!"

Perhaps emboldened by the company that I was keeping at lunchtime, my peers became increasingly convinced that I was this thing they called "faggot." Despite my pornographic predilections, I remained skeptical. Moreover, I was terribly confused as to how these people had any idea that I might like to look at boys. How could they possibly know about my desires? Granted, I had feverishly jerked off to pictures of men having all kinds of sex, but that was in the comfort of my own bunk bed. How could the kids at school have any idea what went on under my sheets? Was it my chunky, pre-pubescent body? My free expression of emotion? Something about my gender performance gave my peers license to jump to conclusions about the kind of sex that I liked (or might like, since I hadn't yet had anything close to a sexual encounter). How could they know when I was still so unsure?

Their conviction didn't stop me from trying to sway their opinion. I would find some place deep inside to store it, to vault my queerness away so

that no one would ever find it. For my eyes only. I tried desperately to contain whatever it was that tipped off their gaydar. It never worked. Not long after my humiliating assault in the hallway, about 7 or 8 white boys from my program marched over to me during lunch period, including the guy whose foot left a bruise just above the small of my back. The one in charge, or perhaps the only one of them with the temerity to ask me, demanded to know whether I "spit or swallow." Although my Internet explorations had certainly revealed to me "alternative" understandings of these words, I was quite sure that these boys must be asking about something else entirely. I had no fucking clue what that might be – but I knew that I had to answer. "Swallow," I said; it seemed as good an answer as any. They got a good laugh out of that. They *knew*.

I was crushed. In elementary school, my femininity had been embraced by most of those around me as entertaining; I was always the class clown. In this new, foreign environment, it was viewed as alien and pathetic. After a few months of taunting, lonely lunches, and even a rock thrown at my head, I stopped skipping. In fact, I stopped smiling. One of my teachers, who in hindsight I'm pretty sure was gay, pulled me aside and asked me what was the matter. "You used to be this happy go lucky kid, and now…" He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. How I could I even begin to explain to him my troubles when I couldn't even put my finger on them?

My only recourse, I figured, was to find other gay men who could tell me what lay ahead. Stephen and Pablo had certainly provided me with a queer foundation, but none of us actually spoke of our homo-desires. The only folks that I heard talking about being gay were the likes of Dr. Laura and Rush Limbaugh and other "Christian" conservatives who blabbered on and on *ad nauseam* about the alleged proclivities of homosexuals. I needed to meet a homo in the flesh. I needed them to tell me what it meant to be gay.

Far too young to go to any bars, the Internet proved to be my only queer resource in North Carolina. It was a few weeks after my fourteenth birthday when I mustered the courage to meet a guy name Goble with whom I had been chatting for several months. He was 19 and had just moved to

Charlotte from a tiny town a few hours away called Forest City. He must have empathized with my teenage angst and confusion. After some negotiation, we arranged for him to pick me up at the grocery store near my house to spend some time hanging out with him and his friends. They were the kind of audacious, working class Southern queens that some would label "white trash" on account of their polyester clothes and fiery temperaments. Most of them had abandoned their painful, isolating family lives in rural North Carolina to move to the big city. They had become each other's chosen family.

In my years spent in their company, I would learn what being gay was all about – at least, their kind of homo. They introduced me to things like house music and drag. While others might know a kind of "Tom of Finland" gay that's all about muscles and mustaches, their kind of Southern femme gay was all about *Steel Magnolias* and Cher. It's the kind of twisted campy existence you might find, say, in the cult film *Sordid Lives* – a kind of audacious, bitter wit borne out of real pain and suffering. It reveled in camp, tragedy, and attitude.

Together, we were *fabulous*. We were the kind of faggots who dropped Skittles into our Zima bottles. The little candy pieces would fizzle and change color as their outside shell dissolved into the drink. We fucking *loved* that shit. Sentences were preceded by "honey" or "sugar" and things we fancied were divided into three categories: "fierce," "fabulous," and "divine." It was a world of polyester built for our own escape, a refuge from the drudgery that was the "real world."

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Keeping all that I was learning outside of school separate from the rest of my life was, at first, manageable. Well aware that my faggotry relegated me far outside the bounds of Southern propriety, I tried my best to lay low as much as possible while in school. As time passed, however, it became more

difficult to conceal my queerness from my peers. It seemed that the more I tried to fit in, the more my peers reminded me of my status as a faggot.

After two traumatic years of middle school, it was clear that the IB program was not for me. I changed tracks to join my peers from elementary school in a high school a few miles away from my house. But middle school had changed me. It has stamped out the boy that my friends in elementary school knew. I stared at the ground when I walked the halls. My face was riddled with acne. I was the portrait of an angsty teenager. Even back in the suburbs, I was an outsider.

At the risk of sounding terribly cliché, I sought solace in the theatre. It was the only place in high school that managed to accommodate all of me. Drama class allowed me to piece together all the pieces of my self into one collective identity. Since middle school carved me up into pieces, I had felt like I was performing different versions of myself depending on who was watching. At home, I did my best to perform as straight and "normal" as the circumstances would allow. I would read from another script at school – that of a quiet, reserved boy who awkwardly meandered through the hallways while staring intently down at the floor. On the weekend, I would play what was perhaps the most accurate reflection of me, the rebellious gay teenager who liked to smoke, drink, and party late into the night. My training in theatre gave me license to experiment with consolidating all of these versions of myself into a new kind of self, someone less compromising for his audience.

Drama class also suddenly opened up a network of peers who didn't just tolerate my iconoclastic effeminacy, but celebrated it. I had never had friends my own age. Sure, I had folks to eat lunch with or perhaps go to the occasional concert. But it had been many years since I had had a meaningful friendship with anyone at school. Misfits themselves, my friends in the theatre allowed and, indeed, *encouraged* me to put to work all that my gay male friends had taught me in the ways of dramatics.

My newfound home in the theatre gave me the confidence to bring my nellyness out into the open. If I was going to be a faggot no matter what I

did, I figured that I might as well "be all that I could be." And faggot, I was. In truth, a certain amount of respect came with wearing candied-apple-red vinyl pants and 4-inch platforms without so much as flinching. My outrageous wedge platform heels were, perhaps, a bit intimidating. I was *fierce*. One morning while I was leaning over the counter before school, my mother actually exclaimed "Look at those pants! You could bounce a quarter off that thing!" (I'm still not sure how I was supposed to react to that.) My father was less excited about my style choices, but I somehow managed to make it out the door to school without too much squawking.

My fagalicious wardrobe didn't necessarily stop kids from talking shit about me, but it certainly gave them pause to do it to my face ("if he's crazy enough to wear vinyl pants to high school, God only knows what he could be capable of"). I banked on the hope that my attitude would keep people out of my way. To my amazement, my strategy generally worked. The only time I can recall being verbally harassed to my face was when some boy quietly mumbled "That's right faggot, prance down the stairs" to me while I was heading downstairs to class. I actually thought it was kind of flattering.

I buttressed my social standing with an uncanny drive to succeed academically. At my uber-competitive high school of about 2500 students, academic prowess brought some merit. I studied far more in high school than I ever did in college, and it paid off. During my senior year, my Calculus II teacher pulled me aside and said, off-hand "You know, I used to see you in the halls. You were so loud… I had no idea you were such a good student." What I think she really wanted to say was, "I had no idea faggots could be so smart."

Putting myself so blatantly on the edge of acceptability was, however, not exactly without cost. It may have protected me from most name-calling at school, but off-campus my attitude and fledgling self-assuredness did not negate my status as a faggot. Even when I tried my very best to tone it down, *everyone* knew. Being so damn nelly, in my experience, obviated telling anybody that I was queer. My closet came without a door. Grocery store clerks knew. Elderly couples walking past me in the mall knew. Hell, even

telemarketers knew. And they didn't like one bit of it. Attitude or not, as a queer in the South I was destined to be a social pariah.

That's the thing about being a fag in the heterosexist South – it kind of makes you the unintelligible "other." I clearly read as male, but my limp wrist and dramatic vocal inflection fell far outside the bounds of masculinity. Whether I liked it or not, my mannerisms were something of a slap in the face to the genteel Southern way. I was reminded of this often in the glaring eyes of passersby or the condescending tone of my teachers in school. They desperately wanted to put me in my place, to straightjacket my faggotry.

Far outside of the edge of acceptability, all of the niceties that the South is known for were largely cast aside. Such barefaced sissyphobia and heterosexism radicalized me, just as historically other disenfranchised communities have been mobilized by oppression (e.g. Blacks in the South under lynching, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina). It left an indelible mark on me, fundamentally changing the way that I navigated the world. Femme guys in the South, and other parts of the country, know what I'm talking about. It's that ever-present feeling of impending danger, not terribly different from the fear that many women describe having when walking down the street alone at night. It's my hesitancy to rely and trust others, particularly straight men.

Perhaps a story might better help to illustrate this. For the first year that I attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I found myself living in an expensive private dorm called "Granville Towers." A prissy fag through-and-through, I was lured in by their included room cleaning services. I never considered that the culture that went with such an elite, exclusionary dorm might not be entirely homo-friendly. My suitemate quickly came to exemplify that culture. He was a handsome, beefy Italian guy in the ROTC who came home violently drunk most evenings to pound his fists against the stall in our shared bathroom while screaming incoherently about some faggot or bitch that had pissed him off that night. Despite his rabid sexism and homophobia, I couldn't shake my attraction for him. He had military cropped

black hair, soft tan skin, and round muscles that I fantasized about grabbing onto while he moved on top of me.

During one of the first weeks of school, I found myself standing next to him in the fluorescent-lit elevator on our trip to the 7th floor. He was shirtless. The rational half of my brain implored me to mind my own business and stare straight ahead, though I was admiring his well-sculpted frame out of the careful corner of my eye. My prostate, however, demanded that I steal a quick glance to my right. Neither I, nor my prostate, was prepared to find him staring right back at me, rubbing his weighty crotch with a sneer on his face. *Fuck.* My eyes immediately dropped down south to his crotch. His athletic running shorts were glistening from the sweat dripping down his chest. *Holy, holy, holy fucking shit.* I jerked my hungry eyes away as fast as possible and concentrated on the elevator door. I knew better than to show any sign of interest. If this were an erotic story, I'd follow him to his room and he'd greedily fuck my face while telling me I was his cock-sucking bitch. He'd probably even spit on my all-too-eager face. But this wasn't someone's fantasy. This was desire laced with real danger. Was it a trap? I wasn't willing to find out. I hurriedly left the elevator and locked myself in my room. I think I must have masturbated twelve times that afternoon.

It wasn't long thereafter that I found out more about this Joe character. I was, as was oft the case, sitting at my desk chatting with folks online, when I heard him yapping on the phone with someone. This wasn't terribly out of the ordinary; Joe was a loud guy, he made his presence known. And then he said the word "drag queen." My ears perked up. "Dude! I didn't know he was a fucking drag queen." A few moments of silence. "Yea, whatever. So I guess I had sex with a dude. But, I mean, I didn't know!" I was, at that point, leaning back in my chair with my legs pushed up on the desk; I almost fell backwards as I tried to digest this new information. There was more to Joe, it seemed, than met the eye.

Months later, I was typing away at my computer when my suitemate and a few of his friends came home drunk and angry. Joe stormed into the

bathroom, spewing homophobic verbal diarrhea while banging his fist against the door to my room and rattling its handle. It was locked. My body froze with fear. This was nothing like his usual drunken homecomings. "LET'S FUCKING BREAK INTO THAT FAGGOT'S ROOM! ARE YOU IN THERE, FAGGOT?" Things began to move slowly. I tried to get up but my legs remained defiantly in place. "THIS IS THAT FAGGOT'S SHIT, LET'S PISS ALL OVER IT. YOU HEAR THAT FAGGOT, WE'RE PISSING ALL OVER YOUR FUCKING STUFF?" He hit the door, threatening to break it down.

Apparently my queerness had offended Joe's sensibilities. I grabbed the scissors at my desk, not knowing what I would do with them if he somehow managed to break in. Stab him? Puh-lease! I had a hard enough time pricking my finger for my at-home HIV tests. But his rage was uncontrollable; his conflicts with his own desire were clearly tearing him apart. Luckily for everyone involved, the door withstood his beating.

I moved out of the private dorm and into University housing the next day. Despite the many people around to see (and hear) his tirade, my attempts to bring honor court charges (bringing charges in a university-run court system) against him were fruitless. I found out later that Joe was himself a member of the honor court. Call me jaded, but somehow I kind of doubt that the investigation was altogether thorough.

Whether or not Joe was "really" gay isn't particularly important. What is important is how he impacted my life. Joe vividly illustrated to me just how fucked up and explosive this thing called masculinity could be, especially when threatened by my effeminate, queer desire. He cemented what the boys in middle school had tried so hard to tell me. To them, I wasn't gay. Gay was too proud. I was a measly little faggot. A sissy. A bitch. I was worthless, God damn it. Why couldn't I get that through my thick skull?

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It was only through the company of other faggots in Chapel Hill that I was able to deal with Joe's jarring attack. I stumbled upon my new posse of homos at the local coffee shop on a particularly slow evening in September. A boy named Andre quietly passed me a note that read in jagged handwriting, "Power House – You *know*." I didn't "know," but I was quickly whisked 10 miles away to the Waffle House in Durham with Andre and two of his friends. They had officially invited me into what would soon become my new queer family in Chapel Hill. After a sweaty night of dancing and debauchery at the gay bar, we'd head over to the sleazy 24-hour eatery with a laptop, order greasy food and coffee, and sing songs by Fiona Apple, Whitney Houston, or perhaps even a tune from the musical *Rent*.

At each stage of my young life, I have been blessed with friendship groups of queer men like this who nurture, inspire, and motivate me. While not all of these men have necessarily been a caricature of femininity, we have all dabbled in the art of camp together to create a kind of collective identity. All of us had struggled as outsiders in a culture obsessed with an image of masculinity that we did not resemble. Being in the South only exacerbated this feeling of alienation.

It was this feeling of alienation that facilitated coming into my political consciousness. Growing up in a household rife with "GOP" political commentary (my father would insist on making us listen to conservative talk radio on family road trips) had, early on, familiarized me with the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that is 21st century American politics. I launched my career in activism in high school, when I directed and performed in a Broadway Revue with a group of my theatre friends that raised nearly $1000 for the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative. In a North Carolina public school, AIDS was the closest I could come to doing anything in the realm of queer activism. It was also something of a slap in the face to my high school, where I was the only openly queer person.

It wasn't until college, however, that I really began to find an intellectual space to challenge the culture that I had always viewed with suspicion (and, likewise, that had always viewed me with a healthy dose of suspicion).

Though I was lucky enough to have a US History teacher in high school who assigned Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States*, the vast majority of my teachers never asked us critically examine American history or, for that matter, American culture. Not even the local LGBTQ youth group asked these kinds of questions, settling for just making sure we didn't get AIDS or kill ourselves.

My professors in college, on the other hand, demanded that I do so. I was particularly drawn to feminist critiques of culture for the way that they challenged norms of gender. I had a lifetime in training in understanding the grave shortcomings of the gender binary. Women's Studies classes with professors like Sherryl Kleinman, Karen Booth, and Pamela Conover, all gave me new critical tools with which I was able to build a queer political consciousness. We read from authors like Suzanne Pharr, who eloquently made clear the links between homophobia and sexism, and Kate Bornstein, who has with great wit and humor made the case for actively disrupting the notion of the gender binary. Women's Studies was the only academic space at UNC in which I could have these kinds of conversations.

With a foundation in feminist analyses of gender, critically examining how race and class structure our world was made easier. My experiences in the predominately white program in middle school had already primed me to understand the kinds of privileges that came with my white skin and wealth. Feminist critiques of race and class from folks like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins challenged me to more closely examine how my skin color and class had lubricated my movement through life. I was called to ask questions about my life and American culture that I had never before considered.

It was with this understanding of identity that I eagerly founded the Unity Conference at UNC-Chapel Hill during my sophomore year. I wanted to put together a program that would explore where sexuality and gender identity intersected with other kinds of identities like race, class, ability, and age. I searched for speakers who could make those links evident – from the Black lesbian activist Mandy Carter to the wonderfully theatrical activist and performer Nomi Lamm. I also looked for inspiring political thinkers who

could help inspire political action, like former National Gay and Lesbian Task Force director Urvashi Vaid, who keynoted the first conference.

After directing the conference for three years, it became increasingly clear that the political leaders that I sought were almost exclusively woman-identified. During my junior year at UNC, I wrote an editorial for the campus queer magazine, *LAMBDA*, expressing my frustrations in finding queer male mentors. It was appropriately titled "Where the hell are all the feminist queer men?" While feminist women had certainly given me the tools to understand my own life as an effeminate queer man, I was finding few resources from other men who shared my experiences and politics.

At the same time, I found myself more and more disillusioned with the national LGBTQ movement that, it seemed, was less and less interested in radical change. I spent a summer in Boston working for one of those national organizations, hoping to find a movement that made room for all kinds of queer people. Instead, I found myself in big-shot meetings of Boston's major LGBTQ nonprofits that were focused on planning events that highlighted the experiences of those who were more "marketable," while desperately trying to keep the rest of us out of the photo album.

Sitting in those meetings, I couldn't help but to think that my more effeminate friends and I were likely to be some of the people they were working to make invisible. Hostility towards nelly faggots like me, in my experience, has come from both inside and outside queer communities. Gay men, in particular, seem to be guilty of this kind of gender policing. Too many of the queer men that I've met – both in the South and elsewhere – have hissed and booed at femme guys' alleged gendered dysfunction. They say that our stereotypically homo affect is some combination of awful things like superficiality or immaturity. "Why can't you just be normal, for God's sake?" They want us to keep our faggotry to ourselves, lest we give them all a bad name.

But I can't. And I won't. I spent far too much of my life trying to contain my faghood to satisfy others. If I am loud or eccentrically feminine today, it is because of the years of putting up with a patriarchal, heterosexist

culture that constantly reminded me of my inferiority. Everywhere faggots like me look, we are reminded of just how pathetic or pathological we are: news reports, television shows, music videos, school books, romance novels, stand up comedians, product advertisements, televangelists, politicians, and scientific studies. From time to time, even the people who are allegedly fighting *for* us tell guys like me to butch it up. I have exactly two words for them: Fuck. You.

Guys like me create camp to *survive*. It was our protection from a world that took pleasure in ridiculing us; camp was our multipurpose second skin. It was, for me, a way to try to reclaim some of my eccentric spirit that my peers had crushed in middle school. It lets us make comedy out of tragedy and fools out of idols. It is our own way of making some sense out of a culture that only makes room for nelly boys when we design their houses or when we're needed for psychological studies.

I have come to realize that there are few winners in a world fraught with such manic gender policing. I'm not referring here just to women, who are obviously undervalued and often infantilized in American culture. Straight men, often pegged categorically as the winners under patriarchy, often suffer as well, under the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. While it is true that straight men collectively hold many of the cards, it is easy to forget that as individuals their struggles with gender can be deeply emotionally damaging. Gender, at least as it is currently understood, makes free expression nothing short of impossible – for all of us.

I anticipated – I had hoped – to find a more, shall we say, enlightened politics and community in my move to San Francisco. I was shocked and disappointed to find that queer communities in small towns in the South were often far more politically savvy and radical in their vision for change than many of the people I have met in California. Many of the men I met while living in San Francisco saw little impetus to fight for change, perhaps because they have never really faced the kind of day-to-day animosity that queers face in the South. My worry is now that, as homophobia goes the way of racism and sexism and becomes more nuanced, less blatant, and

disproportionately damaging to those on the bottom, queer people will generally be less inclined towards radical politics that challenge the status quo.

It was truly a sad day when one of the incredibly few queer male feminist mentors and leaders I had found, Eric Rofes, unexpectedly died. He was one of a tiny number of gay male leaders, in my opinion, who spoke progressive values to action. His memorial service in San Francisco was a first for me. With the exception of a cousin I barely knew who died when I was very young, death has kept a distance from my life. Highlighting the stark difference between my own life and Eric's, Amber Hollibaugh closed the service by reading from his harrowing and eloquent account of the utter loss he experienced in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in his book, *Reviving the Tribe*. In a fitting tribute, Sylvester's disco anthem "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" played louder and louder as she read until it was reverberating in the large room.

My anguish over Eric's passing was heightened by a sinking feeling that there would be no other queer man to fill his shoes. Despite the tensions that still exist between the kind of sexual liberation that gay men have spearheaded and the women-driven feminist movement, Eric had managed to straddle both. This was no small feat. In his absence, I worry that queer men might be left with the likes of Andrew Sullivan, Dan Savage, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

I, for one, hope we can do better. The progressive queer male leaders and thinkers of tomorrow may very well be those of us who continue to live as outsiders in American life: men of color, sissies, sex workers, men with disabilities, transgender men, and those of us born in places where homophobia is still a constant, acute threat. For me, it was the experience of growing up nelly in the South that made ignoring the pervasive inequality in America difficult, if not impossible.

It is that outsider status that I cherish so dearly. It grants a certain ability to see what those on the inside cannot. "American by birth, Southern by the grace of God." Despite all of my trials and tribulations, I wouldn't have it any other way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trevor Hoppe is currently a graduate student in the joint PhD program in Sociology and Women's Studies at The University of Michigan. He hails from North Carolina, where he spent four beautiful years at UNC Chapel Hill before moving to San Francisco to get his Masters in Sexuality Studies. He has a long history of LGBT activism, which continues today with his work on HIV prevention and gay men's health. His website is: http://www.trevorhoppe.com

IV. QUEER FEMINIST POLITICS

BACK INTO THE FUTURE: TRANSPHOBIA IS MY ISSUE TOO!

WARREN BLUMENFELD

"Let's face it: transphobia is our issue, too. As important as are our efforts in defeating sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, and biphobia, also important is our work toward conquering personal, institutional, and societal forms of transphobia and its offshoots, such as what some call 'effemiphobia' (or, as it has also been called, "sissyphobia") — that insidious and dehumanizing fear and hatred of anything even hinting at the feminine in males."

Hi, I am a gay man and my name is Warren Blumenfeld, or as my friends like to affectionately call me, "Estelle Abrams" — honorary Jewish bisexual woman from Brooklyn. I informally adopted that name after a friend told me that I looked like a woman that his mother played Bridge with. Actually, though, Estelle embodies the feminine side of my soul—my joyous, playful self – the creative, spontaneous, sensitive spirit that I have come to treasure and genuinely love.

But this wasn't always the case. When I was quite young, long before I learned what were considered the "proper" rules of conduct, I naively introduced Estelle to my classmates and my neighbors. I was quick to discover that they feared and even despised her. Children called her names with an incredible vehemence and malice that I did not understand.

Adults hated her too. After I introduced Estelle to my parents, they quickly scheduled my first appointment with a child psychiatrist when I was only four years old. Over the next eight years, my parents and their hired shrink continued their efforts to kill Estelle, to exorcise her in the hope of forever eliminating all contact, all vestiges, all memory of her ever being a part of me.

It was the early 1950s, the so-called "McCarthy Era"—a conservative time, a time when difference of any sort was viewed with suspicion. On the floor of the U.S. Senate, a brash young Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, sternly warned that "Communists [often thought of as Jews in the public imagination] corrupt the minds and homosexuals corrupt the bodies of good upstanding Americans," and he proceeded to have gays and lesbians officially banned from any government service. To McCarthy, Jews, homosexuals, and Communists were one and the same.

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) U.S.-Americans during this era, police frequently raided their bars, which were usually Mafia owned; the U.S. Postal Service raided LGBT organizations and even published the names of their mailing lists in local newspapers; and people regularly lost their jobs for being "exposed" as queer. LGBT people were often involuntarily committed to mental institutions and underwent painful electro-shock therapy; some were even lobotomized (if you're unfamiliar, this means that doctors removed the frontal lobes of their brains).

Not knowing what else to do at this time with what they considered to be my gender non-conformity, my parents sent me to a child psychologist because they feared that I might be gay (or to use the terminology of the day, "homosexual"). There was a basic routine in the "therapy" sessions. I walked into the psychologist's office, took off my coat and put in on the hook behind the door. The psychologist then asked me if there was anything in particular that I wanted to discuss. I invariably said "no." Since I did not understand why I was there in the first place, I surely did not trust him enough to talk candidly with him. When I was less than forthcoming in our conversations (which was on most occasions), he would take down from the shelf a model airplane or a boat or a truck, and we would spend the remainder of the hour assembling the pieces with glue. In private sessions with my parents, he told them that he wanted me to concentrate on behaviors and activities associated with males, while of course avoiding those

associated with females. He instructed my parents to assign me the household chores of taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn (even though we lived in an apartment building and we did not have a lawn), and not washing or drying the dishes. Also, I was forbidden to play with dolls or to cook. And – as if this all was not enough – he advised my parents to sign me up for a little league team, which, despite my hatred for the sport, I joined for two summers.

If I learned anything during my time with the psychologist, it was that I should cloak Estelle from the sun's exposing rays – to keep her well concealed deep within my consciousness, only to be resurrected during those rare but precious moments of solitude. It wasn't long after my sessions with the psychologist began that I began to be convinced that there was indeed something wrong with me. Why else would my parents be sending me, trying desperately to change me, my "mannerisms," my interests, my likes, and even my dislikes?

"When you wave," my father sternly warned one afternoon on the front steps of our apartment building when I was eight years old, "you MUST move your whole hand at the same time. Don't just move the fingers up and down like you're doing." He grabbed my arm, and despite my free-flowing tears and cheeks pink with shame, he vigorously demonstrated the "proper" hand wave for a man. Then, as if anticipating the scene in the film *La Cage Aux Folles* (and the U.S. remake *The Birdcage*), my father took me into the backyard and forced me to walk and run "like men are supposed to move." Obviously, I had previously been doing something wrong. "Of course the other children pick on you," he blamed. "You *do* act like a girl." I was humiliated.

For most of my years in school, I was continually beat and attacked by my peers who perceived me as someone who was "different." Names like "queer," "little girl," and "fag" targeted me like the big red dodgeball my classmates furiously hurled at one another on the schoolyard. I would not – and could not – conform to the gender roles that my family and peers so clearly expected of me, and I regularly paid the price.

This kind of bullying and policing of my gender started the very first day I entered kindergarten. It was 1952 and I was attending public school in Bronxville, NY. As my mother dropped me off and kissed me good-bye on the cheek, I felt completely alone and began to cry. My new teacher walked up to me and said, in a somewhat detached tone of voice, "Don't cry. Only sissies and little girls cry." Some of the other boys overheard her, and quickly began mocking me. "The little girl wants his mommy," one said. "What a sissy," said another. Without a word, the teacher simply walked away. I went into the coatroom and cried, huddling in a corner by myself, until she found me.

Years later, in 1970, after I came out as gay to my parents, I asked my mother why she and my father had sent me to "the toy doctor," as they had once called the psychologist. She looked at me urgently and with deep affection said:: "You wouldn't have understood at the time, but we sent you because we felt you were too effeminate, and we thought you would grow up to be a homosexual." "Your effeminacy," she continued, "was the reason why the other children couldn't accept you and why they hurt you. We sent you because their taunts hurt us too, and we couldn't think of anything else to do."

But that wasn't the whole story; she also confided another reason for sending me. She told me the story of how my father suffered the pain of being different when he was young. He and his two sisters were the only Jews in their high school in the 1930s in Los Angeles. Because of the anti-Semitism of the time, the other boys beat him up nearly every day. While in elementary school, he hid in a small crawlway beneath one of the buildings during recess period to avoid attack by his peers. My mother told me that she and my father attempted to help me conform to gender expectations, to fit in, so I wouldn't have to go through what my father experienced.

My parents sent me to therapy, at least in part, in an attempt to direct my eventual gender expression and sexual identity (at the time, they equated my gender non-conformity to my possible homosexuality). My school reinforced this on my classmates and me every day. Even in kindergarten,

children were channeled into gender-specific activities: boys were encouraged to participate in sports, girls to hone housekeeping skills such as cooking and cleaning. This less than subtle encouragement seemed to grow more rigid with every new year of school.

Despite this, I developed what would become a lifelong appreciation of music and art. In the fifth grade, I auditioned for the school chorus and was accepted along with only a handful of boys and about 50 girls. The scarcity of boys in the cast was not due to any gendered imbalance in the quality of boys' singing voices. The determining factor was one of social pressure. I and the other four boys in the chorus were generally disliked by our peers. In fact, most of the other boys in our class despised and picked on us, and viciously labeled us "the chorus girls," "the fags," "the sissies," and "the fairies." The girls, on the other hand, who "made it" into the chorus were well respected and even envied by the other girls in the school.

The forces that set out to kill Estelle—those societal battalions bent on destroying all signs of femininity in every male—nearly succeeded in coercing me into denouncing her, but through some power more potent than they, Estelle was victorious in surviving their relentless attacks. Being mightier and more willful, she stayed with me through times of torment and times of "therapeutic" treatment. Even when, due to the overwhelming negative reactions she received from my peers, I began to lose trust and to doubt her,, she never gave up on me.

My friends have often asked me, "What was that energy, that force empowering Estelle to repel her would-be executioners?" What kept her strong throughout those difficult years? I believe that it was, quite simply, a vision — a vision of social transformation articulated by feminists during the second wave of the Women's emancipation and liberation movement and later by early gay liberationists during Estelle's youth.

Looking back through history, for instance, men accused of same-sex eroticism in the Middle Ages (then called fairies), for instance, were rounded up, bound, tossed on the ground like kindling, and unceremoniously set ablaze. Their burning bodies served to ignite women accused of witchcraft

who were tied just above them. (This is, of course, where we get the word "faggot" – a word that originally referred to a bundle of wood used to start a fire.)

Many years later, the reverse would be true. Catching the spark of feminist thought and theory— which questioned and challenged traditional gender constructions, the inherent inequalities between the sexes, and enormous corrosive effects of heteronormativity—fairies joined together exploding conventional notions of gender, most notably definitions of masculinity. Radically queer groups emerged to disrupt the very foundations of U.S.-American constructions of gender and sexuality. During the early 1970s, I was an active member of Gay Liberation Front in Washington D.C., which formed the leading edge of a movement rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Our first meetings were held at Grace Church, the Washington Free Clinic in Georgetown, and All Souls Church on 16th Street, until we managed to rent a brownstone on S Street to establish a Gay Liberation Front living collective. Meetings provided a space for gays, lesbians, bisexual women and men, and transgender people to come together and put into practice what feminists had taught us—that the "personal is indeed the political."

We laughed together, and we cried together. We shared our ideas and most intimate secrets. We dreamed our dreams and laid out plans for a world free from all the deadly forms of oppression. And, somewhere along our journey, we began inventing new ways of relating to one another. For the men, we came to consciousness of how we had been stifled as males growing up in a culture that taught us to hate the woman within – that taught us that, if we were to be considered worthy, we must be athletic, independent, assertive, domineering, and competitive. Most of all, we rejected the idea that, to truly be men, we must bury our emotions deep within the recesses of our souls.

Looking back over the years, as our visibility has increased, as our place within the culture has become somewhat more assured, much certainly has been gained. But, also, I can't help but feel that something very precious has

been lost. Our early excitement, our desire— though by no means our ability—to fully *restructure* the culture, as distinguished from mere reform, seems now to lay dormant in many of our political organizations and communities. Today, reflecting on what seems to be the major focus of the mainstream movement, I see four main themes — or, what I am calling the "Four Ms" of the mainstream movement.. These "Ms" are: 1. Marriage Rights, 2. Military Inclusion, 3. Media Visibility, and 4. Making Money.

While these are laudable goals, I believe that if we are going to achieve a truly equitable society, we must reach higher, wider, and broader. I believe that we need to work to "transform" or "revolutionize" completely the society and its institutions by challenging overall power inequities in terms of traditional gender and racial constructions, the economic basis on which this country rests and the massive inequities between socioeconomic groups. We need to make links in the various forms of identity and forms of oppression, and form coalitions between various marginalized groups, as well as look at other means of activism, which can result in true and lasting systemic change.

I do remain hopeful, however. The increasing visibility and recognition of bisexuals and transgender people today is again shaking up traditionally dichotomous notions of male/female and gay/straight. Their stories and experiences have great potential to bring us back into the future — a future in which the Estelles (indeed, anyone on the gender spectrum) everywhere will live freely, unencumbered by social taboos and cultural norms of gender. It is a future in which the "feminine" and "masculine"— as well as all the qualities on the continuum in between — can live and prosper in us all.

With this in mind, let us not work only toward lifting the ban against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the military. Instead, let us also work toward lifting the ban against our transcending and obliterating the gender status quo by continually questioning and challenging standard conceptualization of gender in our society. For ourselves and our young, we must work to build a society in which we can all feel the freedom to express our gender in ways that are authentic, honest, and sincere to each individual, ways that we choose rather than those that are prescribed.

Let's face it: transphobia is our issue, too. As important as are our efforts in defeating sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, and biphobia, also important is our work toward conquering personal, institutional, and societal forms of transphobia and its offshoots, such as what some call "effemiphobia" (or, as it has also been called, "sissyphobia") — that insidious and dehumanizing fear and hatred of anything even hinting at the feminine in males. This is, of course basically a thinly veiled version of misogyny. Indeed, we can argue that homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism, have their roots in sexism. One cannot hope to eliminate the former categories without eliminating the latter.

While we continue to work on issues around same-sex marriage and domestic partnership, we should ensure that we work, as Estelle has done for me, towards strengthening a partnership between the many points on the vast continuum between our masculine and feminine qualities that make us all whole, integrated human beings. We must not, however, limit our efforts to these forms of oppression. For oppression operates like a wheel with many spokes. If we work to dismantle only one or a few specific spokes, the wheel will continue spinning and trampling over people. We must work toward dismantling all its many hideous spokes if we hope to ever truly dismantle oppression.

I believe that sexual and relational attractions and gender expressions alone are not sufficient to connect a community, and by extension, to fuel a movement for progressive social change. We must, therefore, look beyond ourselves and base our communities and movements not simply on our identities, but also on shared ideas and ideals that cut across individuals from disparate social identities. We must come together with like minds, political philosophies, and strategies for achieving their objectives.

This is my vision of a movement for social change, which follows a central tenet of Jewish tradition known as *Tikkun Olam*: meaning the transformation, healing, and repairing of the world so that it becomes a more just, peaceful, nurturing, and perfect place. I understand *Tikkun Olam* to be

equivalent of working for social justice and social equality, sometimes against incredible odds, for people of all social identities and all backgrounds.

Whenever individuals or groups oppose dominant ideologies and dominant group privileges, however, there is always a risk of ferocious backlash. The vicious attacks against Estelle are only one case in point. Currently, there is a cultural war being waged by the political and theocratic right, a war to turn back all the gains progressive-minded people have fought so tirelessly for over the years. Until LGBT organizations and movements join in coalition with other communities working to end oppression, we will never achieve a genuine sense of community, and a genuine sense of equality will be wholly unattainable.

It grieves me terribly when I see gay and lesbian organizations themselves restrict inclusion of bisexual and transgender people from our agendas, our communities, and our movement. That's when we also must speak out, because it is our issue. When anyone is targeted for hate-motivated harassment or violence based on their skin color, socioeconomic class, sex, gender expression, sexuality, physical appearance, ability or disability, ethnicity, this is our issue too. In the end, I have seen that whenever anyone is diminished, we are all demeaned, and I understand that the possibility for authentic community cannot be realized unless and until we become involved, to challenge, to question, and to act. Estelle has been an activist throughout her life to make the world a better and safer place for me and for others. She has acted with courage, compassion, and integrity.

So, if indeed it is true that, as the old saying goes, the fish is the last to see or even feel the water because it is so pervasive, then from our vantage point at the margins, queer people have a special opportunity – indeed, a responsibility – to serve as social commentators, as critics. Our experience as outsiders gives us tools to expose and highlight the rigidity of gender roles and the oppressive attitudes and behaviors that dampen and saturate our environment – and, most importantly, to challenge the culture to move forever forward and to grow. I hope we can join together and go out into our lives and work for *Tikkun Olam*. Let us transform the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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QUEER LIBERATION? NO THANKS, WE'LL PASS

BRENT CALDERWOOD

"After years of trying to be "real men" in order to be accepted by heterosexuals, we gave up and ran for the hills of San Francisco. There, we learned the same lessons over again that were drummed into our skulls as kids: If you want to make in the world, kid, you'd better turn that swish into a swagger."

A friend of mine who's taking a French class at San Francisco State University told me recently how the professor asked students, one by one, to answer the question, *en français*, "How would you describe your ideal man or woman?" My friend Toby began to describe his ideal—his boyfriend Marco ("His eyes are brown, his hair is black…")—but the instructor suddenly interrupted Toby mid-sentence. "No, no," she scolded him in English. "You're not supposed to use the masculine form of the possessive. You should say, '*Her* eyes, *her* hair.'"

Toby thought the whole thing was pretty funny, but I wasn't so amused. I spent my whole adolescent life changing pronouns and possessives, altering my language to pass as straight in school. I even learned to tell fag jokes as often as possible so they wouldn't be told about me. When a boy in my seventh-grade Pre-Algebra class accused me of having a lisp, which he claimed meant that I was gay, I nearly banished the letter "s" from my speech. Plurals were out of the question. Things became singular, alone.

If I had known then that I'd see that same boy in one of the many gay bars in the Castro some fifteen years later—if I'd understood that he was just the first in a long line of gay men who'd pressure me to pass so they wouldn't feel so lonely in the closet—maybe I wouldn't have taken him so seriously. But take him seriously I did. As a result of my linguistic efforts, I probably have a larger vocabulary than many of my old classmates, but fifteen years later I still shy away from sibilant words whenever I'm the least bit nervous —like when I'm out on a date with a guy who manages to wear his masculinity with some semblance of authenticity and self-possession.

Now in college and talking to my openly gay friend Toby in the office of the Queer Alliance, San Francisco State University's gay student group, I realized that the same pressure to conform I'd felt in the seventh grade was still alive and well here in San Francisco. Only the words had gotten bigger. Instead of being accused of being a cocksucker, I might be accused—if I were to take a French class too—of improper use of the masculine form.

When I arrived at SF State, I was ready to relax and stop fighting. After years of straining to pass as heterosexual in school, followed by more years of activism and advocacy for queer youth, I was ready to be on the academic equivalent of R&R —basking in the warm glow of queer community that San Francisco promised. I was ready to be accepted with open arms into that community, and I expected that I'd find a boyfriend by the end of my first semester.

But it wasn't that simple. When I arrived, I was shocked to find that I still felt relatively invisible. What was going on? Hadn't thousands of students from all across the country come here seeking safe haven from their backward backwater hometowns? The Castro was full of such refugees, even though they were loath to talk about such things at their favorite watering holes. I knew that, ever since the Gold Rush, San Francisco had been a place that attracted misfits and miscreants dreaming of hidden riches and open lives. That was the city's reputation, but where were these misfits now? Changing their language in classrooms, changing their behavior on the streets to avoid the harassment that still happens.

A lot of people, including most of the gay people I know, think San Francisco is one of the best places in the world for gay people to live. But if

San Francisco is one of the best places in the world for us, that says more about the sorry state of the world than it does about San Francisco. Sure, you can hold hands with your same-sex partner in the Castro. But travel six blocks north, south, east or west from the intersection of Castro and Market streets, and you're just as likely to be sneered at as you are to be cruised. You might even be catcalled by passing motorists.

In a city where many gays look unnervingly like our "Governator" in his box-office prime, most bigots are sensible enough to wait till they're in a moving vehicle to vocalize their bigotry. Just last week, in fact, I was walking through Hayes Valley, the upscale neighborhood just east of the Castro that's home to our city's LGBT Center, when a carload of boys yelled "fag." At first I thought maybe they were calling me "fat"— was this, I wondered, a driveby attempt to urge me to spend more time on the Stairmaster? But no, they didn't care a lick whether I toned up my midsection or not; they were calling me a faggot, urging me to tone down my faggish, gay, unmanly appearance. Their jeers were diminished slightly by the Doppler effect, but rang clearly in my ears even after their car had disappeared over a hill.

Accusations like this, such blatant reminders that I'm not cutting it as a "real man," are blessedly rare now that I'm all grown up. Which makes me grateful, sometimes, to be single. The odds of being pegged as gay go up, after all, when you're coupled, and if you two manage to walk out of the gay ghetto into some other neighborhood without being hassled, you're aware with every step you take that you're making a political statement. If you lean over to kiss your lover in a nice restaurant (since going to a nice restaurant arguably means leaving the Castro), you're not just being affectionate, you're being radical. And if your date seems cold and distant over dinner, you're left to wonder, "Is Bob not interested in me, or is he afraid of being attacked?" Small wonder, then, that even in a city that's about 25 percent gay, very few gay men seem to be in long-term relationships.

The judgments we grew up with, as deeply rooted in our psyches as they are, impinge upon our relationships in ways that are far more pernicious

than the judgments we encounter in our adult lives. As gay men, most of us spent the early part of our lives trying to pass, trying to hoodwink the other guys into thinking we were "one of them" —which doesn't exactly set the stage for honesty and intimacy with other men. And although most agree that things are changing for the better, many of us are still growing up in what feels like a pretty hostile world —one in which our brand of loving is hated, where our desires are viewed as disgusting, reprehensible, weak-willed, evil, or, at the very least, laughable.

Is it surprising then, given this hostility, that many of us would be just a wee bit emotionally bruised? For some, continuing to pass is the strategy. For others, when passing isn't enough, the goal becomes disappearing altogether; higher levels of depression, substance abuse, and suicide in the gay community seem to bear this out. As long as we consider our uniqueness a liability, we'll continue to try to extinguish what's aberrant about us. Isolation and drugs remove us from reality, but only temporarily. When the pain returns, we're forced to either embrace our uniqueness or else extinguish our very being.

This is the shadow, this is the dark current that runs parallel to gay pride parades and increased gay visibility. No matter how accepting some families may be, no matter how many episodes of *Will & Grace* get syndicated or how many people put *Brokeback Mountain* on their Netflix queues, coming out in America is still an act of sacrifice and risk and hope for just about anyone who does it. You're sacrificing your assumed role in your family and society. You're risking rejection, even abuse, from those who are supposed to love and care for you the most. You're hoping you won't feel like you're the only one "like you" anymore—you're hoping to trade passing for an actual sense of belonging.

And certainly, on the surface, San Francisco does provide a place where I don't feel so alone anymore. I can step on any bus in the city, for instance, and know that there will be other out gays and lesbians heading to work and generally going about their lives, just like I do. But if I scratch that shiny iridescent veneer even just a little, I start feeling as isolated as I did growing

up in the suburbs of San Leandro, where homophobes were legion. Just south of Oakland, and only 10 miles as the crow flies across the bay from San Francisco, it was nevertheless light years away culturally and politically. If anything, its geographical proximity to San Francisco made its inhabitants, including its children, more virulent in their hatred of gays, eager to distinguish themselves from the perverts who were parading and making waves on that side of the bay. The close proximity to San Francisco also made them hyperaware of gay cues—so that seventh graders with lisps were suspect, and words like "faggot" and "dyke," rather than serving their traditional purpose as generic reminders to toe the gender-role line, had a more specific meaning: they were bold-faced accusations, official charges of wrongdoing.

Having grown up in the Bay Area, I've witnessed many men metamorphose over time. Now 32 and having been "out" for half of my life, I often run into the skinny, soft boys I knew from queer youth groups in Hayward, Berkeley and Oakland, newly transformed into hulking Adonises. I even occasionally see some of them at the gym, where I seem to be spending as much time as they do. Well out of our teens now, we've abandoned our dreams of turning heterosexist norms on their heads and embracing our deviance. After years of trying to be "real men" in order to be accepted by heterosexuals, we gave up and ran for the hills of San Francisco. There, we learned the same lessons over again that were drummed into our skulls as kids: If you want to make in the world, kid, you'd better turn that swish into a swagger.

Despite living in what many refer to as the "Gay Mecca," I still feel an intense pressure to conform, and the rules eerily resemble the ones that the jocks used to enforce in gym class. Don't move your hands too much when you talk. Don't lisp. Don't smile or make eye contact with other boys (well, with one new proviso: only if you want to fuck them). And don't let anyone accuse you of being a 90-pound weakling. Get big, big, big. Size matters.

The Castro is full of men who are on their way to or returning from the gym. A lot of these guys would get winded just from walking to their

mailbox, but you wouldn't know it by looking at them. They've made a career out of pumping iron (sometimes literally—you wouldn't believe how many personal trainers I know), all in the ironic effort to emulate the thugs who pantsed them in the schoolyard.

Don't get me wrong —I'm certainly not immune. I understand the desire to be considered attractive and healthy, but there's something frightening about a community of men who are bulking up their bodies to achieve some predetermined definition of masculine perfection, meanwhile neglecting the fragile psyches that drove them here in the first place. When I visit the Castro, I see a lot of hurt little boys hiding inside the suits of armor they've created. As gay men, I think it's time we ask ourselves: What is the armor for? What, or whom, are we protecting ourselves from? From gay-bashers? Doubtful. If Stonewall taught us nothing else, it taught us that an artfully thrown beer bottle is far more effective at deterring physical assault than a high-definition six-pack. No, we're protecting ourselves from one another—that is, we're protecting ourselves from being rejected by other gay men.

Having left our homes and old lives behind, we need desperately to find love and acceptance, and the possibility for being rejected yet again, by yet another community, for being soft and effeminate—or even sick, dirty, or contagious—is too much to bear. So we head to the gyms, there to sculpt physiques that look strong and healthy. Then we head to the locker rooms, where we keep our heads down and hone on our finely tuned peripheral vision, just as we did in high school. If we make connections there at all, it is in the steamrooms, where faces and eyes are obscured.

It's a sad tale, I know, and one I fear will add a new label to my already-chafing nape: cynic. Am I risking ostracism yet again? Who wants to be around a cynic, after all? After all those hours I've spent in the gym, the last thing I want to do is earn the scorn of other gay men. My friend Toby, certainly, thought I was being too critical of his French teacher. But if I am critical, it's because I'm an idealist. It's because I love men, and gay men in particular. And I think we can contribute more than we currently do—to

ourselves, to each other, to the broader culture. I believe our presence as queer outsiders in a heteronormative world is illuminating. But we can only bring our own kind of light to the world if we are, in fact, present—here, now. Present to the reality that we will *never* gain political, social, or personal acceptance by disappearing ourselves, subsuming ourselves to bland, outmoded notions of masculine identity.

Queer liberation means being accepted as we are. For that to happen, we must each start by accepting, and being, fully our*selves*—masculine, feminine, somewhere in the middle, or maybe somewhere entirely outside of the gender binary. We're almost there, too. In coming out of the closet, we jettisoned expectations about who we were supposed to be in order to find out who we really were. Along the way, many of us gathered with other gay men in urban enclaves. And although it's understandable that once there, we reverted to imposing those old, familiar expectations on each other, that strategy hasn't brought us any closer to personal or political liberation. It's time to make a change.

It's time to let go of those tired old expectations and give ourselves permission to be who we really are. This will require letting go of a lot of fear, the fear that drove us into the closet in the first place: the fear that we would be punished for failing to be just like the other guys in the locker room. But guess what? Now we *are* just like the other guys in the locker room, in the gyms we've made for ourselves in places like the Castro—so why are we still afraid? If we let go of the fear and look each other in the eye, we will see ourselves in each other. We will see the beautiful, queer, imperfect boys—and men—that we were meant to be all along.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent Calderwood is a writer, editor, illustrator and musician. His essays and reviews have appeared in magazines and newspapers nationally; his poetry has appeared in journals such as Slow Trains and modern words, as well as in the upcoming anthology Solace. He won a 2007 Lambda Literary Foundation Fellowship for poetry, and he was a 2007 Chancellor's Fellow in English Literature at the CUNY Graduate Center. In Fall 2008, he will begin working toward an MSW in Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. He lives in San Francisco, where he is finishing his book-length poetry collection, Fault Zone, as well as a memoir.

ON BEING A QUEER MAN: FEMINISM AND THE NEED TO BE AN ALLY

MICHAEL FARIS

"I believe that as a culture we are often confused about what it means to be a man or to be a woman. In short, we're generally unsure what gender means. Growing up as a man in our culture, I think, is about struggling with what it means to be a man: how tough to be, how to relate to women, how to bond with other men, how men are supposed to express emotion — and this list is just a start."

I was a skinny, lanky kid in elementary school, the sort that was more interested in math and fantasy stories than in football and tag. Sexuality did not yet play a role in how we defined gender on the school bus, so I was not yet maligned as a "faggot" as I sat in one of the first rows of the school bus, but that didn't mean that gender didn't play a huge role in how we related to each other.

Those first few rows were reserved for those who didn't quite "cut it" in the social strata of my small, rural school. As a third grader, I sat there constantly bearing the taunts from behind. Kyle was the worst. A few years older than I, he spent our shared fifteen minutes on the bus kicking my feet from behind, tapping my head, and finding as many faults as he could in my appearance and actions: I wore hand-me-down shirts from my aunts, I had bushy, unkempt hair, and, perhaps worst of all, I wasn't able to stick up for myself or harass other kids on the bus.

Although I could tolerate the abuse from behind for those fifteen-minute bus rides, the harassment my littlest brother, a kindergartener, received was far more unbearable. If I was skinny, he was emaciated. If I had a mop on my head, his hair was something from a rag doll, with white, wispy locks falling into his eyes. While I took the taunts with anger and rage, he took them with naïveté and appreciated the attention.

The day that sticks out most in my mind was the ride home from school when Kyle and a few other older boys convinced my brother that it would be cool to flip off our mother and tell her "fuck you" when he got off the bus. My brother seemed to take this as wise advice (though I don't know what he was thinking), but I knew right away that they were attempting to humiliate him. Outraged that he could be so naïve, I found myself kicking him as hard as I could when we got off the bus.

I couldn't understand my actions at the time, except to say that I was angry that he could be so duped by these boys. Now, I see a whole system of gender and class playing out in that scene. I see the bullies sitting behind me as understanding what it takes to be a man and acting it out: they knew there was a hierarchy to enforce, and the effeminate, the weak, and the meek were at the bottom.

I think I had begun to see this, and begun to realize that I didn't have what it took to be manly. Except in one case: to show my brother that if he was going to be too naïve to realize what was happening to him, that I would show him, through kicking him in our driveway, that I knew more about what it meant to be strong and male than he did.

Gay and queer men often talk about having a "root" — a time early in their lives when, looking back, they can see they were "destined" to be gay or queer. I prefer to think of roots in a slightly different way. This event was one of the many roots that would begin to define my discomfort with manhood and masculinity.

Now, at 27 and as a queer-identified teacher, writer, and academic living 2000 miles from my parents' Iowan farm, I am someone that third-grade me wouldn't recognize himself in. In particular, it is my ambivalence towards identifying as a man that may be hardest for the younger me to identify with.

This ambivalence arises every time I am asked to mark my sex or

gender on a form. This ambivalence quickly turns to frustration when I am asked for my "gender" but must mark either "male" or "female." Too often, questionnaires and surveys conflate sex and gender, and even when they don't, they limit us to binaries: male or female, man or woman. This may not seem like that big of a deal. After all, I'm perceived as male-bodied and I identify as a man. However, I am struggling with identifying as a man, largely because of my politics and the influences of feminist scholars whom I've read – such as Andrea Dworkin, John Stoltenberg, and Catharine MacKinnon. I'd like to chronicle here my growth from someone who saw the world in strict categories of man and woman into the queer man allied with feminism that I am today.

I believe that as a culture we are often confused about what it means to be a man or to be a woman. In short, we're generally unsure what gender means. Growing up as a man in our culture, I think, is about struggling with what it means to be a man: how tough to be, how to relate to women, how to bond with other men, how men are supposed to express emotion — and this list is just a start. Gender, it has long been understood, is a social construction, based on the values we have ascribed to sex. It has been these values that we've ascribed to manhood that I've constantly wrestled with.[1]

It wasn't until I started studying gender as a social system, as a codified set of rules and expectations embedded with domination, that I began to understand what it means to be a man. Or, rather, it wasn't until I started applying what I was learning in classes and in my reading to my own life that I began to understand what it meant to be a man. I owe much of my

[1] I will be, primarily, focusing on gender in this essay, but I would like to give a nod here to the idea that sex, too, is a social construction. For when we define sex, usually as either male or female (and increasingly allowing for intersex), we are usually discussing the presence or absence of a penis. Sex, then, as it is usually defined, is the social value put on the penis. When a child is born, doctors define it as male if the external genitalia is over a certain length and female if it is under a certain length; anything in between is ambiguous or intersex. What this social definition of sex fails to take into account is the genetic makeup of our bodies (which could differ from the phenotypic presentation of our sex), the hormones that course through our bodies (which could differ from the previous two), and, some claim, our brain waves (which too could differ from any of the previous three traits listed before). Although I'm certain I'm a person with a penis, and that I must have had enough testosterone to have gone through puberty, I can't be entirely sure that I am fully male unless I undergo genetic and brain-wave testing. The social focus on the penis in defining sex, though, I think is important in our understanding of gender.

understanding of myself to feminist scholarship and to gender theory. Gender activist Riki Wilchins writes that "gender is primarily *a system of symbols and meanings—and the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use—for power and sexuality*: masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness" (14, emphasis original). As Wilchins stresses here, gender in our society is enforced through rules and punishments; these rules and punishments not only limit us to rigid definitions of who we can be, but also privilege men (as active, strong, and dominant) over women (as vulnerable, passive, and weak).

My journey into feminism and understanding my own manhood began late in my undergraduate career. I remember my junior year of college, sitting in a class on gender and language. It was a tumultuous time in my life; I was dating a woman for over two years and was dissatisfied with most aspects of the relationship: the use of my social time, our sexual relationship, the way we argued, my inability to communicate my feelings or needs, her domination of the relationship. Feeling emasculated because of my partner's dominance in our relationship, I felt uncomfortable with my manhood — or perhaps my self-perceived lack of it. With my personal baggage about gender, I wasn't very comfortable in this course.

During the same term, I wrote a (rather bad) poem for a writing class I was also taking. It began:

> my women's studies class is interesting
> because all the women act like men
> and all the men act like women
> not that i'm to talk
> i'm pretty feminine myself
>
> but some of these men
> refuse to call themselves men
> as if they're making some grand statement
> about to change the world

I was obviously indignant toward my male classmates who expressed discomfort with identifying as a man. At the time, I identified as a feminist, but I had no idea how to enact my feminism in my everyday life, or what it

meant for my manhood — and my understanding of gender even more so. I concluded the above poem: "but at least i know i'm a man / with a penis waggling between my legs." While I didn't ascribe to all the rigid rules of manhood, I felt that there were still boxes we had to fit in, and foremost among them was identifying as either man or woman, and making sure this identification matched one's physical sex.

It wasn't until recently that I began to understand more fully what manhood really stands for (though I don't think I yet understand gender completely). In *The End of Manhood*, John Stoltenberg tells the story of Tom, who isn't sure what manhood means. Tom always felt compared to other men, and he isn't sure what the "stuff" that other men have more of than he. He begins to ask other men whom they feel compared to — who has more of this "stuff" — and eventually, he figures out who has the most "stuff." He goes to the swamp to meet this manly man: Deep Bob, "a massive hairy creature [that] rose up out of the goo, slime sheeting down its matted fur" (31). Deep Bob ironically turns out to be the tooth fairy, who only acts as Deep Bob part-time. Manliness for Deep Bob is a public façade, a part-time job that does not encapsulate who he truly is. The lesson of Deep Bob is that manhood is an act, a performance.

Stoltenberg then tells his own story of growing up. He explains that either he was compared to other men who had more "stuff" than he (and he was picked on by those men as well), or he had to "pass" — that is, convince others that he had those qualities of being a man, but not really convince himself. He wound up picking on his little sister in order to feel manlier. As he tries to recount this story as an adult, he talks to his sister and realizes that he does not remember as much about his taunting and teasing as she does. He concludes, "The one who is making up the manhood has to forget a lot that goes into the legend of one's gender" (35). Stoltenberg relays that the key to manhood is forgetting what one does to harm others' selfhood in the name of validating one's own manhood; all a man has to remember is how his own manhood was validated.

In the epigram at the end of this realization, Stoltenberg writes:

TO KNOW WE REALLY HAVE MANHOOD,
WHATEVER THAT CAN MEAN,
WE HAVE TO DENY SOMEONE ELSE'S SELFHOOD—
OVER AND OVER AGAIN. (36)

As the oldest brother of three, I've started thinking about the ways we picked on each other and fought. With just three and a half years between my youngest brother and me, we fought and roughhoused a lot. I've often attributed this to our relative proximity in age and to "boys will be boys."

But now, after immersing myself in feminist theory, I have begun to wonder if this is true. Riding on the bus was a humiliating experience, and it was embarrassing to see my littlest brother picked on as well; once off the bus, I'd turn on my little brother and release my rage on him. As a victim of bullies on the bus, I didn't feel strong enough or man enough. I realize now my frustration during this time had to do with my own naïveté about how to be a man (a bully). I was even angrier that my brother was even more naïve. I had no idea how to express my frustration except by showing him that I knew more about manhood than he did — through striking out physically against him. I was like the bullies on the bus; if my brother didn't know the codes of manhood, I had to show him.

In high school, as I began to socialize less with my brothers and more with my friends, I noticed the competition had moved from those I *had* to live with to those I *chose* to hang out with. My male friends would regularly compete: who was the better basketball player; who had sex more or had a girlfriend; who hit harder; who was willing to drive fastest; who had the coolest car. One friend was constantly teased because he was smaller than the rest of us and a bit of a "neat freak." We tormented him with taunts, mocking his feminine desire for tidiness and his short stature. In our eyes, he was "gay," and we let him know it. I was one of his worst tormenters, despite our close friendship, and ironically, I was even afraid that he really was gay and would eventually hit on me. I had internalized at this point, though at a subconscious level, that being a man meant being straight.

While my time spent with men was characterized by competition, I noticed a completely different culture among my female friends. Our relationships were built less around doing things together (or against each other) and instead about talking. I remember late nights at parties when Jessi and I would sit in a bedroom and talk while the rest of the party was elsewhere in the house playing Nintendo64, shooting hoops, or playing with fire (pyromania was a hit among my male friends). Our conversations during these parties were about relationships, feelings, and listening. I felt stronger connections with Jessi than my guy friends, probably because we actually took the time to listen to each other.

Certainly, I don't mean to create a false dichotomy here; I had guy friends with whom I talked a lot, and women friends whom I played sports with and compared strength. And when I did engage in sports or competition with girls, I still felt like I was measuring myself not solely as a basketball player or as a roller hockey player — but also as a man. If I couldn't outperform a girl at basketball, say, then I obviously wasn't fulfilling my obligation as a man (to be stronger, faster, and more skilled at sports than a woman). But, for the most part, my relationships with guys were different from those with girls.

And of course, especially against male friends, I was often less of a man than others: I was skinnier, slower, clumsier, less athletic, less interested in cars, and generally less something — and I talked about women in a different way than most of my male friends — in that I didn't talk about them hardly at all (except to say I thought someone was cute or I had a crush on someone). I was never lewd or crass about women, like many of my male friends were. I'm not sure why, but I just felt uncomfortable about it.

It wasn't that I wasn't attracted to women. I was and still am. To this day, I can't figure out why I didn't want to talk about women the way I heard other men talking about women. Was it because I was so uncomfortable hearing my dad talk about women in that way? If so, why did that make me so uncomfortable? I wonder sometimes if it was because I saw women as so much more human than men. Women expressed themselves, they talked

more, they had feelings, and they demeaned other people less — in general, at least. Men, on the other hand, treat each other like crap. Worse yet, I saw them treat themselves like crap. They never expressed themselves and kept their emotions all inside, except maybe for anger. For example, I've never seen my father cry, not even at my grandmother's funeral. I've only seen him express two emotions, really: anger and happiness — and that happiness, of course, was never too happy, too elated: that would be too gay.

I think that it was this difficulty concerning what it means to be a man, among other factors (growing up in a small town, not seeing any visibly queer folk, growing up strictly religious), that prevented me from coming out until I was 21. Being a man is defined in terms of relationships to other men and women. With men, it's competition (who is a better man); with women, it's a romantic or sexual relationship. Getting over that hurdle at 21 allowed me to come out as bisexual when I was 21, but I wasn't completely comfortable with that term.

I wasn't straight (I was attracted to men), but I wasn't gay (I was attracted to women). But bisexual didn't seem to work either, because I suddenly found myself meeting transgender folk and genderqueer folk who complicated the issue. Once, on a trip to Chicago, I corrected a five-year-old girl on her use of pronouns when referring to a rather attractive person I had just met. "You mean *she*," I said. I was quickly corrected that this person preferred *he* or *ze* (a gender neutral pronoun). If I was finding people attractive who didn't conform to our society's construction of male or female, was bisexual the best word for me? I soon found myself not too comfortable with the gender dichotomy altogether.

And, it turns out, I'm still not comfortable with the limited options of male and female. When I moved to Oregon at the age of 24, I first came into contact with the word *queer*. I made new friends who used the word to describe their sexuality and politics, in part to be more inclusive of folks who don't sit within the traditional gender dichotomy. The word *queer* hadn't been available to me in Iowa, where it seemed like everyone I met identified as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, or transgender. Now, this "new" term resonated

with me because it connoted strangeness and confusion, as well as a refusal to sit in a binary.

I also became more familiar with feminist theorists who argue that the root of the oppression of women lies in the sex/gender system, in the actual construction of sex and gender itself. It was upon encountering these theories that I finally felt like I began to understand what it meant to be a man, as well as what it meant to be a woman. I had already understood that gender was socially constructed and not the same as sex. Additionally, I already felt that there was something awfully wrong with the way we constructed manhood, as well as the way men treated and talked about women in general. However, it wasn't until reading the work of feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and John Stoltenberg that I felt like I had more insights into our culture's sex/gender system.[2]

MacKinnon and Dworkin have both noted that the way society constructs, discusses, and engages in heterosexual sex is in terms of violence and domination. Dworkin argues that the way we talk about and view heterosexual sex informs the way we relate to each other and the way power structures exist. In her book *Intercourse*, she writes that we often discuss sexual penetration in terms of violation to the point that "Violation is a synonym for intercourse" (122). For Dworkin, the way men talk in literature, philosophy, law, etc. draws on the metaphor of heterosexual sex, but the way we talk about sex (violation and penetration), continues a system of domination of men over women. It is not just that penetration occurs, but that this penetration is talked about in terms of violation: e.g., *conquest, laid, dominated, invaded, fucked* — and that this violation is normalized.

MacKinnon too notes the violence that is used when it comes to heterosexual sex. She believes that heterosexuality is defined by "the

[2] I acknowledge that it is problematic to rely on the theories of MacKinnon, Dworkin, and Stoltenberg, as their theories are considered out-dated and have been criticized from various other feminist perspectives. Feminists such as Ann Ferguson (119-120) and Judith Butler (23) have criticized MacKinnon's theory in particular as overly determinist. Specifically, Butler writes these theories do not leave room for us to theorize about sexuality outside a rigid gender dichotomy. While I find many of these critiques convincing, I also think MacKinnon's theories, as well as Dworkin's and Stoltenberg's, allow us a framework for understanding how we construct and understand manhood in our culture.

eroticization of dominance and submission" (178). Gay sex, too, often enacts this dominance and submission. Even if we aren't talking about sex, it seems that men are defined by domination and women by submission. The countless times I was called "pussy," "pansy," and "girl" in the hallways at school began to have a new meaning to me after I read Dworkin's and MacKinnon's work. If I wasn't aggressive enough, I wasn't fully a man. I had to a be a "girl."

"Why must human experience by 'gendered' at all?" Stoltenberg asks (304). This is a question that I've spent quite a bit of time considering. It seems that in a truly just society, we wouldn't need gender. We would be polyandrogynous beings, each one of us a mixture of feminine and masculine traits without being labeled as gendered. If society were this way, it seems to me, then we wouldn't have to rely on a system of gendered domination. Youth wouldn't feel less than others because they didn't live up to a model of manhood. I wouldn't have been humiliated by the bullying of my brother on the bus. People attracted to the same sex would be safer because there would be no expectations that they be attracted to certain people.

What this would ultimately mean, I believe, is respecting one's own and others' dignity. Stoltenberg writes that to be a man means to be loyal to manhood rather than to oneself. To pass the test of manhood one has to ignore the dignity of others and of oneself, to reduce others to "Its" instead of full humans, or "Yous" (1, 330). When we men bully or demean others, we reduce them to objects, to "Its." This act of demeaning seems completely wrapped up in the construction of manhood. It seems that a genderless society would be the best answer, and I admire some people who have decided to use gender-neutral pronouns for their efforts toward this change.

But here enters my ambivalence: I've considered my discomfort at continuing to identify as a man, to use the pronouns "he" and "him," to continue existing in a binary gender system with which I disagree. I have considered instead identifying as genderqueer and asking others to use the pronouns "ze" and "hir" when referring to me. But I have to consider pragmatism. I am visibly male, and unless I take moves to alter my physical

makeup, I will probably always be coded by others as male, and thus ascribed as a "man" by strangers. To deny that I have been constructed as a man, I believe, would be to also deny all the privileges that I get (unearned) for being coded as a man in society. This includes those privileges that we give men unconsciously: taking their ideas more seriously, listening with more respect, not interrupting their words as often as we do women's, to start a brief list.

But there is another reason I don't feel comfortable starting to identify as genderqueer: as an educator, I feel that if I am perceived as too radical (and granted, some readers will already feel that I am), I might lose identification with students. That is, if I identify as genderqueer, I may alienate students who have more traditional values. Losing this identification with younger men is especially dangerous, I feel, for male students who often need a model of manhood that is as non-dominating as possible. I now teach college, but when I taught middle school, I think the model of manhood that I presented (one that stuck up for women and queer folk, one that showed interest in traditionally feminine activities, one that wasn't deep-voiced or physically threatening) served as a model for the quieter, weaker, and meeker (and possibly queer) boys that one could be a man who was strong in non-traditional ways.

So what does it mean to me to be a queer man? We often speak of allies in the queer community, generally in terms of heterosexual folk who have chosen to work and fight as allies to queer folk. But I'd like to reposition this word, and stress the importance of queer men as allies to other subjects of domination: women, trans folk, other queer men, persons of color, differently-abled folk, economically disadvantaged people.

The ways we can go about this are various, but I believe that three key approaches are important. First, we must give up our unearned privilege when we can. For example, male voices are given more reverence than female voices in our society, and it is important to let others speak and call attention to situations when male voices are valued more highly. Second, we must also use this unearned privilege to help others when we can. This can involve situations of speaking truth to power when those in power won't listen to the

lived experiences of oppressed people. Finally, if we are ever to achieve a more equal, just society, we must break the male bond, by which I mean when men bond over the domination of others (e.g., talking about women as if they are solely objects). It is vital to break my bond with those men and instead stand up as an ally for other oppressed folks.

Being a queer man is already an act of breaking the male bond, but I don't believe that coming out is enough to fight the systems of domination that we have been born into. It is a start, for sure. I've developed close friendships over the last few years with wonderful women, trans folk, and queer men because I have chosen to fight sexism and other systems of oppression. I've found that we can trust each other to stand up for each other against acts of domination. When I consider these trustful relationships, I can't imagine a life in which I had chosen to attempt to be a 'real man," which I believe would be a life of constantly reducing others to "Its" and maiming their dignity — and through that, destroying my own.

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STRIPPING TOWARDS EQUALITY

ERIC JOST

"I finished my thirty minute shift, collected my tips (a paltry $20), and left the club quickly, afraid to hear any comments from the other dancers, patrons, or the manager. But as I exited the club, my emotions took over and I felt a rush of exhilaration at having broken out of my comfort zone and tried something new. I was hooked!"

The night I stripped for the first time was the night I became an activist.

It was December 2003, and my friends and I – having just finished final exams – decided to celebrate by going to a gay male strip club in Washington, DC. I had no idea what to expect; I had never been to a strip club before – gay or straight.

Approaching the club, I could hear the thumping bass of the music from inside, and my heart was quickening in time with the rhythm as we made our way toward the front door. We paid a small cover charge and made our way onto the main floor. The source of the music came from floor-to-ceiling speakers on either side of an enclosed DJ booth. In front of us, patrons sat around a bar while nude dancers performed acrobatic routines from brass poles hanging from the ceiling. The small main stage – backed by sparkling gold streamers – lined the far right wall as a muscular policeman slowly removed his clothing while a bachelorette party watched in awed anticipation. Along every wall, television monitors broadcast images of men in every possible sexual position.

My friends and I stood in shock, attempting to process the sensory overload that had hit us only moments earlier. I hadn't even been inside for five minutes before the club manager – a smallish man in his mid-thirties – walked up to me and asked, "How would you like to dance tonight?" His question caught me off guard. Me?! Dance? Naked?! Only a few months had passed since I lost my virginity, so being suddenly propositioned to enter the sex industry, however briefly, was a complete shock. I glanced at my friends, giggled, and coyly declined his invitation. He didn't persevere, but told me to let him know if I changed my mind.

After much deliberation with friends, and after the manager and several dancers again attempted to sway me, I decided to suck it up and get on stage. With gold streamers twinkling behind me, I stripped down to nothing but my socks (where of course attentive customers would place their generous tips).

Like any virgin, my first time was less than spectacular. I don't imagine it was very erotic as I had no idea what I was doing – and I wasn't particularly confident with my body. Not to mention the fact that my two best friends were staring up at me from the floor below! Additionally, whenever I noticed one of the club's patrons watching me with any interest, I would quickly look away, embarrassed by their attention. But I finished my thirty minute shift, collected my tips (a paltry $20), and left the club quickly, afraid to hear any comments from the other dancers, patrons, or the manager. But as I exited the club, my emotions took over and I felt a rush of exhilaration at having broken out of my comfort zone and tried something new. I was hooked!

While I had a great time on stage that night, my overprotective boyfriend and a stint overseas to study abroad hindered my return for almost a year. When I was given an assignment in class to develop an ethnography around a designated "queer space" in DC, I immediately thought that the strip club would be the perfect place to conduct my research – and possibly make my return to the stage. So I made a deal with the manager who had months before coaxed me onto stage: I would strip periodically at the club, in exchange for interviews with club patrons, employees, and other dancers. And, of course, I got to keep all of the money I made. It was a perfect arrangement!

For the next four months, I became something of a regular there, talking to dozens of customers and strippers while writing furiously about the ins and outs of participating in this particular queer space: How the dancers interacted with the customers; how the customers interacted with each other; and how the venue itself facilitated social networking among everyone in that space. Concurrently, I felt empowered by dancing. Never before had I been admired for my body – and the ability to make money simply by using what nature gave me was liberating and my self confidence grew immensely.

As time went on and my research project came to a close, I felt that it was time for me to make a decision: to continue stripping or end my career as I ended my project. Although my friends and my partner all knew that I was doing field work at a strip club, I had decided not to tell anyone about the full extent of my involvement. I felt gratified by the work, but the negative reaction from my boyfriend after my first foray into the world of stripping frightened me into keeping my silence. And that fear ultimately made my decision for me: I would stop dancing. At the time, I couldn't bring myself to face my friends' reactions, and although it saddened me, I felt such a relief upon quitting. No longer would I be lying about where I was going or what I was doing there. In fact, I found myself so afraid of what people would think of me that I didn't tell anyone about my work until several years later.

Even though my tenure in the sex industry was relatively brief, my work at the club impacted me immediately. I began reading anything I could get my hands on regarding strippers, sex workers, and others working in the sex industry. Unfortunately, most of what I read was disheartening. Little to no testimonials or research have been done on or by male sex workers, and many of the texts I read addressing female sex workers were derogatory and unenlightened. Sex-negative feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, viewed sex work – even gay male sex work – as being exploitative of women and inherently evil; and many of their colleagues seemed to subscribe to that particular point of view. From what I found, it seemed that academia had agreed that the sex industry was put in place for one purpose: to exploit and degrade its workers.

Soon, with some guidance from friends and professors, I discovered the works of Lily Burana, Carol Queen, Annie Sprinkle, and Carol Leigh (aka Scarlot Harlot). Here were women who defied social norms and didn't view sex or sex work as degrading but, rather, empowering. They argued that not only is sex work worthwhile, but more importantly also legitimate, fun, and sacred. I learned from them that sex work is not a continuation of patriarchal exploitation, but instead, a potentially subversive act that, in fact, undermines patriarchy and pervasive sex negative attitudes. These might have been strong women speaking on behalf of other women, but they were suddenly my new heroes.

Encouraged and motivated by my fellow travelers, I entered the world of queer activism. I was determined to not only fight for the rights of GLBTQ individuals, but bring sex worker rights to the forefront and destigmatize sexual norms on the whole. But, to my surprise, many so-called progressive communities seemed far more aligned with conservatives on these subjects. Feminist and queer organizations alike felt that fighting for sex worker rights would hurt their movements' credibility. Even the organizations that I worked with that focused specifically on sexual health or GLBTQ rights never considered sex worker rights a top priority.

In 2006, however, after years of advocating and fighting losing battles with employers, I finally saw a glimmer of hope. I attended the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference in my hometown of Kansas City. I was excited to attend the conference particularly because of the "Sexual Freedom Track" the Task Force had carved out within the conference's program. Here were a series of workshops specifically designed to promote the rights of queer people who haven't received the same recognition within the movement.

At one workshop early on in the conference, the issue of sex worker rights came up and I saw my fellow sex workers vocalizing their indignation at the treatment they received by the mainstream GLBTQ rights movement. In a moment of exhilaration, I stood up and added my voice to the outcries, describing my own history with the sex industry and my displeasure with

having been silenced by the GLBTQ community when I spoke out in defense of my right to strip and in defense of sex worker rights on the whole. It was the first time that I had "come out" as an ex-dancer and I remember trembling as I described my experience, fearing the inevitable persecution soon to come as a result of my disclosure.

The amount of support my fellow sex workers and I received was overwhelming, and everyone in that room seemed genuinely concerned over the current state of sex worker rights. I felt that I was witnessing a change within the GLBTQ rights movement – as if the issue at hand finally had a face and a voice. I imagined a great shift to be taking place, as if the 2,000 people attending the conference were now unified behind the sex worker rights movement and we would see it listed as a priority by the movement's frontrunners.

As I left the conference room for the evening, however, I walked by two participants I had seen periodically throughout the day. As I passed them, I overheard one of them say, "I understand where they're coming from, but I wish the prostitutes wouldn't force their ideals upon us." Immediately my dreams of grandeur were shattered.

My experience at that conference and the lack of action taken in its aftermath has left me wondering why – after living through the ongoing feminist and gay rights movements and the alleged sexual revolution – sex and sex work continue to be among the most taboo subjects in the 21st century? Worldwide, GLBTQ communities have embraced each other's differences and celebrated our supposed sexual freedom that evades many of our heterosexual brothers and sisters. But the apprehensions I have witnessed when bringing sex to the forefront might bring us to ask ourselves: Is the queer community really as sexually accepting as we like to think it is?

Over the last decade, we have witnessed the rise of the Marriage Equality movement. And while success is being made – however slowly – on that front, our focus on partner rights seems to have frightened us back into our sexual closets. It is almost as if HIV/AIDS made us so fearful to fight for sexual freedom that we have looked for other, more "appropriate" battles to

win. AIDS not only affected our health, but single-handedly erased the entire sexual revolution from our collective consciousness. And although many have worked tirelessly to convince the general public that we are no longer concerned with the "sexual" aspect of our "sexual identity," the truth is that, by forsaking it, we are lying to ourselves and actually risk losing the right to express our sexuality openly and feely. And I, for one, am not willing to reenter any one of my many sexual closets.

Four years ago, I began a journey that has led me down a path I could have never imagined. A few months dancing nude on a stage has resulted in more judgment and vilification than I ever could have imagined. And while I continue to support the movement that has seen so many advances in recent decades, I find myself more and more disheartened with the battles GLBTQ activists choose to fight; while finding it slightly ironic that a movement supposedly based on sexual freedom has chosen to shy away from sexuality only four decades after the movement's beginning. Our political activist organizations would be better served to remember the fact that when the riots at Stonewall occurred, GLBTQ individuals were being locked up for the same reasons that sex workers are today.

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V. TRANSFORMING MASCULINITY

JESUS OF SAN FRANCISCO: CAN JESUS CHRIST BE A RESOURCE FOR QUEER MASCULINITIES?

ROB DAY-WALKER

"I've stayed in the Christian tradition because the Jesus of the Religious Right is not the one that I experienced when I was five years old, nor the Jesus found in the pages of the Bible. Therefore, I write what follows in the service of communities I know and love: those who follow Jesus (especially if they disagree with me about queer sexualities), and queer men of every description."

Opening Space for Conversation

In many queer male communities, talking about Jesus smells a bit like sleeping with the enemy. I would like to think that I understand the queer academic allergy to listening to Christian discourse about sexualities or the nature of God. After all, invoking God, it seems, is the ultimate power move—the ultimate unanswerable argument. If heterosexism has divine sanction, then queer males are off to hell in a hand basket, right? Some queer men conclude that it's much better to focus on how God is used as a weapon against us, continuously expose why this happens, and then set aside all the rhetoric and get on with thinking intentionally about our own bodies and identities. God—or any conception of the transcendent realm—is better left to private imagining. Anything else seems to smack of universals, of grand, scientifically validated stories that supposedly explain the whole universe (metanarratives). Contemporary culture, claims scholar Jean-Francois Lyotard, experiences "incredulity" toward such grand visions of reality. This is understandable, especially when so many of these visions leave no room for our experiences as queer men. Yet, here I am, writing an essay about Jesus, the central figure in our culture's major "metanarrative," as though queer men should pay attention to him!

I am certainly not the first to suggest that Jesus can be—and is—the ally of queer people. I write as a Christian, a queer man who wants to be a friend of Jesus; I want to stay affiliated with the Church, even (and especially) if some Christians are heterosexist homophobes. I fear, though, that most of my queer brothers will dismiss this essay with justifiable anger: "Of course Jesus has nothing to do with San Francisco. Next!"

I grew up in a Christian home for most of my life. I prayed the "sinner's prayer" at five years old with my Dad on the way to kindergarten, the day after my birthday. I think I'd lied about something and gotten caught by my dad. So, as I sat with tears streaming down my face, he asked me, "Bobby, do you want to know *why* you do bad things?" I really did (which might figure when I was trying to avoid being disciplined again!). But I was totally unprepared for what happened next. Somehow, I understood what my dad was saying to me about Jesus dying to take away my sin and give me new life with God, though I'm quite sure, as I look back, that the language was probably beyond my comprehension at Kindergarten age! I started bawling, and as I prayed to Jesus for forgiveness of sin, it wasn't guilt that I felt lift from my shoulders—it was fear. You have to understand: my step-dad and I never really got along—I was sometimes petrified with fear of him—but during that prayer, I experienced Jesus' love for me, and his complete welcome.

People like Richard Dawkins[1] claim that children cannot have true experiences of conversion because their parents have indoctrinated them. All I know is that after my prayer, the constant fear in my life was never quite so crippling. Despite all the grown-up sceptics who pooh-pooh'ed my

[1] Author of *The God Delusion*, a recent bestseller that defends hard-line atheism.

conversion, I never expected the kind of mystical experience I had that day with my step-dad. Afterward, when I was scared or frightened, I would sing songs to Jesus because I knew that he loved me even when I doubted my dad's love. Later, when I was a teenager, I would forget the welcome of this simple Christ as I battled with a Christ who seemed to ask me to change my sexual orientation. I often thanked God the Father several times a week for not killing me outright whenever I came crashing down from the bliss of sexual fantasy about boys.

After attending Bible College for a year and a half (while living in dorms with beautiful men!), I was suspended because of issues surrounding my sexuality; I couldn't put off dealing with it any longer. I enrolled in counselling to change my orientation, and also saw a secular social worker once or twice a month. From the age of nineteen until the age of twenty-two, I snapped like a yo-yo between what my emotions and body told me and what my conservative theology dictated. It was a brutal struggle, but in the end, I concluded that Scripture didn't say anything about homosexuality being sinful, per se. Despite the so-called "clobber verses" (e.g. "Man shall not lie with man, for it is an abomination") that most of us have heard before, I found that a contextual reading of the Bible does not support homophobia any more than it does the oppression of women or ethnic minorities.

I've stayed in the Christian tradition because the Jesus of the Religious Right is not the one that I experienced when I was five years old, nor the Jesus found in the pages of the Bible. Therefore, I write what follows in the service of communities I know and love: those who follow Jesus (especially if they disagree with me about queer sexualities), and queer men of every description. Some of us queers, I find, wish that we could find a way to cut through the Church's bullshit, longing to find some solace in a Christ who really is "good news" for us. We are tired of being hit over the head by a heterosexual, heterosexist, pro- ("traditional") family Christ (and His misogynistic, abusive Father) whom certain kinds of Christians portray as "saviour"—well, as long as we look like *them*.

A close reading of the canonical Gospels shows, in contrast, that Jesus said absolutely nothing about homosexual sex between men; was decidedly disinterested in patriarchal marriage; asserted the necessity of faithfulness in marriage for both men and women; and de-emphasized "blood family" to a shocking degree for his culture and time period. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are "theological biographies" that contain the historical witness to the life and teachings of Jesus. Some Jesus scholars believe these documents contain very little "history"; instead, they tell us quite a lot more about what early Christians thought of Jesus. In contrast, others believe that the authors knew the importance of truthfully recording history (albeit with a "believing" bias). In other words, some scholars say that the writers made up stories because they had a particular theology; others say that the happenings reported in the Gospels are the concrete historical basis for the theology that developed in early Christian communities.[2] I fit into the latter category.

Granting this assumption, I will use material drawn from the Gospels to suggest ways in which Jesus can become a resource for queer masculinities. My reading critiques many aspects of queer masculinities or queer male communities; a queer Jesus still challenges all who love justice and peace—especially those who name the name of Christ—to live in a way that actually reflects what we say. "The personal is political," – so the feminists tell us – and in a culture where personal faith in Jesus supposedly props up a great deal of political activism on both the right and left, that is all the justification I need for my investigation.

I can't make the entire Christian tradition safe for queer men. A project that ambitious would take several volumes and even then isn't guaranteed success. I can only sketch an outline of Christ as a friend to queer men – someone capable, with our help, of undoing the damage of Christian theological heritage *from the inside*. With this modest goal, perhaps others more

[2] When dealing with history, I consider myself a critical realist. This means that while there is something external to the observer to actually report, the experience of observation is always mediated by language and the subjective consciousness of the observer. It is most accurate, then, to speak of statistical probabilities (approaching certainty) rather than "what actually happened"—as though there is no interpretation involved. This position is similar to that of Jesus scholar NT Wright in his several academic works, especially his *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series published by Fortress Press.

capable than I can join the continuing project of "befriending the text," reading it from their own experiences of queerness to see if it can express "good news" for our queer lives. When quoting the Gospels, I use the New Revised Standard Version, which employs inclusive language when referring to humanity and reflects a mainstream (rather than right-wing Evangelical) method of translation.

Jesus and Women

> **Luke 10:38-42 (New Revised Standard Version)**
> ***38*** Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ***39*** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ***40*** But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ***41*** But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ***42*** there is need of only one thing [or *few things are necessary,* or *only one*]. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." [Brackets indicate an alternate reading found in the margin of the NRSV text.]

I have a confession to make. I *loved* the story of Mary and Martha growing up, because I *hated* chores. I live with a disability—Cerebral Palsy. It leaves me a wee bit gimpy; though I get around reasonably well, I hate pushing around a vacuum cleaner, standing at the sink doing dishes, or sweeping floors. I was thoroughly incompetent at sports (despite my stepdad's efforts to "toughen me up" by teaching me to bicycle, play baseball and soccer, and even to jump rope). Neither did I like drawing or piano very much—mostly because I felt that my dad pushed me way too hard. I just felt clumsy, lazy, and stupid.[3]

Instead, I found joy in reading and creative writing – and, oftentimes, you might've found me in my room, singing about Jesus. My dad figured that I wasn't busy enough around the house—he once accused me of "sloth" for sleeping in past 10 AM on a weekend—but I would remember that Jesus was

[3] Thanks to neuropsychological testing, I now know my "spatial orientation" is in the fifth percentile, far below average.

on *Mary's side.* Neither chores nor obsession with productivity, I decided, were of first importance, after all.

At first blush, this text would probably rankle most feminist men or women from any number of angles: Martha is in the kitchen, the traditional domicile of the woman, supporting the evidently more important work of a man (even one as nice as Jesus). Her sister Mary isn't much better—why is she sitting at the feet of a man, simply accepting what he says? From this position, we might think that Martha *rescues* Mary from abject intellectual servitude; if Mary is in the kitchen, she is in woman-space, at one remove from direct manipulation by a man (even one as nice as Jesus).

Or taking another tack, doesn't Jesus sound like an intellectual snob? In this circumstance, isn't he being a little unreasonable? *Oh, come* on, *Jesus,* we might say. *Who's going to cook dinner if we're all just sitting around? Aren't you tired after a long day preaching revolution in the countryside? Besides,* we might add, *who's going to throw this fabulous party without any food? Mary chose "the better part"? Surely, Jesus, your rebuke is a little harsh!* Martha (Stewart) fits a latent Protestant work ethic that many of us—including me!—carry in our hearts.

It was a rebuke all right, but maybe not as harsh as we might think. As scholars acknowledge, Jesus' culture was unapologetically hetero-patriarchal. Martha is, indeed, doing the culturally acceptable thing—what's expected of her. A visiting rabbi is in her home, and she has to make sure her hospitality is at least adequate, even if she's not the "hostess with the most-est." Technically, she's in the right when she says to Jesus about her sister, "Tell her to help me!" Can't you hear her? "If you want supper, tell her to get up off her ass and get in the kitchen!"

Rather than a universal condemnation of practicality, Jesus interrupts Martha's usual thinking, warning her in advance to pay attention by repeating her name: "Martha, Martha." He offers Martha the chance to break out of several unjust systems that hold her captive. Prepping food, of course, is women's work, freeing the men for the "real work" of intellectual conservation or studying Torah. In fact, in the world of Jesus, women are not

taught the Torah as the disciples of rabbis, but rather have to ask their husbands about anything they don't understand.

In fact, some scholars suggest that this story represents the Lucan community's response to a debate about whether or not women can be disciples. Can they be trusted with the teachings of Jesus? Remember: in Jesus' world, if you can be taught, you are qualified to teach. The answer is a definite *yes*, for both Luke and Jesus. Jesus calls Mary and Martha out of rigid gender roles by according them the respect that a man would have. By recognizing their equality with him, he subverts the gender hierarchies that would merely leave Mary and Martha "safe" in the kitchen, rather than as active participants in revolution. By calling them to be "useless" or socially inappropriate in the moment, Jesus undermines sexist norms by focusing on a wider vision of revolution.

Jesus calls on Martha, and on us, to either subvert or critically adopt society's expectations of gender. Feminist theory tells us that these expectations are not "natural" or inborn; rather, society teaches us ways of "performing" gender with socially acceptable "scripts." Jesus recognized Mary and Martha as his equals (in contradistinction to his culture at large!). To Jesus, women have equal moral agency with men; equal ability to teach and critique the received tradition; and equal share in shaping his kind of revolution – the kind that leads people to new cultural, political, and spiritual understandings and patterns of life.

Jesus, who bent gender boundaries and empowered women, suggests to queer men that we can and should be feminists; we should resist and overturn language, attitudes, or social mechanisms (like gender-role rigidity or the notion of a single "feminine" or "masculine") that oppress women. This happens in the revolutionary "preaching" of organized activism and daily conversations, which we can use as invitations to adopt a more radical and liberating way of life. We see in the Gospel of Matthew, however, that Christ's affirmation of women does not come without a cost—without an adjustment or clarification of his own values.

Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ***22*** Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ***23*** But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ***24*** He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ***25*** But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ***26*** He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ***27*** She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ***28*** Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Oddly enough, as we read the passage above, we realise that Jesus doesn't seem to have a problem with the "Canaanite" woman's gender; her ethnic background seems to be the main issue. Is it possible that the one whom Christians call Messiah, the Son of God and even the (sinless) Second Person of the Trinity, is a racist?

Many Christians (including myself) find this story very uncomfortable indeed: the messiness of this passage (which is arguably less messy than the Gospel of Mark's version) doesn't square with our expectations of a truly good human being, never mind God-in-Flesh! I suspect that part of many Christians' discomfort is a refusal to really think through the implications of Jesus' *humanity* (whatever we might say of his deity). The key point seems to be this: if Jesus cannot really learn (i.e., if knows everything because he's God), in what sense can he be called *really* human? And if he, being God, really is being racist, what does that say about God? To put it mildly, in the words of transmale theologian Justin Tanis, this story "is not the image of Jesus I was taught in Sunday school."[4]

Christian angst aside, Jesus does open himself to new insight and ways of performing his mission in the world. Dr. Walter Deller, a respected Canadian Anglican theologian, once asked me about this passage in a personal conversation – "Is holding the beliefs of your culture a sin *before* or *after* someone raises your consciousness about them?" Justin Tanis claims,

[4] Justin Tanis, "Eating the Crumbs That Fall from the Table: Trusting the Abundance of God," in Goss, Robert E. and Mona West, eds, *Take Back the Word* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 43.

"This story details Jesus' one and only trip outside Palestine."[5] Is it also possible that this encounter with the Canaanite woman is Jesus' first opportunity to evaluate his beliefs and the extent of his mission?

Whatever we conclude about the awkward scenario of the text, it *is* clear that Jesus is a different person at the end of the encounter. His own masculinity, we could say, proves flexible and secure enough to let down his guard to see this woman and her daughter as whole persons; further, Jesus acts to restore dignity to this woman by relieving the oppression (indicated by demonization) that her daughter suffers. Tanis agrees:

> Jesus' ability to make a radical shift in how he interacts with this woman speaks of the depth of his relationship with God, his sense of self, and his own expansiveness of vision. It takes a person of enormous courage to change like this, to admit that he is wrong, to do things so differently than he had done them even one minute before.[6]

Jesus' "expansiveness of vision" stabs at the widespread misogyny (let alone racism!) that I have experienced in queer male communities. I wish I could say that hatred of or disgust with women was limited to a particular group of people, but it doesn't seem so. In my own experience, young "effete" or "twink" males, who are just coming out, often literally say, "Ewww!" when I attempt to discuss close relationships, including sexual ones, with women.[7] This view is almost understandable in young queer men who are still finding a secure queer identity (assuming there is such a thing as a stable queer identity!). But I have encountered it also in men who are old enough to be my father—and I'm in my late twenties. I have even met queer men who experience castration phobia straight out of Freud's case files. Could it be that many queer men hate and fear women because we actually want to retain the vestiges of heterosexual male privilege? Do we fear being castrated by straight men and being forced to play the part of woman, or some even lower social role?

[5] Ibid, 45.
[6] Ibid, 50.
[7] Trevor Hoppe let me know that "the late great Eric Rofes" concludes much the same thing. He calls it the "ick factor."

San Francisco queer activist and sexualities scholar Trevor Hoppe offers a trenchant analysis of the cultural assumptions behind queer male sexism:

> Where the hell are all the feminist queer men?…
> Many people simply fail to make the connection between sexism and heterosexism…. Our popular culture has connected non-straight sexualities with feminine men and masculine women. In a society where these stereotypes are coupled with the widespread sexism that values men and masculinity over women and femininity, it is only logical that gay men, who are considered weak and feminine, will be treated with less respect than straight men, who are considered strong and masculine.[8]

Hoppe argues that these sexist attitudes exist alongside our disgust, especially when queer men "[question] lesbians as to how exactly they have sex. Underlying this seemingly innocent question is a phallocentric sexist mindset that represses female sexuality and makes it difficult to fathom sexual intercourse without a male."[9] Is it not ironic that queer men, utterly uninterested in sex with women or playing with the vagina, can't understand why some women don't find cock as fascinating as we do?

We can't have our cake and eat it too, boys. Queer men committed, like me, to Christian spirituality need a biblical and feminist analysis that owns our part in prevalent sexist and heterosexist cultural attitudes that derive from Christianity. Such analysis begins, I expect, with a fresh, contextualised reading of the Bible. As I have sketched above, such readings uncover what many hundreds of years of white, straight, male theology have missed: Jesus was/became a feminist; was willing to change his views; and he worked for the freedom of his sisters by dismantling the socio-political forces that held them in subservient position to men. Such a Christ can undo the misogyny and sexism of Christendom from the inside, as long as we are willing to follow where he leads. And to the degree that sexism, gender essentialism, and heterosexism interrelate, such a Christ can, and does, act as a resource for queer masculinities.

[8] LAMBDA vol. 27, issue 14 (2004). Accessed 29 May 2007. http://www.unc.edu/glbtsa/lambda/articles/27/1/feministqueermen.htm.
[9] Ibid.

Jesus the Victim-Revolutionary

A few years ago, Mel Gibson ignited a firestorm of controversy in Canada, the UK, and the States with the release of his film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Its graphic depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus, coupled with accusations of the film's (and Gibson's) anti-Semitism, roused many tempers. In gay and lesbian communities, this film seemed to strike a particularly raw nerve because of the murder of Matthew Shepard. His death took on mythic proportions in the so-called US "culture wars" as gay and lesbian interest organizations positioned Shepard as a kind of political martyr. You may remember, as I do, reading op-ed pieces or seeing photographs that described Shepard's murder as a crucifixion. Indirectly, gay and lesbian activists claimed, this quiet Episcopalian college student was a victim of Christians following a homophobic, heterosexual Christ, whom most ethically well-adjusted people would not recognize as the real Jesus at all. Canadian popular musician Jann Arden brings this sentiment into focus in her song "Into the Sun":

> Smack dab in the middle of sin,
> the whole world's in trouble again.
> You feed a wicked heart and you kill a decent man:
> Jesus Christ, JFK, Martin Luther, amen.
> Jesus Christ, John Lennon, Matthew Shepard, amen.[10]

We sense a kind of religious fervour (all the more powerful for Arden's understated melody) in her "amen"—literally, "I agree." Her chorus encourages each victim of violence to "hold your head high" and "turn your face into the sun."

Given our cultural reaction to Shepard's murder (whether in mainstream society or as queer men), it is easy to see why queer men identify with the crucified Christ. Depending on how we interpret the reasons behind his execution, Jesus was either crucified for who he was (Israel's Messiah or the Son of God) or for what he supposedly was doing (plotting the revolutionary downfall of Rome's occupation of Palestine). Just so, queer men find themselves persecuted for who they are (in older, so-called essentialist rhetoric) or for what they (allegedly) are trying to do (rip apart the family, displace Christian values, destroy America, or whatever else).

Many Christian queer men identify with Jesus, sensing a kindred spirit or an alternative set of masculinities available to them within the Christian tradition. Christian institutions, as a whole, continue to ignore this crucial fact, because it severely problematizes traditional homophobic and misogynist theologies. In Roman Catholic theology, for example, the allegedly celibate priest is seen as the bride of Christ. Former Jesuit queer scholar Robert Goss suggests that, in offering himself as a sacramental channel to Christ, a priest performs an alternative masculinity—Goss calls it a "femasculinity."[11] The priest both "births Christ on the altar"[12] and consummates (as a male) an erotic act with a male Christ! Are we at all surprised by the instabilities and contradictions of such "homodevotion to Jesus,"[13] especially if a primary image of God's relationship to His people throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is that of Bridegroom to bride?

What I mean is this. Throughout the biblical text, we have an image of heterosexual marriage as a primary metaphor of relationship with God, usually viewed as male. But in the hetero-patriarchy of Biblical times, only men were considered full persons (though there is an ever-increasing strand of liberation for women). So we've got allegedly heterosexual men trying (and probably failing) to relate romantically to their male deity while simultaneously forbidding homoerotic acts (as in the book of Leviticus) because the penetrated man symbolically becomes a woman, and the penetrator is a bastard for stealing his victim's manhood! Is it any wonder that tensions and contradictions should arise within such an angst-ridden metanarrative?

[10] Lyrics accessed 30 May 2007. http://www.sing365.com.

[11] Robert Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond* Jesus Acted Up (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 37.
[12] Ibid, 44.
[13] Ibid, 113-139.

Despite this angst, subsequent Christian history also includes stories of queer male lovers of Jesus. St. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-67), for example, "struggled with…sexual attraction to his fellow monks," but "transferred [his eroticism primarily] to his contemplative practice."[14] This contemplation was a highly imaginative form of prayer that engaged the senses. Goss himself admits that such visualization allowed him to experience Christ's welcome to him as a gay man: "I finally admitted to myself that I loved Jesus because he was a male and that it was OK to love Jesus passionately and erotically as a man."[15]

Even before I knew I was gay, I longed to be the Beloved Disciple of John's Gospel, lying close to Jesus' heart. There was a period within the last few years when erotic visualization of Jesus' presence was a great help to me in my journey to integrate my sexual life, my sense of personal devotion to Christ, and my theology. Like many male Christian mystics, I wanted Jesus to be my lover, a top to this mostly-bottom.[16] When Goss describes "men lying joyfully on their backs with their feet ecstatically in the air," I blush because that playfulness, that *jouissance*, describes me![17] When I have sex, I often sense the presence of the Holy Spirit so intensely that (s)he makes my orgasm even better than normal! Other times, there is a quiet peace, a sense of being wrapped in a blanket, or of being kissed. Visualising Jesus as my lover actually scared me a little bit—it is easy to make Christ in one's own image. (Certain Christians I know find my experiences very strange or blasphemous.) But these experiences helped me to reject the idea that Jesus would be indifferent or hostile to me as a "gimpy"—a disabled man—who finds a deep childlike joy in seeing beautiful men everywhere! As an old Sunday school song says, "Jesus loves even me" in my queer gimpy masculinity.

This erotic contemplation becomes possible for many queer men with the aid of Christian artistic representations of Jesus, especially on the cross.

[14] Ibid, 125ff.
[15] Ibid, 17.
[16] Goss, 130-131.
[17] Goss, 79.

There is a strange androgyny—Goss' femasculinity, perhaps!—in early Christian art about Jesus.[18] Queer men may be right, it seems, when they intuit Christ's welcome as their lover and identify with him as a victim: he is male, and a queer male at that, who accepts his own sexuality, and the sexual interest of other queer men, as part of being fully human. Homodevotion to Jesus on the cross seems rather shocking in light of any challenges that Jesus presents to queer masculinities, because we seem to forget a central and disgusting fact: *the cross is an instrument of torture.*

It is difficult to imagine a more terrible implement of torture than the cross. With its development, the Roman Empire created one of the most painful, humiliating, and effective forms of public execution in human history. Yet, Christian queer men often seem to forget how horrible a fate befell their Lord. Historically speaking, Jesus would not have been beautiful and pristine on that crude device, with a look of exquisite agony upon his face. On the contrary! Based on historical data about crucifixion (confirmed by the accounts in the Gospels), we can imagine the scene. Jesus' back is raw from being scourged brutally with a metal-tipped whip; he scrapes against the wooden cross's unfinished surfaces; he gasps for breath, slowly suffocating, tensing his muscles to push against the nail through his ankles so he can draw air; he sags back down to relieve the pain, except that, without the support from his ankle, he is again unable to breathe. He begins again. Whatever the problems of *The Passion of the Christ* as a portrait of Jesus, Gibson's film shows us clearly how horrible was the penalty of crucifixion for Jesus or anyone else under Roman rule.

Non-Christians rarely miss the absurdity of the Church's glorification of torture as the supposed means of salvation.[19] It is not, of course, the

[18] Veneration of the crucifix was not part of my experience of Christ, but when I did encounter crucifixes, they always seemed eerily beautiful. Christ was always white, thin, and lanky, with a loincloth tastefully arrayed. Though I never fetishized the cross, I know that many queer Christian men look "upon images of Christ with a homoerotic gaze and erotic longing."
[19] The essays in the book *Consuming Passion: why the killing of Jesus matters*, edited by Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley, raised my consciousness about the intersections between Christian theology about the cross and the potential for religious violence.

torture that the "good news" acclaims,[20] but this fact is easy to miss in a society where the cross is a piece of jewellery on the one hand and a weapon to perpetuate anti-queer (anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, etc.) violence on the other. Do, or perhaps better yet, *should* queer men find a tortured Christ physically appealing?[21] Does our sexualised fascination with an androgynous Christ blind us to our own hypocrisy? Is it possible we over-identify with Jesus on the cross, or Matthew Shepard on his fence, and thereby forget that *we* are capable of the same kinds of violence?

The Crucified Christ critiques what queer men consider beautiful, as well. He challenges us to include in our communities those who are queerer than us, especially in their aesthetics. Would we have mourned for Matthew Shepherd if he'd been plain looking? A person of color? A flaming drag queen? Gimpy? Trans? Did we become aware of him because the straight world thought he was "safe" or "asexual" enough to make into a public figure, a sweet little homosexual? Would we pay attention to Christ, would some queer men be so erotically fascinated, if he were hideously unattractive? Can we be saved—would we *want* to be saved—by a "fugly" Jesus?

I hasten to add that I often implicate myself in my own questions. My best friend and former Significant Other is a bear, but I fantasize about twinks and guys with a swimmer's build. I tend to be less attracted if guys look emaciated, though. I got angry when Shepard was killed because I wished I could have saved him, loved him, and had sex with him. He reminded me of me, except without the Cerebral Palsy. I, the gimpy who used to be insecure in his looks, have rejected (with a sneer!) perfectly loveable men who didn't fit my physical "type." Some open-minded queer boy I am, asking others to see past my disability to meet *me* when I can't see past my own fantasies to meet *them*!

[20] Few Christians realise that "gospel" was originally a Roman political term that was "queered" by early Christian communities as an anti-Imperial statement: "Jesus is our Lord, *not* Caesar!" Would that North American Christians, in particular, would realise this explosive potential of "good news," especially when faced with the local Empire's self-justifying and ultra-nationalist rhetoric.

[21] I don't intend this question to exclude my queer brothers involved in BDSM; rather, I hope it is an invitation to examine queer male (erotic) responses to sexualised and/or brutal violence.

To this day, I don't fully understand why my ex is so hot to me, but he is. How many of us have been cruel to twinks, to bears, to flamers in drag, or to average Joes who use the hated phrase "straight acting and looking" without actually taking the time to fully understand their stories? Doesn't that mean we're capable of "crucifying" members of our own communities? Don't we see the patterns of such violence in ourselves?

Stopping oppression sickness, and the cycle of violence, must include a key component: forgiveness. After all the self-care, after all the talk-therapy, after all the interventions and activist projects combating oppression, this is the only way to release ourselves and those who oppress us from the psychic and spiritual wounding of our pasts. Are we ever fully aware of the damage that we cause others or ourselves, even if we have good reason to stay angry, bitter, or cynical? Perhaps this is why Jesus claimed from the cross, "[My oppressors] don't know what they're doing."

When we can ask for mercy upon those who have bashed us in the streets, who have inflicted so much pain upon us, we have forgiven. When we stop excluding potential partners on the basis of our fantasies and instead take time to hear each other's stories, then we are truly welcoming and queer. When we stop treating each other as meat, even during casual sex, and realise that we, with our bodies, welcome people into queer community rather than simply perform a transaction, we can stop being so fucking mean and catty to each other.[22] But living this way doesn't happen overnight—we need the confidence to believe that such a world is possible. This is why we can't, as queer men, leave Jesus on his cross to die. We need his resurrection, too.

[22] Whether sex can be truly anonymous or casual if we take this idea seriously is, I think, a matter for serious discussion within queer male communities.

The Resurrected Jesus

Luke 24:1-3, 9-11 (NRSV)
1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices [that] they had prepared. ***2*** And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ***3*** but when they went in they did not find the body. ***9*** [R]eturning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ***10*** Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; ***11*** but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

I've struggled immensely with articulating why the resurrection of Christ should be important to queer men – even through four revisions, I still struggle to make my words do what I intend them to without alienating anyone either by rude dogmatism (baggage from my fundamentalist background) or by waxing poetic and theological (which Trevor Hoppe, my editor, is quick to point out!). On the one hand, the resurrection of Jesus is, for me, a tremendous source of hope; on the other hand, speaking of the resurrection of Christ immediately seems to mark one's position in the "culture wars" of the United States. If I believe in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, most likely I will be homophobic, heterosexist, "conversionistic," and non-pluralistic: "Our God was raised from the dead; therefore, we're right, and therefore, *you queers* (or Muslims, Mormons, radical feminists, etc.) get to burn in hell." If I believe in the *spiritual* resurrection of Christ, on the other hand, I might seem rational, non-judgmental, and pluralist. After all, dead bodies don't actually rise, do they? Maybe there are many paths to the heart of the Sacred, and Jesus is just one of them – besides, we don't want the fundamentalists to be right about us!

I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus[23] for many reasons, but one of them sticks out for me: my own body will someday be completely whole and free. Many people want to construct many kinds of disability as merely

[23] When I say resurrection, I am using the concrete image of indicated the Greek word *anastasis*, which is Greek literature, virtually without exception, means that something has happened to a corpse (which is why Greek philosophers, along with every other civilization that has any understanding of scientific observation, affirm that dead bodies don't rise). This is precisely what the early Christians are claiming, and as NT Wright notes, this belief is the only reasonable explanation for why the early Christian tradition took shape as it did.

constructive differences: "You're just 'differently abled,'" they say. But the way I see it, my brain is damaged, and the God I see in Jesus didn't curse me with Cerebral Palsy; neither will God leave me this way forever. If I were in a crowd in the Gospels, Jesus would have healed me, too, just like he healed everyone else who came to him. I used to think, for years, that Jesus would only heal me if I "repented" of "homosexual behaviour." But repeated experiences of Christ's welcome to me as a gay man—not to mention intensive study of the Bible—convince me that I was wrong. I look forward to the day when I can dance just as fluidly and sexily as any hotshot bar-star, thank you very much! If Jesus Christ has been resurrected bodily from the dead and is still alive, that kind of world, a world with no disability, no AIDS, no queer bashing, is not only probable—it's inevitable. As a Christian, believing in the Christ that will give us *that* kind of world gives me hope.

The spiritual resurrection of Christ, to me, seems far less compelling. On the surface, divorcing belief in Christ from whether his corpse revived has one advantage: it kills any Christian pretention to moral superiority; therefore we can join humbly join the rest of their brothers and sisters in struggling for a better world. But other implications of the spiritual resurrection view disturb me greatly. If Jesus' bones really are in the ground, what does that say about the power of death? Were the writers of the Gospels (and the early Christian movement) having a collective hallucination, which gave rise to the delusion that "goodness is stronger than evil/love is stronger than hate/light is stronger than darkness/life is stronger than death"? Was the death of Jesus, the feminist and queer struggler for justice, who believed he was the liberating agent of his God, simply a twisted cosmic joke? The implications for queer justice are no better. Do queer men who work for justice in our society really deceive themselves into thinking things will get better? What the hell does "justice" mean, anyway? Won't the homophobes and gender-enforcers win, in the end? Do we fantasize about a world that will never happen on the basis of non-existent evidence and next-to-nil probability?

I ask myself these kinds of questions all the time. I study history, critical and textual theory, and Christian writings as hobbies—some people say I'm a glutton for punishment. I participate in communal Christian worship regularly. And I also listen, when I'm able, to the intuitions of my own heart. All three of these aspects have a place for me, and the more they interact, the more convinced I am that the bodily resurrection of Christ serves as the basis for my own hope. Jesus did not come back as a ghost, but as a transformed, glorious, and still-physical person. The mystery and wonder of this reality pervades the Gospel stories about the appearances of Jesus, as well as the letters of Paul. Jesus scholar NT Wright, paraphrasing historian Ed Saunders, claims, "The New Testament writers are struggling to say something [about the physicality of Jesus], which they passionately want to affirm, but for which they don't yet have language." I submit that perhaps the resurrection of Christ can give hope to other queer men, as well. Jesus, the queer Christ, will lead us to a queer world where oppression, disease, and death have died. Christ himself will prove that he has always been a defender of queer men, against everyone who has called us unclean or consigned us to the fires of hell.

I guess, with that admission, I've ruled out being a full-blown postmodernist—someone who believes that grand stories or metanarratives don't exist. Some queer men will have problems with this Christian story for many reasons. After all, they note perceptively, God-language is the ultimate power game. Isn't the certainty I express a barely-veiled power claim that will, in fact, oppress queers who choose not to become Christians? There is a tremendous danger, they assert, in projecting our own stories outward onto the cosmos, as though *our* story is the only true reflection of the mind of God. They are right. These questions challenge us, especially those queer men who name the name of Christ, to exercise great humility in our knowledge claims. But the humble and defiant "incredulity" of Lyotard is *itself* a metanarrative based on improvable axioms, as any world-view is. The post-modern worldview tends towards nihilism (not to be confused with amorality). Nothing has fundamental meaning, claim the nihilists. Perhaps

the verbal diarrhoea of much (but not all) post-modern and queer theory masks a subtle existential angst—we sense, deep in our bones, that we will never be understood, and that our temporary victories are hollow.

Despite this strong post-modern lethargy, post-modern scepticism and deconstruction make an important point that Christians and queer men especially need to heed. The resurrection of Jesus is not an excuse to draw battle lines of us versus them on any issue. It is not an excuse to use our rhetoric as a weapon against real people to destroy their lives. AIDS is not God's weapon against queer men. Homophobia and bashing (including outing closeted gay politicians who do not persecute queer people) are not forms of justice. And activism, whether Christian or queer, that cloaks assimilation and buying into an inflexible political agenda with the call to action isn't worthy of the name; we should call it manipulation, instead.

Rather than rejecting metanarrative altogether with certain post-modernists, I argue that the resurrection of Jesus doesn't give Christians—and Christian queer men—the right to oppress anyone. According to Robert Goss and other queer scholars, the resurrection is the ultimate vindication of Jesus' message, and a demonstration of God's very real and concrete solidarity with oppressed people. Jesus is vindicated—his message is real, his solidarity with women and queers unbroken, his victory of over death and oppression certain and coming soon! Death will not win. Empire (American, Roman, or any other) will not be able to stomp us out. Mainstream GLBT organizations that enforce the gender binary or try to squeeze all the colours of the rainbow into one mould have had their day: we do not need to be married, nor do we need to fuck without any sense of respect or hospitality, to achieve queer liberation. And best of all, our bodies and our sexual experiences have enduring value, because the body is a fluid and glorious site for interaction with the sacred, even with the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that queer men can have confidence that all our work will not fundamentally disintegrate, even if we must deconstruct and then reconstruct it until oppression ends. Before I

was born, the Stonewall Riots showed us that drag queens and leathermen could resist oppression, kick some ass, and change the world. There was a recognition—what the New Testament calls *faith*—that there was something liberating and right going on. The death of Matthew Shepard, horrible and ambiguous as it seemed, continued and perhaps accelerated a shift in public consciousness about violence against queer people. Trans Days of Remembrance open our minds to those who cross or blur the gender binary, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. Hurricane Katrina, though devastating, catalyzed a tremendous outpouring of love to a city full of queer people, contrary to the ranting of televangelists on the Religious Right. Do we recognize these events as moments and seasons of liberation and change? Should we? Do we have the courage for this kind of recognition? Are we willing to deal with reality but refuse to conclude that our actions are meaningless? Do we have the audacity to say boldly, "We see the spirit of Jesus Christ in this," even if people disagree strenuously with us?

I hope that even my brothers who are not Christians can still take something away from this analysis. We can read the resurrection narratives strictly as a literary text without trying to do theology as such. Jesus' empty tomb, which seems to the apostles (and to many of us!) "an idle tale," seems to affirm, mysteriously, that death and oppression can never have the last word. Queer people have had these kinds of experiences by the score, and I think it's time that we claim this profound and concrete intuition as knowledge of our own and as a source of empowerment for queer justice-making. To put it another way, not only straight people come back from the dead.

Jesus of San Francisco

This picture of the resurrected, embodied, vindicated victim and feminist that I see in the pages of the Gospels and in my own experience, I call "Jesus of San Francisco." I have tried to show that queer men can know Christ as a friend and ally of our communities. The Jesus of the Gospels—the same Jesus that Christians claim God has raised from the dead—also challenges us to examine our ways of life and how we structure our communities. Christ challenges us to embrace and celebrate our feminist brothers and sisters, thus subverting misogyny and fear and contributing to our own liberation. He challenges our sense of beauty and asks us to honour our bodies and our stories. He asks us to defend and shelter victims of violence against queers while rooting out the seeds of that violence in ourselves by practicing forgiveness. Above all, I believe Jesus asks us to struggle for and celebrate the full liberation of all people, precisely because he has promised, by his boundary-breaking resurrection, that it shall happen.

The point of all this is hope. One thing I love about Jesus is that he always takes me by surprise. Right when I think I have him pegged down, when I am convinced he looks just like me, he shows me that I have in fact nailed him to the cross of my own of my expectations and pet theories. The amazing thing, though, is that he always rises again from the dead and lovingly shows me that I can never contain him, even within my best imaginings.

Even with this caveat in mind, I do feel that Jesus can be a resource for queer men and queer masculinities in several key ways. First, and most fundamentally, the Jesus of the Gospels and the one experienced in the lives of queer Christians leads to a boundary-shattering feminism, a "returning to roots" that asserts, loudly and concretely, the goodness of all members of the human family. All human beings, and most especially the destitute and oppressed, are subjects of God's liberating concern and love. Queer male

discomfort with and hatred of women (or of minorities within queer male communities) must end if we take Jesus seriously.

Second, Jesus extends radically inclusive hospitality to outcasts, women, and children. Not only does he find his primary vocation in healing service to others, but he demonstrates solidarity with oppressed people by sitting down with them to eat. (The dinner table usually reflects the values and priorities of a given culture.[24]) "Nice" Jewish boys of Jesus' day didn't eat with tax collectors, prostitutes, and lepers! He performs his own culturally subversive masculinity, broadening the definition from the "muscular Christian" singular definition commonly articulated by the religious right. By accepting and overcoming his victimization on the cross through forgiveness, Jesus further bends the definition of masculinity out of shape. Literary theorist Judith Butler calls this bending and redefinition "proliferation of genders." The very notion of a single 'masculinity' collapses because there are so many "internally ambiguous" ways of defining ourselves in relation to others. Jesus allows people to tell their own stories and to live in ways that bring personal fulfilment and justice-oriented community building.

Third, Jesus rejects all forms of masculinity that have their basis in violence and oppression. Many scholars believe that Jesus knew his revolutionary message would lead to conflict with Rome. Yet Jesus, in contrast to the usual violent behaviour of Roman criminals, extends forgiveness to his murderers. In effect, Jesus stopped the cycle of violence with forgiveness. Christians believe that in Jesus, God declared that there would be an end to violence, victimization, and revenge.

Fourth, Jesus models for us in his life and his resurrection concrete manifestations of hospitality and hope. Healthy queer men, I submit, can learn much from Jesus' "eating and drinking with 'sinners'" and his message that God is active on the side of the oppressed, dismissed, and forgotten. Doesn't Jesus already mirror many of the things that we see in our everyday experience of queer men? When we see queer men engaged in the healing

[24] Left-wing Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan calls Jesus' table praxis, "open commensality."

professions, when we see a friend do his best Martha Stewart impression while hosting a party, and when we see the easy welcome and powerful intensity of our bear and leather brothers, do we not see the same demonstrated by Jesus in his own time and place?

Last, and most incredible to me, Jesus demonstrates that being in touch with the sacred, with God, can be a life-giving way of being that has nothing to do with bashing women, fleecing the poor, or putting people on a guilt trip. Instead, Jesus' awareness of God's presence, fostered by a life of prayer, led him to profound and concrete action and prophetic speaking—he not only spoke of God's heart for people, but also challenged others to buy into God's agenda—not, as some would have us believe, an agenda of violent revolution, hopeless nihilism, or rigid religious observance. Instead, I believe that it is an agenda that brings concrete healing and justice to all those around us, including those who disagree with us. Jesus himself, as I've shown, has enough security and sensitivity to learn from an outsider, a religious heretic woman, how to think about God! Perhaps Jesus can give us the courage to engage again with the intuitive or spiritual side of our lives as queer men that we have compartmentalized or drowned out because of the lashings that religious fundamentalism – in all its guises – has imparted against us.

I've presented a strong image of Christ in this essay, one with which my queer brothers may disagree for any number of reasons. Perhaps my sketch is too radical, or perhaps not queer enough. Perhaps some of my brothers may still find "Jesus of San Francisco" useless to them. But the Jesus whom I've experienced, who always calls me to be his friend, doesn't have a problem with that—he'll always be better than I can ever comprehend. I suspect he is even queerer than I dare to hope, and because of this, I submit that Jesus can be a resource—a re-enlivening, blurring, and subverting source—for queer masculinities. I dare to pray that Jesus may be and become a resource for *you*. This Jesus, whom I find in the Gospels and in my own heart, still has me singing—even when I'm standing at the sink doing dishes. The peace of Christ be your's.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Day-Walker is a 27-year-old English Major, lay theologian, and disabled gay man currently living in Winnipeg, Canada. He loves Battlestar Galactica, learning about radical social analysis, and singing about Jesus. When he grows up, he wants to be a good writer, a Christian clergyperson, and a happy member of a polyamorous family. He's learned one thing in particular from the submission process for this anthology: when all else fails, read the directions.

MESTIZA/O GENDER: NOTES TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE MASCULINITY

DANIEL E. SOLÍS y MARTÍNEZ

"Constructing my queerness solely out of either Latin American homosexuality or American gayness presents great obstacles to the type of queerness I want to embody. Like Juan Diego, my options are seemingly limited – Do I choose the gendered homosexuality I grew up with in my family or the individualistic gayness of the country I was born in?"

> …don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures - white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture - *una cultura mestiza* - with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.
>
> - Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [1]

Queer Mestizaje: Finding My Own Path

On December 9, 1531, on the sacred hill of Tepeyacac, just outside the recently-conquered city of Tenochitlan/Mexico City, an indigenous man who is now known only as Juan Diego combined the traditional Mexica[2] goddess Tonantzín with the Spaniards' Virgin Mary to create the Virgin of Guadalupe. Juan Diego, a recent convert to Catholicism, was visited on Tepeyacac by an oddly brown-skinned Virgin Mary. This seemingly indigenous Virgin Mary told Juan Diego to visit the Spanish Bishop in Mexico City and to ask him to build a church dedicated to her at Tepeyacac. Juan Diego did as she asked; but the Bishop refused to believe the lowly indigena (indigenous person) Juan Diego and demanded proof of this miraculous apparition of the Mother of God. Juan Diego returned to the sacred hill in search of proof and found the Virgin Mary waiting for him. The Virgin Mary instructed him to ascend to the mountaintop of Tepeyacac where he would find a bounty of beautiful flowers miraculously growing out of season that would serve as his proof. Juan Diego gathered the flowers into his cloak and then descended the holy mountain to return to the disbelieving Bishop.

Once again, Juan Diego repeated the Virgin Mary's request for the construction of a church at Tepeyacac. The Bishop again demanded proof. Juan Diego simply replied by unfurling his cloak and dropping the flowers at the feet of the Bishop, immediately filling the room with a tremendous fragrance. It was at that moment that the Bishop saw the divine imprint of the brown-skinned Virgin Mary on Juan Diego's cloak. Being humbled by both the choice of the indigenous Juan Diego as the Virgin Mary's messenger and the brown skin of the Virgin herself, the Bishop agreed to build the church at Tepeyacac.[3]

The acceptance of the brown-skinned Virgin Mary on Juan Diego's cloak by the Spanish Bishop was the beginning of the officially-sanctioned cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Americas. Within the racially-mixed form of the Virgin of Guadalupe, indigenous people like Juan Diego were able to merge their traditional religions with the Catholicism imposed on them by the colonizing Spanish, so as to produce a truly new form of cultural and religious expression. Given their inability to directly confront the more powerful Spanish, the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America used the Virgin of Guadalupe to create within the dominance of the Spanish a space of their own. Utilizing the legitimization that the Spanish Catholic Church conferred on the Virgin of Guadalupe, indigenas such as Juan Diego forged religious customs that were neither Catholic nor the traditional

[1] Anzaldúa 1999 p.44
[2] The indigenous people commonly called Aztecs, called themselves Mexica.
[3] Mini 2000 p. 39

practices of the Mexica, but that mixed elements from both. The birth of the brown-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe was a powerful event that signaled the beginning, first in Mexico and Central America and then in the United States, of a process of cultural mixing that has given rise to new ethnic and national identities.

The story of Juan Diego, with its unequal marriage of conflicted ideas and practices in the face of powerful forces, is a compelling metaphor for my own life as a Latino gay man attempting to create a way of being queer that is ethical, freeing and true to myself. Like Juan Diego's merging of the repressed indigenous goddess Tonantzín into the ascendant European Virgin Mary, I endeavor to create my own gayness through a blending of two distinct systems of homosexuality: that which my parents brought with them from El Salvador and that which I grew into in the United States. Growing up, my queerness was contained by my family within the traditional homosexuality of El Salvador. In that system, homosexuality is a matter of gender difference that is expressed by both sexual behavior and deviant gender practices. In El Salvador and much of Latin America, homosexual men and boys like me are seen not as women or men but instead occupy an ambiguous place in between. Under this particular system of homosexuality, my parents raised me quite differently from my brothers: I am the only one who was taught by my mother and grandmother how to cook, clean, sew, and even now am responsible for organizing family events such as birthdays, holidays and dinners. As a child, I was allowed to socialize with girls and women, all without my gayness being explicitly named. Within my home, my budding gayness was silently accepted and integrated into the larger fabric of my family so long as it did not threaten the heterosexual status quo.

My family's acceptance of my gayness was markedly different from the clearly defined homosexuality of the United States that I found first on the playgrounds and in the classrooms of my elementary school, and later on in the queer identity groups I joined as a teenager. The homosexuality I found outside of my family was one of a clearly defined gayness that was accessed through personal identification. In what I call the American system of

homosexuality, a person was gay either because they called themselves gay or because others labeled them that way. As I grew older, I discovered communities of queer people in the United States built around a shared sense of identity and personal experience. At the core of these communities was the idea of "coming out" - or publicly naming one's queerness to others. This explicitly named gayness was quite different from the unnamed ambiguous position I held within my family. After I came out, my position in my family changed as I sought to force them to accept American gayness as the basis for how they understood me and my queerness. My efforts led to great conflicts between myself and most of my family members. As I grew increasingly isolated from my family, I realized that American gayness with its emphasis on the individual wasn't sufficient for me or my particular situation. I began to seek a way to construct an empowering queerness that challenged heterosexism but that also didn't isolate me from the people I love so much.

Constructing my queerness solely out of either Latin American homosexuality or American gayness presents great obstacles to the type of queerness I want to embody. Like Juan Diego, my options are seemingly limited – Do I choose the gendered homosexuality I grew up with in my family or the individualistic gayness of the country I was born in? Given the overwhelming power of both types of homosexuality to resist challenges to their oppressive elements, I find myself moving within and between both systems to create the queerness I seek.

In this essay, I reflect on my experiences living in both systems of homosexuality and the way in which I now mix and match elements from both to forge my own form of libratory queerness. I explore first my early childhood growing up ambiguously queer in my family and then examine my emergence into American gayness as a teenager. Finally, I trace my attempts to create an identity that is a mixed blend of the two systems of homosexuality that have defined me, all in the hope of not only liberating myself but also to transform Latin American and American homosexualities. I do not necessarily believe my life to be special or unique – no Virgin Mary appeared to me - but instead I see my life as a useful source from which to

extract a queer masculinity that can support me in being the kind of queer man I want to be. My youth, for all of its mundane routines, was spent in the murky borders where my family's ideas of homosexuality rubbed up against the gay individuality of the United States. This constant rubbing produced a space from which my own queerness was born. I call that space a mestiza/o gender.

At the core of both my journey and this essay is a creative process of reclamation. Rather than simply giving up on both of these homosexualities, I seek to work within them by taking elements from both and combining them together in a new way that can challenge the oppressive components within each. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, in studying the oppositional and creative use of mainstream heterosexual and queer cultures by queer of color performance artists, has articulated a process similar to the one I wish to engage in. Muñoz calls this process disidentification. He describes this as,

> … the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology … this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.[4]

Moving beyond the binary idea that in the face of oppressive forces one can either purely resist or assimilate, Muñoz instead sees disidentification as a means to creatively engage with structures of injustice. Disidentification allows marginalized individuals to take the tools of oppression used against them and use them in new ways that alter their meaning so as to challenge the very oppression from which they are drawn. Muñoz values disidentification because it presents a means to escape the binary of assimilation and counteridentification which both serve to reinforce the dominance of oppressive systems. It is what Muñoz calls 'working on and against' that makes disidentification a powerful means of altering the harmful elements of both Latin American homosexuality and American gayness.

[4] Muñoz 1999 pgs. 11- 12

I utilize disidentification to blend the two forms of homosexuality so as to construct a third path of queerness that can escape the limitations of both. Through disidentification, I can work against the totalizing power of Latin American homosexuality to trap queers in the gender system of man/woman. A third queerness can also work against a gayness in the United States that is increasingly becoming nothing more than a colorful and non-threatening alternative to heterosexuality. As gayness in the United States becomes more mainstream, it is not only leaving unchallenged dominant ideals of consumerism as citizenship, but in fact it is using those same ideals as the definition of social justice for queers. Since both forms of homosexuality are limiting and perpetuate violent forms of oppression, I must create a queerness through my daily practices that draws from the most transformative in both while challenging the most repressive in each.

I name this queerness "mestiza/o gender" to both reflect the combination of Latin American and American homosexualities that I propose but also to draw on the historical process of mestizaje. The development of the idea of mestizaje itself is fraught with complexities of power and struggle. The word mestiza/o was first used by Spanish colonialists as one category of nearly 100 in their complex racial hierarchy system that placed them at the top and enslaved Africans and the indigenous at the bottom. Mestiza/o referred to people who were the children of a Spaniard and an Indigenous person. In the beginning of the 20th century, mestiza/o was adopted by Mexican intellectuals to define the mixed racial heritage of Mexico as the basis for a cosmic mission of global unity that could thus only be achieved by the Mexican state/people. This vision of an imperialist mestizaje was used by Mexican elites to erase the contemporary repression of the indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples by the Mexican state.[5] From there, the idea of mestizaje was taken up by the Chicana/o Power Movement of the 1960's and 1970's as a means to describe the racial and cultural mixtures that define the experiences of Mexican Americans in

[5] Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos wrote the manifesto of this imperialist *mestizaje* in 1925, titled *La Raza Cósmica*.

the United States. To this day, mestizaje remains a pillar of Chicana/Latina identity and politics. Given the varied and contradictory threads that have gone into the creation of my self, I use the word mestiza/o fully aware of its historical development to capture the complicated queer mixture - sometimes smooth, at other times rough - that I propose to create.

It is my goal to fashion a queerness that resists assimilation by the forces of oppression through its political orientation and its transgressive way of being. In these times of American Empire and the straightening of gayness, all of us have an ethical responsibility to resist, no matter how small such resistance might seem. Like the race mixing that mestiza/o has traditionally referred to, I am interested in creating a gayness that is a mixture – imperfect, always in process of becoming, yet resisting with all of its might. It is towards that end, that I write these notes, themselves imperfect and in process of articulation.

Border Clashes

My childhood experiences in the vast stretches of Los Angeles were defined by a constant shift between two separate worlds firmly divided by a border made up of language, class, and race. The Salvadoreño culture of my home and neighborhood in the eastern San Fernando Valley was an island in the surrounding sea of Americanness. Moving from the Spanish of my family to the English of my teachers and school forced me from an early age to be constantly aware of the need to shift my way of being depending on where I was. Who I was depended on where I was, who I was with and what language I was speaking. Like many budding homo boys, the need to constantly move back and forth between worlds made me a talented performer from an early age. I quickly became a skilled border-crosser.

At the very core of my role switching was a fundamental clash between the migrant gender-sexuality worldview of my family and the "native" system

of the United States. My parents were locked in a battle -internally and externally - to craft a family that was the best of the values and cultural forms they had been raised with, but that at the same time recognized the sheer reality that they were not in El Salvador anymore. This battle was never explicitly named by my parents as the source of their discomfort with my brothers' and my own rapid Americanization, but it quietly informed every action they took.

It was often my grandmother who most vocally expressed this conflict to my brothers and me. As a domestic worker in the affluent West San Fernando Valley, my grandmother was exposed to the dirty laundry of the rich and white. Daily, she would clean the most intimate spaces and garments of white people, all for less than $50 a day. Whether out of a need to simply vent or as a means to recapture her sense of agency, she would convey horror stories of disgusting habits of personal hygiene, drug abuse, and broken families. These stories served as the morality tales of our immigrant home in a new land full of material promise and cultural perils. In particular, many of her stories centered on the polluting affects of the menstruation of the white teenage girls of the families she cleaned for. Often her stories about menstruating white girls would end emphatically with the statement, "¡Son tan cochinas!"[6] Her stories taught me that everything "out there" - that is everything outside of the home -was tainted. In my grandmother's stories, moral and physical pollution awaited us in the outside world, which she represented through the polluting bodies of menstruating white teenage girls. The vivid images of dirty white girls my grandmother painted reinforced my already emerging sense of white people's racial, class and sexual differences.

Either consciously or unconsciously, my grandmother's conflation between white women and moral contamination served to mark not only whiteness as deviant but also femaleness. The unnamed ghost lurking in all her stories was the polluting vagina. Frightening pictures of bleeding white girls stalked my imagination every time I left my home and entered the world

[6] "They are so filthy!" author's translation.

"out there." This unease made me afraid of the unknown, which often meant the white and the female. In the world my grandmother constructed, white girls stood in place for the larger contaminating threat of American culture. In my grandmother's equation, white girls were inherently tainted because American culture was tainted. In warning us away from polluting white girls my grandmother was in the same moment both resisting assimilation into white Americaness and perpetuating the misogynistic construction of women as polluting to men and society at large.

Home itself was a confusing space. Patriarchy was the central axis around which my parents constructed our family. My father worked an inhuman amount of hours as a machine-shop operator to support my family, but his salary was simply not enough to make ends meet. In the rapidly de-industrializing Los Angeles of the 1980's, machine-shop work was on the decline. My father's lack of an American education and legal status exacerbated the dwindling supply of work, resulting in a continuous cycle of migration from one job to the next. This instability finally forced my father to allow my mother's entrance into the working world. Like my grandmother and aunt, she too became a domestic worker for the rich and white of the West San Fernando Valley.

The emergence of my mother as our family's co-supporter led to fierce fights for dominance and power within our home. Quite simply, my mother's departure from her traditional role as homemaker undermined my father's masculinity. The assault on my father's manhood was twofold. Since he couldn't fully provide for all of our family's financial needs, he was failing at his manly obligations. This was compounded by the loss of mental and physical control over my mother. It was perhaps the loss of total control over my mother that most undermined my father's masculine power. With work, my mother gained independence as she learned how to drive and for the first time had money of her own to spend. Implicit in my father's frustration was the fear that her daily sojourns to the outside world would corrupt my mother and render her unfit as both mother and wife. My father's fears would explode in dramatic and often violent outbursts aimed particularly at

my mother, but also at my brothers and me. These poverty-driven gendered struggles set the stage for the emergence of my queerness within my family.

As is the case for many homo boys, from an early age my mother was my world. The bond between us was one of sameness; in my mind I was just like her. My mother is fond of reminding me of how as a baby she alone had the power to stop my tears. To this day, she is still one of the few people that can get me to shut up. Given the close affinity between my mother and me, when my parents would fight I would stand at her side ready to battle my father, and often my older brother as well. It wouldn't matter who was wrong or right, but simply that my mother was threatened. Since I saw my mother as not only my role model but as the source from which I had sprung, when she was threatened I was threatened.

Often the fights between my parents were about the bond of affinity between my mother and me. My father accused her of spoiling me, which in our working class home had strong undertones of feminization and emasculation. In claiming that my mother was spoiling me, my father was really saying that she was turning me into a non-boy. His accusations were further complicated by his patronizing of my older brother as his Chosen Son. Subtly undermining my mother's authority over him, my father drew my older brother into his orbit as an ally. As time wore on, those battle lines became entrenched gender lines dividing us into two opposing camps: my father and older brother as the men and my mother and I as the women. It was in those moments of anger, of a family divided along lines of what I can only call queer genders that my own unique place in my family began to emerge.

My queer gender developed out of those fights within my family. While never openly named by either of my parents, they had tacitly agreed that I was to be raised differently from my clearly male-gendered brothers. I was to be the culerito.[7] As a child, I was the son taught to cook, clean, listen and nurture. At the never-ending string of quinceañeras, birthday parties, and

[7] In El Salvador, the word of choice for homosexuals is culero. Culo, the word it is formed from, means "asshole." A culero is thus an "asshole man." A culerito is thus a young asshole man.

baptismal celebrations, I was always with the women. I would sit among my mother, grandmother, aunt, godmother, and a host of their friends, listening to them gossip about one another, or lovingly (yet critically) pick at their husbands, their sons, and their daughters. Meanwhile, my brothers would play with other boy-children. My inclusion in these circles of women was never questioned, at least while I was present. If whispered conversations of concern about my affiliation with women happened between my mother and her women friends, I was not aware.

My connection to femininity extended to include the toys I played with. I didn't think it odd that I played with Barbies or "My Little Ponies," or that my role model was the 1980's fashionista/philanthropist/superhero Jem. Thanks to my mother's protective embrace, I was free to be myself - plastic Mattel dolls and all. What strikes me as interesting now, from my postmodern, sub-altern, queer, Latino, male vantage point, is how lovingly my family embraced my deviant gender/racial expressions. Sure there were occasional bouts of homophobia on the part of my father, but the overwhelming response from my family was acceptance. Whenever my brothers and I played with our G.I. JOES or X-Men, I was always the one in charge of the women action figures. There was never any criticism. I simply was.

The relative acceptance of my family was matched by the unease I felt towards the world "out there." I don't really remember an exact moment when I became conscious of the fact that my love for girl-child toys and women superheroes was a private matter - a matter of the home and family. Somehow I just understood that it was not okay for me to take my dolls out of the home. Whenever I played with the other children in my apartment complex, I never mentioned that my favorite G.I JOE was Scarlett, the red haired counter-terrorist vixen of the team, and I certainly never dared to bring her out with me to play. Like my constant transitions from English and Spanish between school and home, I also switched my gender performance from home to the outside. The queer child I was inside my home butched it up whenever I crossed the threshold of our door. It took me many years to

understand the unnamed acceptance of my queer gender by my family. Why would my parents, who came from a country where to be a gender deviant was automatically equated with homosexuality, and thus the loss of masculinity, support their son's gender deviance? To better understand my parents' integration of my queerness into our family the only way they knew how, as another type of gendered child, I had to understand the discourses that had informed my parents' understanding of gender and sexuality in El Salvador.

Throughout Latin America and in El Salvador, homosexuality is understood primarily as a matter of gender. Homosexual behavior - particularly the act of penetration - determines to a large degree whether one is or isn't a man. Maricónes, culeros, and putos are all words that name the non-maleness of the homosexual in the traditional Latin American conceptualization of homosexuality. Mexican anthropologist Héctor Carrillo describes the traditional operation of this gender-sexuality system in Mexico as creating men through non-men. He writes,

> [p]rior to the adaptation of an understanding of categories of sexual identity and sexual orientation, Mexican society dichotomized men almost exclusively into two broad categories that were defined by demeanor. Masculine men were hombres or machos. Their counterparts were the effeminate men, the maricones, who were perceived as having forfeited their manhood altogether. The existence of the latter confirmed the 'normality' of the former. The hombres - those who were seen as legitimately manly and who were allowed to assert their dominance via the abuses of machismo - needed the maricones as a point of reference that defined where manhood ended.[8]

The location Latin American homosexuals occupy is critical for legitimizing the normative masculinity of heterosexual men. In the traditional understanding of homosexuality in Latin America, homosexual male-bodied individuals are not men at all. Instead, they are seen as another type of gender category altogether, existing in a shifting location between women's femininity and men's bodies. Carrillo's observations of Mexican homosexuality hold true for much of Latin America. In fact, many names for

[8] Carrillo 2003 p. 352

male homosexuals throughout Latin America speak to this in-between gendered status.[9] In most of its Latin American articulations homosexuality is a matter of gender, not sexual identity.

This in-between homosexual gender is centered on the matter of penetration: he who is penetrated is a homosexual. By being the receptive partner in anal intercourse, Latin American homosexuales give up their claim to masculinity. Instead they enter into a gender space that borrows and claims much from femininity but that is decidedly different from woman-ness. This articulation of homosexuality as a different gender, which essentializes it as a biological trait, creates spaces for Latin American homosexuales within Latin American societies and families. These spaces are often created not by the overt presence of homophobic discourses, but instead by their silent operation. Queer Puerto Rican sociologist Manolo Guzmán, in his critical examination of scholarship on homosexuality in Puerto Rico, describes this further:

> …this absence of speech, no longer talking about things like marriage, represents a suspension of the assumption of heterosexuality. There is enormous amount of room for the expression of homosexuality under this absence of speech about homosexuality.[10]

It is in those spaces of absent speech in which Latin American homosexuality rests. My own parents' response to my budding gender deviance and homosexuality was shaped by this system of homosexual gender. My family's acceptance of my queer impulses was predicated on its safe containment in the traditional queer gender space of the Latin American family structure. So long as my homosexuality was not explicitly named it did not threaten the traditional supremacy of my father over our family.

Despite the impossibility of drawing neat divisions between different cultures' configurations of homosexuality, there are important differences between the Latin American homosexuality system of my childhood and the

[9] In El Salvador, homosexuals are also called *mariposones*, or butterfly-men. In Puerto Rico, homosexuals are called *locas,* or crazy women (Guzmán 2006 p. 35).
[10] Guzmán 2006 p. 88

U.S. gay identity system that I encountered as a teenager coming out as queer. Central to American gayness is the individual and her/his choice: a person becomes gay through a public declaration that is an expression of their will to identify as gay. While gender deviance is often vigorously labeled as gay by heterosexuals, it is only through the individual person's declaration that gayness becomes real. The intimate relation between American gayness and individual identity is a product of the historical circumstances in which gayness in the United States emerged. Queer historian John D'Emilio, in his path-breaking investigation of the origins of gay homosexuality in the United States, firmly ties the emergence of gayness with the supremacy of the individual that is only possible under capitalist ideological and material conditions. D'Emilio argues that the rise of the individual laborer system of capitalism in the latter part of the 19th century replaced the family with the individual as the primary economic actor. This shift created the material conditions in which individual men could financially support themselves and be free to explore their personal desires, whatever they may be. It was this economic emancipation that led to the coming out of American gayness.[11]

Unlike my family, the teachers and students at my schools presented me with a homosexuality that was based on clearly defined lines between sexualities and genders. In the world of the elementary schoolyard you were either a boy or a girl and if you deviated from either of these strictly defined categories, you were harassed. As a boy child that hung out with the little girl cliques, other boys called me a "fag." I had never experienced such rejection before in my life and it was because of that rejection that I began to question my sexuality and gender. As I grew older, I understood that to be different from the normal script of heterosexual boyhood meant loneliness. So to avoid isolation, I attempted to pass for straight and put away the gay. My attempts to be straight failed and as I entered adolescence I struggled for a language that could define the feelings that I felt inside. Only seeing the world of gay and straight around me, I chose to call myself gay.

[11] D'Emilio 1993 p. 468

When I was 16 years old, I came out. My life-long attraction to boys and affinity for feminine things could no longer be contained in the quiet space my family offered. Nurtured by classical gay discourses of personal liberation and empowerment, I militantly claimed an identity of gayness in opposition to my family. I demanded that my deviance be named and recognized by not only my family, but all who knew me. Rainbow flags blazin', I flaunted my new found American gayness for my own personal fulfillment regardless of its affects on my family. In doing so, I ruptured the life-long unnamed place in my family that had contained my deviance. As I struggled against homophobia, I sought to create spaces at home and school that nurtured my growing oppositional queer identity. The challenge I presented to my family's containment of my gayness caused numerous battles between every member of my family and me. In particular, I remember a brutal shouting match between my mother and I that was triggered by a garland of hickies around my neck freshly-given to me by my then boyfriend. Again and again, my mother yelled at me that I was selfish, out of control and ungrateful. I skillfully deployed against her the new language of gay empowerment I had mastered. She was a homophobe, ignorant, and oppressing me.

Those clashes were fundamentally about how I would be part of my family. Would I be a private gender deviant containable within the structure of the family, or would I be a public individual American-style gay? Sadly, my dichotomous thinking led me to cast my family as a site of oppression and the world outside as a place of liberation. In a perverse reversal of my childhood understanding of the world, the familiar had become terrifying and the unknown comforting. Despite all of my seeming certainty that my gay individuality was better than the queerness my family had long nurtured, inside I felt a nagging uneasiness. Despite knowing that I was empowered, I felt isolated. The embracing connectivity I had felt as a child within my family was no where to be found in the gay bars and clubs that I so desperately searched for community. It was that growing emptiness that led me to question some of the assumptions I had made when I came out. I now asked

myself whether empowerment and liberation had to wear the mask of white American gayness? The asking of this question has propelled me towards what I hesitantly call a mestiza/o gender.

Mestiza/o Gender

After I graduated from college, I moved back home. Well sort of. Since my parents had divorced in 1999, home had become an unstable place. This instability only grew, so that by 2006, when I returned to the cement and asphalt plains of Los Angeles from the verdant river valleys of Ohio, my home had ironically shifted from wherever my mother lived to where my father lived. So it was to my father's home that I returned in the summer of 2006. It was there that the questions about my gender, sexuality and race that I had been mulling over for years began to give way to tentative answers.

Once at home after half a decade away, I suddenly found myself caught up in the all-encompassing net that is my family. Again, I was subject to unreasonable invasions of privacy, minor outbursts of homophobia, and the ever-present reminders to fix my bed. I had also lost the ability to bring over men whenever I wanted. These changes, however, paled before the greatest change of all: whereas before I had been the angry black sheep of the family, I was now the only one everyone spoke to. Eerily, I somehow assumed responsibility for negotiating the fragmented terrain of my family's relations with one another and assembling them for birthday dinners and other family outings. I was anointed the family peacemaker.

The shift in my position within my family dramatically crystallized around my younger teenage brother. In his senior year of high school, my brother was at a crossroads in his life and preparing for the life-altering transition to college when I moved back. Building on years of close friendship, I became my younger brother's parent. Emotionally, I supported his ideas and dreams and made it my priority that he was listened to and

nurtured. I intervened between him and my father to ensure that my brother received all the material things he needed. I was and am my brother's queer mother.

In the course of becoming mother-figure to my younger brother, I saw in myself a concrete example of the other type of queerness I had been searching for. The queer gender I occupy in my family now is in many ways a continuation of the culerito place of my youth, but with significant changes. My queerness is spoken and named for what it is. I discuss with my family my attraction to men and share my critiques of heterosexuality. While accepting the connectivity central to Latin American homosexuality, I also value the balancing individuality I learned as an American queer. Combined, these two elements of two different systems of homosexuality have enabled me to construct a masculinity that is nurturing and supportive. The complementary mixture of homosexualities that defines my present queerness has led me to realize the need to employ the practice of mestizaje to create new forms of sexuality. Drawing together the most useful elements of various global forms of homosexuality so as to craft personal homosexualities that challenge both heterosexism and the emergent hegemonic form of gayness in the United States, is a task to which mestizaje is uniquely well-suited for.

With the mestiza/o gender I am creating, my queerness moves beyond a matter of sexual identity and becomes an encompassing gender location. I embrace the ambiguous position of the Latin American puto and realize that pursuing masculinity is not only futile but it is harmful both to me and others. The mestiza/o politics of ambiguity show me that to be a gay man in a unified and stable sense isn't possible. The acts of exclusion that are required in creating a stable identity of gay masculinity, through the mestiza/o lens, are exposed as immoral and highly suspect. By buying into the binary gender system, queer men support the oppression of women, transpeople, and other gender deviants. The space that Latin American homosexuals occupy in the gender system can provide queer men with a means to construct identities that alter patriarchy and create coalitions of change with others. The gendered basis of Latin American homosexuality,

however, must be tempered by the protection of the individual that American gayness so heavily emphasizes. By ensuring that individuals are allowed to develop and creatively construct their own identities, the gendered articulation of homosexuality in Latin America can become truly emanicpatory. This mestiza/o combination is what I seek to create by living it everyday.

I recognize the potential dangers of engaging in the selective extraction and mixing of elements from diverse cultures, but I believe that the need for new forms of homosexualities justifies taking those risks. A politics of mestizaje can produce an impure queerness that is less about how each individual identifies, but instead focuses on how individuals relate to one another in the pursuit of justice. Claiming common cause with others, that is building a coalitional community of change, is an uneven process that must center not on the identities people wear and own, but instead on the act of relating. Who we relate to and how we relate to them is what should define us as queer. Thinking about queerness as a set of relations moves it from the realm of individual sexual identity towards a way of being. This shift sets queerness in the realm of gender, an all-encompassing script that defines who and what we are. Mestizaje opens up the category of gender, which is rightfully seen as a limiting force, into a means to structure the conflicting mixture of privilege and oppression that defines many queer men's masculinities.

These insights lead me to question the very pursuit of masculinity. Why should I care that homophobia emasculates me to varying degrees in varying situations? Nevertheless, I remain a male-bodied person with all of its privileges regardless of whether I am called a faggot or a culero. Why build my community and my life on the pursuit of an ideal that is in the final analysis oppressive and harmful to all? I answer my own questions with a simple answer: Because in the end I remain a man. Escaping masculinity, which for most queer men means escaping its oppressive elements, is in the end a futile search for an unreachable identity that is free of sexism. Despite all I have written and all the thinking that I have done out loud, I will still

have the power and privilege of a man. But, because of the insights I have gained moving back and forth between different forms of homosexualities throughout my life, I also have the ability to be responsible for that power and privilege. I can deploy my maleness at strategic moments and situations that work towards not only the liberation of women, but the queering of men. Accepting this responsibility means not only challenging the macro-structures of oppression, but attacking the beliefs that support them. In practice, this must mean that gay and queer men support ideologies and movements of liberation in their daily life choices such as including housing rights, access to childcare, and immigration amnesty under the umbrella of queer rights. This shift requires a re-articulation of the self on the part of gay and queer men that accounts for our privileges, be they a result of gender, race, or class.

Through my mestiza/o gender, I attempt to honor the unequal amount of ingredients that have gone into the making of who and what I am. I am thankful for the queer gender my parents raised me with as it has shown me that "queer" doesn't mean "alone"; that it is only through our relations with others that who we are can have meaning. I am thankful for the gay individualism of my adolescence in which I learned that who I seek to be is determined by my own unique path and that I should trust that process. It is at the intersection of these teachings that I find the core values that drive me as a person. I take a little from here, a little more from there, and a little less from back there; but it isn't the amount of how much I take from here or there that matters. Rather, it is the fact that I draw from so many wells to water the fields of my mestiza/o imagination that matters. I can create relationships with others that further the mixing of gender categories in the hope of undermining those same categories' power to define who all of us are. In the times in which we live in, of unchecked American power around the globe and the increasing neutralization of resistance movements within the United States, a new type of queer masculinity that utilizes the strategy of disidentification to transform the very terrain on which we fight oppressive

forces, is needed. That is what I hope to work towards when I imperfectly and impurely fashion my mestiza/o gender.

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Daniel E. Solís y Martínez is Master of Arts in History student at Claremont Graduate University. The gay son of Salvadoreña/o immigrants to Los Angeles, Daniel has lived his life in spaces of contradiction. Daniel is interested in the excavation of marginal peoples' buried histories in the greater Los Angeles region. Currently, his research centers on multiracial community organizing in Los Angeles - both historically and in the present day - as well as tracing the trajectory of Latina/o immigrations to and within Los Angeles. Daniel hopes to be a university professor one day.

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STRAIGHT(JACKET) FOR A DAY

PAUL PURCELL

"Ironically, I was the ideal candidate for this study – except of course that I happened to be in the wrong demographic. Signing up for the study was not a problem. After all, they clearly had no litmus test to judge my heterosexuality over the phone. No, the real challenge would be working out how to 'act straight' once I arrived."

In 1895, Oscar Wilde was handed a calling card which read: "To Oscar Wilde – posing as a somdomite." It was intended by its writer, Lord Queensberry, to be an insult. But Queensberry didn't just get the spelling wrong; he also misunderstood the word's meaning. If Oscar Wilde was guilty of posing as anything, it was as a straight man – not as a sodomite. Of course, unbeknownst to the public, he was secretly leading a very gay life. Unfortunately for Oscar, he wasn't a very good poser. He was eventually caught out and the ensuing scandal ruined his reputation and his life.

These days, you're not as likely to ruin your reputation or your life if you get caught out for acting straight. But few self-respecting gay men would pretend to be something they are not. And I've never seen the logic in pretending to be a card-carrying heterosexual, especially when I'm happy and gay. But there was one occasion when I faked being straight for a day.

The occasion was a market research company looking for straight (though they didn't actually use the word) men, between the ages of 30 and 40, who were married with a child between 6 and 12. While normally I wouldn't bother with such a masquerade, the incentive was 30 dollars an hour. Hell, for that sort of money I'd pretend to be lassie!

Better yet, the topic of the market research was shopping. Now this was one area of human experience I feel comfortable classifying myself as an expert. Whether it was shopping for clothes, books, DVDs or just having a coffee in a cafe, I spent a significant amount of time in shopping malls – they were like a second home to me. Ironically, I was the ideal candidate for this study – except of course that I happened to be in the wrong demographic.

Signing up for the study was not a problem. After all, they clearly had no litmus test to judge my heterosexuality over the phone. No, the real challenge would be working out how to 'act straight' once I arrived. I already knew a few unspoken, straight-acting rules to help me out:

- Don't show strong emotion
- Avoid "Chick flicks"
- Don't use your hands to make a point
- Don't cry
- Don't ever desire other men

There, of course, are a few caveats to these rules. You can show strong emotions if they're 'male' emotions – like, for instance, anger. You can alsocry (quietly) while mourning a death in the family or celebrating victory on the sports field. Then you can grope, kiss, cuddle and fondle all you like, but you have to follow the three second rule: full body contact is permitted for up to 3 seconds. Any more than that, and you might be'gay.'

Observing the "straight acting" rules in a straight environment wouldn't be a problem for me on a conscious level. But I couldn't speak for how my body would behave on an unconscious level. Normally, I don't check how my legs, hands, eyes, mouth, or eyebrows behave every single minute of the day. But now, expected to present as heterosexual, I would have to control myself in ways in which my body wasn't accustomed. It would be like wearing a straightjacket.

I anticipated encountering at least one problem – I have a natural tendency to gesture with my hands when making a point. While straight men tend to let their voice speak for themselves, many gay men (including myself) find it useful to let our bodies reinforce our words. Of course, I could always claim I was a fiery Italian or expressive French man – if I only had a convincing accent up my sleeve. Similarly – and equally troubling – I have a natural tendency for my voice to go up slightly in pitch when I get enthusiastic. I'd have to shoot for monotone if I was going to convince anyone I was hetero.

On the eve of my big debut, I realized I had yet another hurdle to jump - a wardrobe problem, specifically. How exactly do you dress straight? I did my best to avoid anything stereotypically "gay" by selecting what I thought was suitably masculine attire: a pair of sexy, three-quarter length blue shorts with a matching tight, white T-shirt. Observing my outfit in the mirror, it occurred to me that straight men don't wear anything tight unless it's designed to impress "chicks" at a social function. As seeing as how there wouldn't be any of said chicks at this function, wearing something tight might be seen as too "gay." I ditched the tight look for something more comfortable and conservative: a pair of beige, linen pants and a navy polo.

Expecting my outfit to blend in like camouflage, I marched into the foyer of the hotel where the market research was being held with my head held high and my face as free of expression as possible. Much to my dismay, I quickly realized that I'd clearly overdressed for the occasion. Two of the five men wore shorts and loose t-shirts with thong sandles – like they had just walked over from a Sunday afternoon barbecue in their backyard. Another two looked like they were ready to head down to a ranch in their matching boots, beige moleskin jeans and plaid shirts.

There was, however one man who notably stood out from the others. He wore a tight grey T-shirt with tight, blue jeans – normally a gay uniform. I kept my eye on 'Grey Top' for the rest of the afternoon to see if he would give away any clues to his persuasion, so to speak.

While we waited for the focus group to begin, I noticed that all of the other men were practicing their best strong, silent routine. None of them greeted or chatted amiably with their neighbor. Normally, I would be outgoing and chatty, but I followed their straight example and did my best to act the part. Thankfully, this awkward and (to me) unnatural silence was cut short when a female moderator greeted us and invited us to join her in a function room. We followed her into the other room, where she offered us sandwiches and orange juice before getting stuck into the research proper.

After the light refreshments, we were given an icebreaker in which the moderator asked us each to say something about ourselves. This was it – the moment I would have to confess my 'straightness.' I was a little nervous and hoped that my outing would be convincing. As we went around the table, most of the men mentioned their wives and kids – but not 'Grey Top.' Curiously, he instead referenced his partner, without any pronoun attached. When my turn came, I decided to play it safe by just using a non-gendered, 'we': That 'we' lived in a outer Canberra suburb, that 'we' had lived in Sydney and the Gold Coast before, and that 'we' both enjoyed shopping at Woden.

Since the proceedings were being videotaped, I took extra care to look and sound convincing enough as a faux straight man. I made sure that I kept my hands under the table so that they did not flap around. I also tried to keep the pitch in my voice monotone, repressing any impulse to raise it too revealingly high when I talked.

As the focus group wore on, we all relaxed and I found it easier and easier to pretend to be straight. At one point, during an exercise requiring us to select positive and negative images about potential shopping centre development in the nation's capital, I picked up the stereotypical image of a happy family going shopping. When my turn came, I waxed lyrical about them: "This photo makes me think of my seven year old boy, and myself going shopping. This photo makes me think of my wife and myself holding hands and walking through the shopping centre." Of course, the seven year old boy I mentioned was really my seven year old cat, but my story was met with the approval of the other men.

At some point during my story, I realized that my hands had unconsciously appeared from under the desk and where attempting to speak on my own behalf, punctuating my verbal sentences with corresponding hand gestures. Immediately, I whipped them back under the desk and resumed without the visual accompaniment. Thankfully, I don't think anyone particularly noticed.

I won extra points for my straight performance when I choose an image of an attractive woman dancing to the accompaniment of a violin player. As it turns out, most men picked this one (as apparently did the women's group). I played my straight card by saying that I thought she was attractive, which got a pretty good response from the blokes! They also said that they wanted to see more attractive women dancing in shopping areas!

I caused some minor controversy when I said that "my wife" and I both liked the post-modern National Museum of Australia in Canberra. My straight pals seemed to think that it was ugly. Being the good husband that I was pretending to be, I jumped to my 'wife's' defense by saying that many people probably said the same thing about the Eiffel Tower 100 years ago. Much to my surprise, 'Grey Top' agreed with me, noting that this was indeed the case.

'Grey Top' also had another clue to send my way when it came to his selections: they were, shall we say, a bit 'different.' While most men picked out stereotypical images of happy, cuddly, hetero family ones, 'Grey' selected images foregrounding the architecture of the place, rather than the people. Perhaps his most revealingly deviant selection was that of a woman with her tongue pierced. He was the only participant to make this selection.

While I might not have been clear about 'Grey Top's' sexual orientation, I was quite sure about the other men in the group and what they wanted out of shopping – from a market research point of view. In a perfect world, they wouldn't shop at all, opting instead to sit at home watching television sports programs. But since they were occasionally obligated to accompany their wives, they wanted shopping centres that they could get into and out of as quickly as possible (no multilevel car parks!).

Unlike my fellow marketing research participants, I loved to shop. I could spend hours shopping - looking for that wonderful new shirt to go with that sexy and tight pair of jeans. But – at least based on this group of men – to be straight required two things: a hatred for shopping and a love for sitting in front of the TV watching sport. Yuck!

I wasn't the only other deviant shopper in the group, however. 'Grey Top' admitted that he loved going to shop at Newtown. But wait – it gets worse. He didn't just love to shop; he loved to shop for *second hand books*! A silence came over the group. Obviously, the other men were not used to hearing straight guys ever admitting, publicly at least, that they loved to shop.

By the time the focus group ended, I had managed to pass as the real thing: a straight, married man with kid right under the noses of my straight colleagues. My performance ended as soon as I picked up my pay check and headed out the door. Oscar Wilde would have been impressed!

While I was happy to have succeeded in my efforts, I was relieved to remove the straight jacket that had been hindering my behaviour for two hours. If the experience taught me anything, it was that to keeping up such an act all your life would be exhausting, if not impossible. I knew that no matter how hard I prevented my hands from flying into the air, the pitch of my voice going above a bass level, or avoiding 'chick flicks', there would always be something that would give me away – I love to shop. Give me the wide, open, air-conditioned malls, Sale Time and my MasterCard over a place on a couch watching boring TV sports programs about hot, sweaty men playing with their balls any day!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Purcell is a 40-something gay man who's been working in the gay media since the early nineties. He lives a quiet, domesticated life with his partner and two cats in a charming terrace in the colourfully queer inner-city, Sydney suburb of Newtown, Australia. In his writing he loves to find the humorous, offbeat and just plain ridiculous things to be discovered in everyday life.