

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

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“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 be a “girl.”

“Why must human experience be ‘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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