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## ***Super Undies, Buff Bodies and Body Facism: Normative Gay Identity and the Politics of Regulation***

Marcos Moldes

*fab Magazine*, a bi-weekly based in Toronto, is an example of a gay tabloid press that claims to provide an alternative to the traditional discourses of gay identity. Providing local coverage of Toronto's gay community, the magazine also contains featured columnists, music and restaurant reviews, and a classified section that focuses on gay businesses and services. However, the magazine's representation of the gay community embraces and glorifies the normative images of the gay body that articulate the stereotypical conception of gay consumer identity. This creates a contradiction at the centre of the magazine: it is a text that seeks to be understood as "for us, by us" publication yet it deploys a normative construction of gayness in the vast majority of its image-based representations.

Due to the lack of diverse images within mainstream representations of gay identity, a variety of texts, like *fab*, have emerged from within the gay community. Many of these texts come in a broad choice of formats and are often categorized as "alternative media." But what makes gay media alternative? Are all of these publications alternative so long as they self-identify as gay? These questions highlight some of the problems with the definition of "alternative media," a label that has become problematic due to the lack of a shared understanding or agreement of what constitutes the alternative category.

While walking through Toronto's gay village a few years ago, one of *fab Magazine*'s covers caught my eye, but when I stopped to look at it, I was surprised by what I saw. On the cover was a muscled, young, orange-tinted (the telltale sign of a tanning salon tan) model holding a syringe in one hand over his body with the other hand on his hip. The model, sporting only a pair of white cotton briefs and a vacant expression on his pouty-lipped face, lay against a bronze-orange backdrop. This was the image that the magazine chose to showcase its theme of health and beauty. The cover listed the titles of several of the issue's features, such as: "Surgery-Free Lipo and No-Scalpel Facelifts," "Beyond Weights," and "Killer Abs." These titles suggested articles that seemed to be less concerned with the health of its readers and more concerned with dispensing advice that would help them achieve a very specific image of beauty. What struck me as odd was not that a gay maga-



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zine would be doing an issue devoted Health and Beauty, but rather that this magazine marketed itself as an alternative gay publication, one that seeks to provide a different kind of coverage—coverage of news related to the gay community that may not be available elsewhere. Yet the images in the magazine were representative neither of the entire gay community nor of alternative approaches to health and beauty. Instead they focused almost exclusively on a very small segment of the community, one that has increasingly come to define gay identity. Representations of this body can be seen throughout the media landscape, as it has come to encapsulate the way in which all media portray gay ontologies. I refer to this body in the singular precisely because of how homogeneous it is: while various models are deployed, they all resemble one another so closely, I would argue, that they come to function as a visual template that others must conform to in order to be recognized as gay.

This body, although a minority, is still incredibly powerful by virtue of the fact that it occupies a privileged position in the media landscape: drawing on the Foucaultian conception of the disciplined body, I argue that the constructed gay body presented by both mainstream media and alternative media acts as a coercive, structural tool through which bodies are disciplined and forced to conform. By thinking of the gay body represented in mainstream and advertising media as a disciplinary structure it is possible to then understand how this representation is imbued with the power to create a very restrictive and exclusionary understanding of gay identity. This articulation of gayness excludes and erases those who do not conform to the standards that are increasingly reified. I argue that this body is powerful because of its ability to be a coercive agent, which “forces” individuals to conform to strict criteria in order to be recognized and understood as gay subjects.

Etymologically speaking “Fab,” is a slang word for the word fabulous which itself originates from “fabulosus” meaning “celebrated in fable.” Fable, from the word “fabula” refers to something that is mythical in origin. From the etymology of the word fab we begin to get a sense of the history of the word and its meaning. To describe something as fabulous means that it is so incredible it is as though it is mythical in its origins. This definition evokes images of Greek and Roman heroes like Hercules or Jason and the Argonauts, or in the case of *fab Magazine* the Super Undies issue. To be fabulous is to be incredible, celebrated in song and story, to be immortalized and seem larger than life. Mythological characters, like the heroes of Greek mythology, are examples of this “fabulousness,” and furthermore, are often used as a way to explain otherwise complex phenomena or events.

Looking at *fab Magazine*’s cover images and the body that it uses in its representation of gay identity I argue that this body and the identity attached to it are contemporary myths of gay culture and are not that different

from the myths of ancient Greece; they structure and order our surroundings much in the same way myths did for our ancient predecessors. If the myth of Pandora's Box explained the social ills that surrounded the Greeks, and Prometheus's gift of fire to humans told the story of the origins of fire, what does the myth of the normative gay body tell us? I argue that this myth normalizes and stabilizes gayness into a fixed identity, one that closely resembles normative masculinity and the values of capitalism. Normative gayness provides us with a simple and easy way to understand a version of gay identity, one that doesn't challenge the status quo and erases the complexities and nuance of alternative modes of identity.

The elevation and accommodation of this body out of abjection to a highly glamorized subject position is evidence of how the normative gay body has become a celebrated cultural icon. This body is an interesting site of analysis precisely because of how it has been raised up from the margins as an almost exclusively consumer subject. Although the normative gay body lacks real political power and indeed does not articulate a desire for political or social change in its representations, it is afforded a great deal of cultural capital. Imagining gay men to be a group of urban, affluent, white men absolves society from addressing chronic issues of homophobia, racism, poverty, and social exclusion.

If gay identity is represented exclusively by the normative gay body, then gayness by extension is comprised entirely by a group of consumer frenzied men with large amounts of disposable income. The myth of gayness then absolves both mainstream and gay culture from dealing with the issues that affect our communities. This is not a simple matter of gay people versus straight people; these issues intersect lines of sexuality and include issues of race, gender, and economic class. The myth of the normative gay body attempts to obscure these problems by presenting a sanitized and "safe" image. As long as the normative construction is dominant and fits within the ideals of hegemonic masculinity then there is no need to seriously consider efforts to counter heteronormativity, or prejudice. If gay identity is based on consumption and affluence then suddenly homophobia is not a problem nor is the drive toward larger political and structural change.

Beefcake photography was a phenomenon characterized by its use of provocative images that bordered on being erotic. This genre of photographic representation is a high point in gay erotic culture that belonged neither to the illicit pornographic underground nor to a "high art" regime but rather existed in a liminal space in-between the two (Waugh, 1996, p. 176). These pictures, circulating under the auspices of being part of an athletic "jock" culture were in fact the fomentations of a gay body that glorified the fit and young bodies that were depicted in its images. Despite the fundamental disavowal of any

sort of homosexual desire being part of the circulation of these images it is clear that they were part of the foundation on which modern gay identities and cultures were built (Waugh, 1996, p. 177).

The beefcake body symbolizes the ways in which capitalism has expanded itself into the realms of leisure, sport, and erotic expression. This body has been a major influence on gay culture in the process: through the commodification of the beefcake body into a template for gay identity (Waugh, 1996, 191). By creating a template for a body that relies on capitalism to exist, images like that of the beefcake genre, or *fab Magazine*, are implicated in the relationship between capitalism and the disciplinary gay body. With the establishment of this link it becomes possible to see how this figure has long been circulating as a disciplinary structure.

While beefcake photography can be seen as a historical legitimization of the disciplinary gay body I argue that *fab Magazine* can not merely be seen as an extension of this cultural aesthetic. Beefcake photographs relied on the athletic body in order to pass through the censors that existed prior to the gay civil rights movement. By claiming to be inspirational material for men these photographs legitimized the pleasure of looking at male beauty and provided an outlet for male homosexual desire. This legitimization must have attracted, sheltered, and facilitated an important (if superficially invisible) gay constituency, a constituency that at that moment in history had few other outlets of expression (Waugh, 1996, p. 188). However, this body, which occupied a counter-cultural space during the pre-Stonewall era, is no longer the subversive tool of gay empowerment that it once was.

In the post-Stonewall, post-*Will & Grace*, post-*Queer as Folk* landscape of contemporary gay culture this image functions as a filter to those who do not (either by choice or by inability) conform to its rigid construction of gayness. There is a need for gay culture to recognize that the boundaries of exclusion that this image consistently reinforces are no longer productive ones. These boundaries no longer create safe spaces for the exploration of homoerotic desire; rather they are boundaries that exclude a majority of gays from participating in culture.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler (1993) argues that bodies are comprised of a dynamic of power insofar as the matter which bodies are comprised of comes to stand in for the regulatory norms that govern them (p. 2). Looking at the disciplined gay body that is represented on the cover of *fab Magazine* it is clear that this body has become a representation of the normative structures that seek to assimilate gay identity. By creating a normative body that functions as a regulatory matrix, the magazine has constructed a subject through which other gay bodies are coerced into conforming.

In this sense, it becomes very clear that the normative gay body is more than just a representation in a magazine and is in fact a mechanism of power. Butler's description of how bodies function as dynamics of power is an excellent way through which we can consider how bodies are not just *performative* subjects. Rather these performances are done within a power structure that governs whether or not the individual bodies can be understood as being powerful.

Although an individual gay body may not be a powerful subject, much in the same way an individual soldier is not a powerful subject, they are embodiments of larger structures that are indeed powerful when conceptualized as such. Therefore the disciplined gay body is a manifestation of a structure that aligns itself with bodies that are sought after as consumer subjects. By understanding how the disciplined gay body is a manifestation of power because of its relation to powerful structures like mainstream media, it is possible to understand how this disciplined gay body is a powerful subject. It is precisely through its links to structures that dominate the field of meaning-making that the disciplined gay body shifts from being a marginalized figure to one that has been accommodated within the media landscape.

Therefore, the cover images are a symbol of the problem of the representation of the gay body within alternative media: they reflect the images produced by the mainstream and lack any sort of representation that is actually based in reality. In *fab Magazine* the gay body is de-politicized and reduced into a flat image with little to no regard for the lived experience of their readers. Instead, *fab* has a keen interest in promoting a variety of products and services to its readers that the magazine proposes will aid them in conforming to the unrealistic expectations of the disciplined gay subject. Because the normative/disciplined gay body is primarily a subject that embraces hegemonic values of patriarchy and consumption, it has been rewarded with a space within mainstream media.

What distinguishes and makes this representation of gayness significant is that it demonstrates an access to power in ways that the non-normative gay body does not. The normative gay, for example, has been embraced by various forms of mainstream and alternative media and has been deployed as the central representation of gayness even though it only encapsulates a small segment of the gay community. Secondly, the dominance of this body means that it is implicated in the erasure of non-normative forms of gay identity. This erasure occurred not only in mainstream texts, but also in alternative media sources like *fab Magazine* that claim to be representing gay identity.

By reinforcing articulations of gay identity that conform to this normative understanding of sexuality, texts like *fab Magazine* are implicated in

the promotion of a media discourse that encourages conformity rather than diversity and the formation of identity through consumption. Furthermore, by embracing a homogenous representation of gay ontology, the body featured in this representation is imbued with power, power in the sense that it is a dominant image of gayness that is, at the very least, partially responsible for the erasure of queer bodies from the media landscape.

## Author

Marcos Moldes is a PhD student in the graduate program of communication at Simon Fraser University. His research engages questions of identity, sexuality, race and gender through Foucaultian analysis. He does not have a buff body or super undies.

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