

Gay Masculinities

Edited by

PETER NARDI

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RESEARCH ON MEN AND MASCULINITIES

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Published in cooperation with the Men's Studies Association,
A Task Group of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism



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Gay Masculinities

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GAY MASCULINITIES

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PETER M. NARDI

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1

“Anything for a Sis, Mary”

An Introduction to *Gay Masculinities*

PETER M. NARDI

Michael: What's more boring than a queen doing a Judy Garland imitation?

Donald: A queen doing a Bette Davis imitation. . .

Michael: Now, please everybody, do me a favor and cool it for the few minutes [my straight friend] is here.

Emory: Anything for a sis, Mary.

Michael: That's *exactly* what I'm talking about, Emory. *No camping!*

—Mart Crowley, *The Boys in the Band* (1968, pp. 27, 51).

For some time, the media images of gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine have persisted. They illustrate the conflation of gender and sexual orientation and raise salient questions about the social construction and relational nature of femininity and masculinity. Even though the blending of gender and sexuality can be traced to the mid-19th century, it persists to this day in a variety of ways. The chapters collected in this volume represent one attempt to understand, in particular, how contemporary gay men in the United States engage in, contest, reproduce, and modify hegemonic masculinity.

Gay men exhibit a multiplicity of ways of “doing” masculinity that can best be described by the plural form “masculinities.” Some enact the

strongest of masculine stereotypes through body building and sexual prowess, whereas others express a less dominant form through spirituality or female impersonation. Many simply blend the “traditional” instrumental masculinity with the more “emotional” masculinity that comes merely by living their everyday lives when they are hanging out with their friends and lovers, working out at the gym, or dealing with the oppressions related to their class and ethnic identities. The chapters in this book vividly capture these variations in masculinities among gay men.

Some Historical Masculinities

The conflation of gender and sexual orientation that exists in contemporary popular culture and many scientific studies reinforces the sexual inversion theories of homosexuality that emerged in late-19th-century medical discourse. In Victorian times, little distinction was made between biological sex and culturally constructed gender concepts of womanhood and manhood (Katz, 1983). At a time when the activities of men and women were strictly separated and an association began to develop of male=active and female=passive, late-19th-century medical literature invoked “sexual perversion” as a way to describe those who desired to be of the opposite sex and “who were said to have done one or more of the following: wore the clothes and hairstyle, undertook the work, played the games, gestured, walked, talked, drank the drinks, acted the political role, performed the sexual acts, and felt the emotions of the ‘other’ sex” (Katz, 1983, pp. 145-146). It was a time when, as Kimmel (1996) argues, masculinity increasingly became an act and the need to publicly display it became more intense: “To be considered a real man, one had better make sure to always be walking around and acting ‘real masculine’” (p. 100).

As emerging concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality became linked to notions of, respectively, the normal and the abnormal, the medicalization of people known as “congenital invert” developed. Perhaps, as Katz (1983) hypothesizes, this demonstrates one of the earliest examples of the creation of a self-identity and category connected to sexual practice. But the outward manifestation of this inverted identity was assumed to be effeminate behavior in men and mannish styles in women, both of which were viewed as threatening to “traditional” masculinity and femininity. As Katz (1983) shows, American postcards and cartoons in the first decades of the 20th century depicted negative images of manly women wearing collars, ties, and coats and negative drawings of “fairies,” effemi-

nate men with limp wrists, concerned about their appearance and doing women's work as store clerks.

Yet, these effeminate men were often interested in masculine men who were depicted in paintings, cartoons, jokes, and erotic stories as sailors or blue-collar manual labor workers on construction sites or at the docks (Chauncey, 1994). That these more manly men also engaged in sex with men showed that it was not only the effeminate men who might be the inverts. The categorizations used in the 1920s and 1930s to describe men who have sex with men were not, however, so easily collated into a single label such as we typically use today, in which "gay" can cover both effeminate and masculine men who share a choice of male partners.

Prior to World War II, gender status contributed to the terms used to distinguish various types of homosexual men: "fairies" (or "queen," "faggot," "nance," "pansy") were effeminate men, "queers" were those interested in same-sex sex but not because of their similarity to women (in fact, many rejected effeminate men), and "trade" were heterosexual men who accepted sexual relationships with the fairies or queers (Chauncey, 1994). For many fairies and queers, a masculine man was the ideal type, the "normal" man embodied in the soldier, sailor, or construction worker. Chauncey (1994) makes it clear that gender status was a key organizing concept of homosexual sexuality:

The centrality of effeminacy to the definition of the fairy in the dominant culture enabled trade to have sex with both the queers and fairies without risking being labeled queer themselves, so long as they maintained a masculine demeanor and sexual role. (p. 16)

For many men who identified themselves based on their interest in other men, rather than on their effeminacy, "gay" emerged in the 1930s and 1940s as the dominant label. But it was applied to any man who had sexual experiences with other men, resulting in the gradual elimination of the category "trade" by the 1960s and the creation of a strict definition of "straight" as someone without same-sex sexual contacts in any form:

It had become more difficult for men to consider themselves "straight" if they had *any* sexual contact with other men, no matter how carefully they restricted their behavior to the "masculine" role, or sought to configure that contact as a relationship between cultural opposites, between masculine men and effeminate fairies. (Chauncey, 1994, p. 22)

Although these shifts in sexual categorization can be used to illustrate a change from a more gender-based culture (where “queers,” “fairies,” and “real” men are distinguished) to one based on sexual orientation and object choice (heterosexual and homosexual), the conflation of gender with sexual orientation by the dominant culture continues. Indeed, it is often evident in the research assumptions of biologists looking for similarities between gay men’s and women’s brains (see Murphy, 1997), in the gender-nonconforming psychological studies of “sissy boys” growing up (see Green, 1987), and within gay communities where the “newly hegemonic hard and tough gay masculinity was serving to marginalize and subordinate effeminate gay men” (Messner, 1997, p. 83).

Consider these examples from the early 1960s. John Rechy (1963), in his classic novel of pre-Stonewall gay life, *City of Night*, describes a bar off Hollywood Boulevard:

Among its patrons are the Young, the good-looking, the masculine—the sought after—and, too, the effeminate flutterers posing like languid young ladies, usually imitating the current flatchested heroines of the Screen but not resorting to the hints of drag employed by the much more courageous downtown Los Angeles queens. (p. 186)

And in the June 26, 1964, issue of *Life* magazine, one of the first major articles on “homosexuality in America” depicted a San Francisco bar where men “wear leather jackets, make a show of masculinity and scorn effeminate members of their worlds,” in contrast with the “bottom-of-the-barrel bars” where one finds “the stereotypes of effeminate males—the ‘queens,’ with orange coiffures, plucked eyebrows, silver nail polish and lipstick” (Welch, 1964, pp. 66, 68). The “fluffy-sweatered” young men who “burst into tears” when arrested are contrasted throughout the article to the hostile patrons in the “far-out fringe” S&M bars, whose attempts to appear manly are described as “obsessive” (Welch, 1964, p. 70). A part owner of one leather bar hangs a sign that says, “Down with sneakers!”—described as the “favorite footwear of many homosexuals with feminine traits”—and is quoted proudly as saying, “This is the antifeminine side of homosexuality. . . . We throw out anybody who is too swishy. If one is going to be homosexual, why have anything to do with women of either sex?” (Welch, 1964, p. 68).

Stereotypes of gay men as feminine were pervasive enough that even a Los Angeles Police Department training manual from 1965 had to remind the vice squad—in an ironically more progressive way—that among homo-

sexuals "physical characteristics of the opposite sex [are] rare. . . . Homosexuals are generally indistinguishable from the general population. Extreme types, however, can look like Charles Atlas or Marilyn Monroe" (p. 2). Almost 100 years after the invention of sexual inversion and the effeminate homosexual male, the perpetuation of a gender-based system of categorization for same-sex sexuality is displayed both inside and outside the gay subculture.

Some Contemporary Masculinities

Even in the years after the rise of the modern gay movement, the rhetoric about gender in many gay organizations and communities has often been oppositional in its tone and it questions the role of effeminate men, drag queens, and "fairies" in the political strategies and media images. Complaints about gay men acting like women ruining the struggle for equal rights for gays are heard among many conservative gay leaders. Along with the transformation in gay masculinity from the "failed male," or sissy, into the hypermasculine clone came a strong division between the feminized and masculinized. Harris (1997) argues that gay liberation created a whole new set of problems in gay men's self-images, resulting in a divide between the effeminate and the masculine:

In the act of remaking themselves in the images of such mythical icons of American masculinity as gunslinging cowpokes and close-cropped leather-necks, homosexuals failed spectacularly to alleviate their nagging sense of inadequacy to straight men, whose unaffected sexual self-confidence continues to serve as the subcultural touchstone of manly authenticity. . . . When we attempted to heal the pathology of the gay body by embarking on the costume dramas of the new machismo, we did not succeed in freeing ourselves from our belief in the heterosexual male's evolutionary superiority. . . . In fact, we . . . became our own worst enemies, harsh, homophobic critics of the campy demeanor of the typical queen. (p. 99)

When did this transformation occur from the effeminate men and drag queens who often were at the forefront of resistance (see Duberman's, 1993, account of the drag queens at Stonewall) to the men whose hypermasculinity became the privileged image? Some of the visible shifts occurred during the 1970s. Of course, there were images before Stonewall of hypermasculinity in the gay bars, leather subcultures, and gay physique

magazines. Indeed, some of these gay body-builder magazines can be traced back to the 1940s (Harris, 1997). But in 1971, the first discussions of shifting gender roles can be found. Laud Humphreys (1971) wrote about the "virilization" of the homosexual and the social movement away from the old *Boys in the Band* image of "limp wrists and falsetto voices." He reminds us, however, that the new styles in homosexual manliness are "not the hypermasculinity of Muscle Beach and the motorcycle set, for these are part of the old gay world's parody on heterosexuality, but the youthful masculinity of bare chests and beads, long hair, mustaches and hip-hugging pants" (p. 41). Humphreys's comments, though, may have been premature.

Within a few years, the appearance of the quintessential masculine gay role image—the clone—demonstrated the emphasis on hypermasculinity among many urban gay men. Martin Levine's (1998) ethnography of the gay macho clones from the late-1970s Greenwich Village describes them as the "manliest of men" with gym-defined bodies, blue-collar clothing, short hair, mustaches, and sometimes close-cropped beards: "They butched it up and acted like macho men. . . . Much to the activists' chagrin, liberation turned the 'Boys in the Band' into doped-up, sexed-out, Marlboro men" (p. 7). And with the appearance of the Village People disco group and their songs of macho men, gay masculine clone images became embedded in popular culture. Did Michael's plea to Emory to avoid camping finally come to fruition?

But rather than contrasting the masculine and feminine styles of gay men in some mutually exclusive fashion, some have attempted to reconcile the range of masculinities that exist in both individuals and collectivities. Although rejecting hypermasculinity and effeminacy, many gay men embrace a "very straight gay" style by enacting both hegemonic masculinity and gay masculinity in their daily lives, as R. W. Connell (1992) argues. In the very act of engaging in sex with other men, gay men challenge dominant definitions of patriarchal masculinity. The hegemony of heterosexual masculinity is subverted, yet at the same time, gay men enact other forms and styles of masculinity, ones that often involve reciprocity rather than hierarchy. How some gay men engage in the pursuit of sex while simultaneously exhibiting an emotional commitment to sharing feelings with their friends is one example of the complex ways hegemonic and gay masculinities intersect (Nardi, 1999).

Connell (1992) says that gay men often seek other men who embody masculinity: "Gay men are not free to invent new objects of desire any more than heterosexual men are—their choice of object is structured by

the existing gender order" (p. 747). In fact, Connell interprets his gay subjects' eroticism of stereotypically masculine men, their masculine personal style, their emphasis on privatized couple relationships, and their lack of engagement with feminism as indicators of a perpetuation of the gender order. For him a "very straight gay" is a contradictory position in the gender order, but it is here that the complexities of masculinities can effect social change in that gendered social system.

Gay Masculinities

In recent years, it has, thus, become theoretically important to speak in terms of "masculinities" rather than use the more limiting phrase of "masculinity." Thanks in part to postmodern ideas, diversity and difference are acknowledged and privileged over a unifying, shared, homogeneous concept. No longer can we justify describing gender in terms of "femininity" or "masculinity," as if there were only one set of feminine or masculine roles. What becomes relevant is understanding people in terms of the various ways they enact masculinity or femininity and the multiple forms these take.

It is in this context that a book focusing on how gay men "do" masculinity emerged. Working under the assumption that gay men display a type of masculinity different from heterosexual men already points to a plurality of masculinities. Yet, to automatically assume that all gay men contest, modify, or challenge heterosexual masculinity—or for that matter, that they all enact the same masculinity roles—does not take us beyond monolithic concepts of gender. It does not adequately reflect the reality that gay men are as diverse as all other groups of humans and do not act, think, believe, and feel alike. Class and racial differences alone challenge any possibility of a unifying masculinity among gay men.

Just as it is with anyone in our culture, gay men carry out gender in multiple ways depending on differences related to social and psychological characteristics, contexts, and eras, as the brief history above demonstrates. The chapters in this volume develop these ideas further, reflect this diversity, and raise salient questions about the way masculinities are enacted in various contexts. Part One focuses on masculinities in gay men's interpersonal relationships. Matt Mutchler, in "Seeking Sexual Lives: Gay Youth and Masculinity Tensions," discusses the sexual relationships of some white and Latino youth (18 to 24 years old) and how their erotic lives are shaped by gendered sexual scripts and by conflicts related to defi-

nitions of masculinity. Mutchler argues that many gay male youth experience conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities related to the breakdown of gender-based sexual scripts. While dealing with the cultural expectation of masculinity and spontaneous sex drives and adventures, gay men also must deal with homophobia about having sex with other men along with a desire for romantic love. Engaging in sex while confronting masculinity tensions has implications for how these young gay men deal with HIV and safer sex.

Besides sexual relationships, gay men seek out friendships as central for maintaining and developing their identity in an otherwise heterosexual world. But how do gay men engage in friendship relationships with heterosexuals? Dwight Fee investigates friendship between straight men and gay men and the questions these relationships raise about masculinity. In "‘One of the Guys’: Instrumentality and Intimacy in Gay Men’s Friendships With Straight Men," Fee explores how sexual difference challenges the gendered constructs in our culture that have managed to keep gay and straight men in separate categories. The struggles between intimacy and instrumentality in friendships are a recurring theme in these relationships, given the emphasis in our society toward a more instrumental notion of masculinity. Gay-straight friendships show that gay men embody masculinity in a much more multifaceted way and suggest a need to get away from the essentialism researchers often use when talking about men’s friendships.

Romantic relationships are another site in which gay men must deal with issues of masculinity. When two men become involved in a domestic situation, issues of power, dominance, and control become relevant. And when these issues take the form of domestic violence, social constructions of masculinity come to the forefront, as J. Michael Cruz argues in "Gay Male Domestic Violence and the Pursuit of Masculinity." Some gay men "do" gender just as many heterosexual men do, namely, by using force, by exhibiting the need for domination, and by the perpetuation of homophobic attitudes.

Beyond interpersonal relationships of sex, friendship, and romance, gay men must manage issues of masculinity in a variety of other everyday situations. Part Two focuses on gay men’s masculinities in the gym, at church, in the grocery store, at political rallies, and in attempting solidarity with women’s oppression. Thomas Linneman’s "Risk and Masculinity in the Everyday Lives of Gay Men" asks what role masculinity plays in the lives of gay men as they confront oppression in everyday situations. For

many gay men, standing up for their rights is a form of risky behavior—not in the way we sometimes talk about unsafe sex, but rather in the way some gay men encounter the heterosexual world and risk being embarrassed, harassed, or beaten up. Sites of resistance occur regularly, and some gay men take the chance of engaging in behavior that may have consequences for their well-being. How this risk taking is related to culture definitions of masculinity is addressed in Linneman's chapter.

For Eric Rodriguez and Suzanne Ouellette, issues of masculinity are highlighted through studying the often-discordant identities of being gay, male, Latino, and Christian. Their chapter, "Religion and Masculinity in Latino Gay Lives," presents in-depth case studies of four gay men who struggle with being gay and religious. In their Latino culture, religion is often viewed as a female experience, and certainly something that might raise questions about a man's machismo. When a gay sexual orientation is also present and threatens definitions of Latino masculinity, religious gay men must resolve a complex set of contradictions.

"Masculinity in the Age of AIDS: HIV-Seropositive Gay Men and the 'Buff Agenda'" by Perry Halkitis explores the emphasis on body building among some gay urban men who work out to counteract both the stereotype of the weak gay man and the image of thinness and wasting associated with having AIDS. Physicality, strength, virility, and sexual prowess become part of the identity of these men as they appropriate the images of heterosexual masculinity. How AIDS has played a role in accelerating a long-standing dimension of gay subculture is explored by Halkitis. Definitions of culturally approved masculinity are embodied through the process of becoming "buff" and resisting effeminate labels.

For some gay men, their everyday lives have become entwined with political activism. For others, being victims of oppression has provided them with insights into other people's marginalization. Or so the story goes, often without criticism, as Jane Ward argues in "Queer Sexism: Rethinking Gay Men and Masculinity." Ward challenges us to reconsider the assumption that just because gay men are marginalized in our society, they therefore have specialized knowledge about women's oppression and feminism. She assesses the masculinities discourse on gay men in the work of some scholars of masculinity and of popular gay writers. Ward exhorts us to go beyond the rhetoric and to explore the actual gendered relationships between gay men and women in everyday life, the perceptions of gay men toward feminist issues, and women's perceptions of gay men's supposed solidarity with feminism.