

In or Out of the Men's Movement: Subjectivity, Otherness, and Antisexist Work

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Pro-feminist men's organizing makes advantaged, White, heterosexual men central to the movement through broader, interlocking social relations. Their relationship to White feminism, taking up of gay politics, and position vis-à-vis men of colour suggest that marginalized men are included or excluded differently on functional grounds but not always consciously as the dominant group comes to see itself as benevolent, progressive, and antisexist. Gender, race, and sexuality operate together (not individually) to secure the dominant group a central political position and a positive self-identity.

Les hommes hétérosexuels, blancs et nantis occupent une place centrale dans les regroupements d'hommes proféministes en raison de leur plus vaste réseau de relations sociales. Leur lien avec le féminisme blanc, s'inspirant des droits des homosexuels, et leur position vis-à-vis des hommes de couleur semblent indiquer que les hommes marginalisés sont inclus ou exclus différemment selon des critères fonctionnels, mais pas toujours consciemment, car le groupe dominant en vient à se considérer comme bienveillant, progressiste et antisexist. Le sexe, la race et la sexualité agissent ensemble (et non séparément) afin d'assurer au groupe dominant une position politique centrale et une conception positive de son identité.

In this article I challenge both the definitional framework of masculinity from which much pro-feminist work stems and the consequent organizing, using aspects of the pro-feminist men's movement in a critical discussion of a prototypical pro-feminist identity that emerged from interviews with men representing men's groups and from theoretical sources. In examining pro-feminist men's relations with men who differ from this normative prototype, I draw on post-colonial theory to explore how subjects come to know themselves by positioning racialized and sexualized Others in different, though related, ways. My central tenet — that men's organizing excludes or includes different groups of men depending on the particular function those groups are imagined to perform — is thus informed by an assumption that much more than simple exclusion is at stake. The absence or presence of specific groups of men is essential to men's understandings of their place within the dominant mode of pro-feminist organizing.

READING PRACTICE AND DECISIVE MOMENTS IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Earlier theoretical and empirical studies of the pro-feminist movement (Nelson, 1997) showed commonalities among activists, who not only conceptualized masculinity as a gendered set of norms that applied mainly to White, heterosexual men but also referred explicitly to a lack of diversity, particularly along racial lines, within pro-feminist groups. For this study, I asked groups with a range of organizing styles, from large antiviolence projects to conferencing networks to small discussion groups, for references to individuals who would be willing to talk to me. The seven men from across Canada with whom I spoke also represented the prototype. All but one were White, heterosexual, well-educated, and now middle class.¹ The one man of colour, who identified himself as bisexual, stated that he was the only man of colour in his organizing group and that sexuality was not discussed.

Perhaps because of the somewhat uninterrogated privileged positions of many men involved, theory and practice were based on gender issues alone. For instance, one group's project to educate schoolchildren about gender and violence used curricula centred on sexism with no analysis of how, for instance, race, class, or sexuality interact systemically with gender oppression. A generic concern about violence against women, seen as something that effects everyone, was often a uniting factor. Violence in different communities was not considered, and seemingly generic acts of violence were not considered enactments of a particular kind of masculinity to which Whiteness, dominance over men of other races, is central. Rarely was the basic theory or design of activism considered as a possible deterrent to diversity.

I think that this perspective reflects early White feminist organizing, which similarly failed to account for women's diverse experiences and still struggles with hegemonic foundations; it is unsurprising that men's work is similar. However, much antiracist work now exists within feminist writing, and works by women of colour have become more central in feminist educating. It seems that much of men's organizing lags behind discursive and theoretical concerns in feminist studies, including post-modern thought that takes for granted the production of knowledge and identity as social.

In analyzing the failure of the men's movement to deal with race but also its limited overtures to gay men, it is clear that an approach to diversity that lists oppressed groups or categories as separate entities (the "diversity list") must be problematized. It is also important to problematize the benefits and invisible rewards of being at the centre of a movement for social change.

Examining common antisexist organizing frameworks enables us to understand the complex motivations for including or excluding certain groups. Post-colonial texts that analyze the making of imperial, or elite, subjects suggest that more than simple discrimination or “difference” may be at issue. Pratt’s (1992) notion of the “contact zone” is useful:

By using the term “contact,” I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. (p. 7)

In conceptualizing how some men of colour and gay men are included in men’s pro-feminist work, I envision the encounter with the Other as central to both dominant men’s self-conception and their conception of the Other.

Whereas masculinities that lie outside the hegemonic form (which may shift with the context) are commonly considered simply marginal, the contact zone offers a theoretical way to explore a web of interactions, few of which are straightforward conditions of dismissal or denigration. To understand instances of welcoming other men into the men’s movement or of seeking to honour their cultural practices requires moving beyond the face value of statements offered by dominant subjects seeking to legitimize their relations. This legitimizing or “anti-conquest” (Pratt, 1992) comes into play in varied forms that can be seen as simultaneous moves towards innocence and domination. Innocence is secured by establishing “safe” relations with White feminists, whose theories are used and whose approval matters, and through overtures to gay men and lip-service to antiracist politics. Domination here is not a conscious or planned desire to suppress other men but a privileged complicity in relations that mark some men as racially or sexually Other.

My texts and transcripts contained what seemed to be inherent contradictions. Although some men took feminist critique seriously, unspoken rewards seemed at stake. These undercurrents seemed analogous to Roman’s (1997) “redemption discourses”: the denial of complicity in practices of domination and the profession of antiracist, antisexist sentiments. Even where forms of complicity are acknowledged, there remains a resistance to examining how one’s very identity rests on notions of Otherness that would be impossible in the absence of a web of systems of domination.

Fellows and Razack (1998) ask, “How do those who are most unmarked — white, middle-class/elite, heterosexual, nondisabled men — come to know themselves through the containment or marking of others, both symbolically and materially?” (p. 342). The central task is to see how

the White middle-class male subject is re-invented and upheld within antisexist work and whether narratives can be read as evidence that the new male consciousness is still a performance of Whiteness.

THE MEN'S MOVEMENT

Common threads in the image of the new pro-feminist man emerged from written sources and from the men I spoke with. He is typically White, able-bodied, middle-class, and heterosexual — as some participants remarked, the man with “the most power in society.” But a new twist emerged. In the company of other men, he is reconsidering his attitudes towards the women around him, questioning his male privilege, and learning to deal with his emotions. He espouses nonviolence and challenges other men to renounce sexism. In many cases, he has examined his homophobia and embraced gay men as friends and colleagues. He takes up activist causes that parallel feminist concerns *without intruding on feminist space*, checks with women to be sure that his group's activities are suitable, and speaks of enhanced relationships with women and approval from feminists. A central desire, however unconscious, of his pro-feminism is redemption from sexism, redemption bestowed by feminist women who accept the “new” man as changed, forgiven, and desirable. Thus, due to his gender-oriented concerns and his general lack of incentive to investigate other systems of oppression, the White “gender-feminist” who sees feminism as simply a matter of gender is the first model the pro-feminist man recognizes.

Desire for redemption is evident in the words of one participant, who referred to an incident of criticism by academic feminists at a conference: “I felt shamed by the women . . . because they were really minimalizing our contributions . . . and I haven't had that much . . . most women say ‘Ah, finally!’ ” The time he spent going over the incident and his obvious dismay long after it had taken place made me realize the extent to which his self-concept and image of his pro-feminist work were tied to the approval of these women. Although coalition-building is important, I am concerned about the unnamed authority of women and the unnamed Whiteness of both this man and his discourses, for they are central to his pro-feminist work. Throughout the interviews, most men were extremely careful in explaining how they had earned women's trust or had overcome boundaries between the genders in various instances. Lengthy descriptions of having “done the right thing” and admissions that feminist women were skeptical nearly always culminated in a positive outcome and the eventual earning of trust.

GAY MEN: THE MODEL BROTHERHOOD?

In constructing and living an image of the “good” new man, men draw on visions of masculinity they see as alternative to dominant or violent ones. Gay men, in particular, are seen to exemplify an alternative masculinity, one that embodies nonviolence, respect for women, and comfort with other men and with touching and embracing as opposed to the competition and distrust common to straight males. It is not uncommon for straight men to note the safety women say they find in the presence of gay men.

Gay men take on an implicit Whiteness in this dialogue. Pro-feminist literature and most of my interviews show that Other men tend to be conceptualized in categories that distinguish gay men from Black men or men of colour. This tendency is obvious in books that deal with masculinity issues throughout, then include a final chapter or section on gay or Black men or on gay *and* Black men (Clatterbaugh, 1990). Gay men of colour fall silently into their racial grouping, their sexualities unremarked.

The sense that (implicitly White) gay men are unthreatening and powerless to oppress and the desire for approval by (implicitly White) women they believe covet the safety of gay friendship make it possible to see how gay men serve a basically straight, White men’s movement. The participants commonly recounted the progress they had made in combatting homophobia and the rewards they had gained in doing so, as in the following excerpt:

I’m much more open about their reality because I’m not as threatened by them [as I used to be] . . . Because I’m more comfortable with my own sexuality, . . . more secure about who I am, hugging a gay friend is not a sexual overture . . . [and] joking with gay men about sexuality or talking about their hopes and fears about relationships is just another way to connect to them.

The point is not to criticize moves to understand gay men but to ask about the unconscious interests of those who do so. Becoming more like the men White straight women trust and proving one’s comfort with one’s sexuality through friendships with gay men *while remaining straight* help to create an alternative straight masculinity rewarded by straight feminist women and perhaps many other women simply looking for gentle “better” men. According to Dollimore (1997),

Progressives would willingly remove some of the stigma from homosexuality, and have often acknowledged the homosexual component within the heterosexually identified. But this is typically the at once honest and evasive acknowledgment of a troubling presence/absence. Put bluntly, to be identified positively outside of its own cultures, homosexuality usually has to be dissolved into androgyny. Or,

alternatively, homosexuality might be called upon to loosen the rigid gender identities within heterosexuality: men are permitted a “feminine” component, and, less often, women a “masculine” one. But such acknowledgments of the “other” gender usually make for a fuller, more rounded, heterosexual identity. (p. 19)

Razack (1998) talks of prostitution as transgression into Other territory and a mode of self-exploration where, in her example, White women cross the repressive boundaries of their gender role:

These are journeys from respectability to degeneracy, but the women who make such journeys (either in writing or in practice) describe themselves as emerging unscathed and strengthened. In short, they emerge as autonomous subjects, having travelled from being good girls to bad girls. This kind of storytelling, it goes without saying, can only be told by those who do inhabit a position of white middle-class respectability. It is a planned, temporary foray into degeneracy that in the end only confirms the traveller in her position of privilege because she is able to emerge unscathed. (pp. 352–353)

In such transgressions, privileged subjects come to know themselves not only as successful adventurers into the “unknown” but also as capable of maintaining the boundaries of their identity as they reveal their “open-minded” progressive politics. For men who venture into the red light district, the safe return, to know oneself as a consumer or traveller in that degenerate site and specifically as *not* its product, allows a spatial and metaphoric distancing central to social relations of power (Razack, 1998). For straight pro-feminist men, crossing the dangerous boundary into relations with “gay Otherness” — a formerly phobic site — and returning, straightness intact, can also allow redemptive self-making. Cultural appropriation of racial boundaries produces similar dominance, albeit in a different way.

MEN OF COLOUR: SHADOWS AND MYTHS

On the surface, the lack of racial diversity in men’s groups might seem due to difficulties in making connections, lack of interest on the part of non-White men, or straightforward racism. But it may hide undercurrents. When asked, the men I studied often shifted to the presence of gay men in the movement: for instance, “we haven’t dealt with racism, but we’ve dealt with homophobia.” Here, the “diversity list” model of separate oppressions is particularly visible. As two participants commented, the first beginning with homophobia,

That’s one of the things that really was a benefit — that a lot of men just simply got rid of that crap or baggage . . . No . . . no, I don’t think we’ve ever dealt with racism.

I mean again I think that it's like we thought we were there for one main reason, and it didn't really matter what the other constraints or concerns were . . . I suppose I partly agree with that. I don't know if you can do all of that work on all of these fronts or positions.

Our subtitle is "pro-feminist, male-positive, gay-affirmative," and we *did* have antiracist in there, but, to be quite honest with you, I've done nothing towards that. I *know* Black men . . . but we don't have an ongoing dialogue as to what it means to be a Black male in our society, and we haven't done a lot of bridges in terms of the racism issues . . . much more in the gay community.

How do we read this lack of deeper analysis, which is often combined with an expressed concern for the politics affecting other men's lives? It is too simple to portray it as solely discrimination or these men as a unified group of conspirators, consciously keeping the Other out. The complexity of longings, desires, and fears — some easily read, many invisible — warrants greater exploration.

It has been central, when considering race, to examine the use of male affirmation or initiation rituals in a number of non-Western and Native cultures (Nelson, 1997). Some participants in my study spoke highly of the sweat lodges they had attended with members of their discussion groups — the face paint, masks, or drumming they enjoyed at retreats, all prototypical mythopoetic male-bonding devices. One participant described the conflict between his desire to attend an annual political pro-feminist conference and his objection to its mandatory rituals. These rituals are largely associated with the mythopoetic men's movement, begun by leaders such as Bly (1990), and they overlap pro-feminist work a fair amount. Kimmel's (1995) anthology highlights some major theoretical differences and attempts to pull pro-feminist and mythopoetic men closer; in practice, I sense a continuum of pro-feminist and mythopoetic work.

At the 1998 United States National Organization for Men Against Sexism conference, I was only a little surprised that the event was not permeated by critiques of solely gender-related work. Attended and presented mainly by U.S. and Canadian men, many workshops and sessions had a decidedly mythopoetic flair, emphasizing personal growth over political analysis or social conscience. Some men's desire for different foci was apparent as a few joked about how they would avoid the expected drumming or hand-holding rituals they felt romanticized men's bonds at the expense of complex political critique.² The neglect or depoliticization of difference made me uncomfortable with the White consumption of the spectacle, at an evening gathering, of Black women drummers performing African music in native costume. This choice of entertainment seemed to allow a false

sense of collective antiracist sentiment that really had not been explored and closely matched the movement's fetishization of Otherness.

One participant in my study expressed a conviction common among men who enjoy ritual practices:

I'm fascinated by the juxtaposition of the "in control" businessman with the tie and, you know, working and breathing on the 14th floor and wanting to get to the 15th . . . with the image of a man dancing naked in the woods, drumming, putting face paint on . . . I think that's a really fabulous juxtaposition . . . It unpacks some of the deeper truths of what masculinity could be.

Lott's (1993) work on blackface minstrelsy analyzes such practices in light of the Bohemian desire of many men to escape their middle-class or upwardly-mobile roots and rebel against the rigid requirements of a masculinity that feels static and confining. In this reworking of identity, Black men become the objects of a romanticized escape that can indulge a sense of difference and freedom. It is not difficult to see that the enactment of the rituals described might serve similar functions in a men's movement hoping to challenge and subvert the norms of hegemonic masculinity. As in Razack's theorizing of prostitution, we see a desire for the freedom to cross boundaries, "play" in Otherness, and retain the entitlement to return unscathed. Indeed, the search for a new masculinity representing emancipatory modes of living and expressing oneself seems to require transgressing boundaries, typically into Native or African cultures, where exoticized men are believed to possess deep truths lacking in Western masculine models, or into gay culture, which is seen as an innocent, benevolent brotherhood. Yet White gay men are present, whereas men of colour, belonging to the very cultures from which these rituals are appropriated, are almost entirely absent.

RITUAL AND SELF-MAKING

A few men criticize the mythopoetic use of ritual on grounds of cultural appropriation (e.g., Connell, 1995; Kaufman & Kimmel, 1995). But two other reactions, one also critical, are more common. Some men see ritual as liberating and therapeutic, whereas others refuse it on the grounds that it replicates cultural practices oppressive to women. Representing the latter, one participant said, "All societies that we know of that have those kinds of rituals have the highest inequality . . . women have the lowest amount of say or participation in the political reality and the cultural reality." Ironically, when Kaufman and Kimmel (1995) analyzed cultural appropriation, they gestured towards this belief. Although it can be argued that

women have a lower status than men in most cultures, whether non-Western women are more oppressed than Western women remains unexamined. No consideration has been given to context or practices of resistance.

Another participant observed:

The men in some communities have been less touched by feminism than men in other communities, and I think it would be naïve to say otherwise — I mean, that's just the way things still are . . . active volunteers talked about how hard it was working in their community . . . violence against women was still completely unchallenged.

Whether or not it can be proved that violence against women remains unchallenged, the “knowledge” produced must be qualified by significant factors that the participant himself mentioned. These volunteers were working with materials produced by White, middle-class, Anglo-Canadian men and implicitly designed for use with the White, English-speaking, Canadian urban population. Pro-feminist men must examine their desire to *include* rather than merely *add* Others in the production of what is “known” about violence against women and thus the exploration of what solutions are proposed.

It might also be rewarding to examine unconscious investments in circulating such ideas. Given a history in which White fears of Black men have been upheld by prominent cultural myths about their violent and bestial natures (hooks, 1996; Morrison, 1997), it is hard to imagine how White men hoping to fight violence and form allegiances with White women would benefit from disrupting these myths. It is not an absence but an implicit awareness of a Black presence that informs White consciousness as it comes to know itself, Morrison (1992) reminds us.

Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness — a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing. (p. 33)

Consciously or not, White men benefit from an image of the dark shadow in the White imagination, male or female.

A transgressive imaginary encounter with the dark Other serves a central purpose in the White male enactment of rituals. For a culture to be appropriated, it must take on mystical, imaginary, and anachronistic qualities associated with something long gone or near-extinct (Crosby, 1991). So, to confront real living Other male bodies would be counter-

productive, making it difficult to imagine, and consume, their “exoticness.” The collective White male imagining/forgetting of history and its material power imbalances makes it possible to project a desire for ritual and cultural meaning onto absent men. The idea is not to demonstrate one’s anti-patriarchal sentiment by joining hands around the campfire with men of colour; rather, it is, as with Lott’s blackface minstrels and Razack’s prostitutes, momentarily to *become* them and in that moment of transgression be engulfed by qualities deemed desirable for one’s project of self-making. Enacted from the standpoint of one who has the privilege of return from that exotic space, it is not a straightforward act of domination or derision but a convoluted attempt to make sense of an obsession with a culture that gives shape to the content of one’s own. This does not require the bodies of particular individuals; in fact, it requires their absence, at worst, or a fantastical conjecture of their reality, at best.

Critiquing the work of Bly, Connell (1995) writes:

Aboriginal men are not real people to Bly, worth getting acquainted with on their own terms. Like Zulus, Arabs and the rest, they are cyphers that fit into a particular slot in his imagination. When Bly’s followers go to the woods to beat on drums, they are not respecting real African or Native American traditions. They are enacting a stereotyped, basically racist, notion of the primitive. (pp. 84–85)

Although building one’s own identity through use of an exotic new cultural space is thought to give not only cultural richness but also solidarity with other cultures, it is a classic anti-conquest scenario:

One common discursive strategy evident in redemption fantasies is the staging of the way in which the White (normative) colonial self supposedly comes to know and be at one with the “racialized other,” whose qualities and life struggles against racism and colonialism become the familiar self (rather than the estranged other) within “us.” (Roman, 1997, p. 274)

In the end, it seems to make little difference whether rituals are embraced or discarded. If one participates in ritual, it is through a vision of men of colour as wild, untamed, and embodying forbidden pleasures that can be enjoyed by venturing over cultural boundaries. But if one is against these practices, it is because the wild, untamed masculinity is *misogynist*. Both standpoints rest on notions of Black men and Aboriginal men and their cultures as essentially Other. So the pro-feminist message, no matter how “gay friendly,” remains a version of the glib pop-cultural phrase “It’s a White thing.” As with much White feminism, this gender work props up the progress of White pro-feminism with a plethora of imaginary or mythical less-advanced, primitive cultures.

CONCLUSION

The presence of a very small number of White gay men and the virtual absence of Black men and Native men in pro-feminist organizations warrant explication. The consideration of gay politics in these movements is not necessarily more progressive than their consideration of race. The two cannot be separated in this way.

I argue that the man of colour discussed in this article is a subject both bearing exotic wisdom and embodying aggressive, essential manhood, whereas the White gay man, also objectified and essentialized, serves different purposes. Although White gay men are seen as objects of White female desire, they are seen not as a sexual threat but as possessing certain "feminine" qualities that straight men can learn and absorb by connecting with them. Thus, White gay men are *within the parameters of straight comfort* and are allowed in. The sharing of new ways to be male can be carried out within the parameters of heterosexuality and the performance of Whiteness.

At issue are not generalized discrimination and exclusion but various specific understandings, exclusions, and inclusions that interlock to fulfill the requirements of redemption from sexism. The point is to unpack the varied ways in which antisexist work rests on other forms of domination and to place them alongside ideas of equality familiar to pro-feminist men.

During my research, I was continually puzzled by written and verbal assertions that one could learn to be pro-feminist without giving up "being a man."³ As these statements were concerned not with biology but with behavioural change, I wondered which components of identity remained to constitute maleness, to be safeguarded if one were to continue "being a man." Should we conclude from this study that being a (pro-feminist) man still rests on racist dominance and projections of fantasy onto other men? We need both a complex rethinking of how men have come to know what it is to be a man in the first place and a re-evaluation of the political project men wish to pursue.

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NOTES

1. I was aware that I represented work whose central tenets participants wished to support. My Whiteness might also have enabled them to assume a shared investment in foregrounding gender, and our shared heterosexual identity, from which some common understanding of male/female relations could be imagined, might also have ensured their comfort. Although I shared working-class roots with some of my subjects, being a graduate student placed me in a class bracket potentially equal to that of the participants, who described themselves as now middle class.
2. This minority of men represented a position in some pro-feminist literature that rejects the need for a men's movement *per se* but calls for men's education about gender, race, and other issues that involve coalition-building informed by other political standpoints (see Connell, 1995; Messner, 1997).
3. Such comments seem to echo Stoltenberg's work (1989, 1994), with which many pro-feminist men disagree. Stoltenberg, too, has failed to consider Whiteness and the relations among different groups of men. His thinking contains many of the moves to innocence or "redemption" critiqued here, such as assuming homogeneity in male experience and measuring "less enlightened" men against his own ideals. He advocates a simplistic mode of adherence to White radical feminist ideas, which he fails to engage in any critical or meaningful way. Thus, I find problematic both the notion of "refusing to be a man" and its counterpart, "not giving up being a man." I question the usefulness of framing the issue in this way because both "sides" stop short of analyzing the complexity of dominant identities (see Nelson, 1997).

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