

Masculinity on Trial

Undressing Homophobia in the Bible Belt

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Late in the fall of 1999 in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, I stood in a windowless evening classroom facilitating a discussion of the week's readings from *Tilting the Tower: Lesbian Studies* (Garber 1995), "Choices Not Closets" (Friend 1987), and the video *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in Schools* (Chasnoff 1997). During the course of this three-hour seminar, one brave young man expressed his homophobia clearly and concisely, openly and honestly, with all twenty-six of the young teachers in the room. "I'm not against homosexuals or anything, but the thought of two men having sex repulses me."

How does the conscientious teacher respond to such homophobic expressions? "Thanks for sharing?" "Heterosexual sex repulses me sometimes, but I don't get to legislate against it?" No, of course not; untenured at the time, although always pushing their limits of "tolerance," I ask him, "Why does this repulse you?" That is, one doesn't "naturally" feel repulsed at any particular cultural representation or image; why be repulsed at this one? What have you learned and been taught in our particular culture that breeds this repulsion? Overall, my male students' capacity to reflect critically on the construction of masculinity is consistently dull and disappointing.

Out of utter frustration with heterosexual men's refusal of male eroticism and their conscious and unconscious embrace of "power," I am coming to think that perhaps our best course is strategically to develop a shared bonding between masculine alienation and homophobic anxieties on one hand and as an entrée into empathy for the rights of lesbians and gays on the other. Recent scholarly and popular portraits of masculine alienation suggests a particular historical formation of men's "vulnerability," which might be productively used to gain men's compassion for the plight of homosexuals.

To suggest that educators use popular cultural depictions of male alienation from Western culture and stereotypes of masculinity to seduce the homophobic men in our classrooms is an alternative to a strategy urged on

myself and a colleague in 1998 when an ex-Fundamentalist Christian woman told us at a conference we should learn the nuances of biblical interpretation. So, counter to my own previous arguments (Boler 1997, 1999), I advocate here—out of utter frustration—a possible entrée of “empathy” into masculinized crises as a bridge to challenging masculine repulsion toward homosexuality.

In what follows, I shall open with a discussion of representations of masculinity portrayed in recent Hollywood films and suggest ways in which these popular portrayals may suggest seductive educational directions. I will then discuss the pedagogical effectiveness of several independently produced videos I use to engage women’s studies and pre-service and in-service education students in thinking about masculinity and homophobia: *It’s Elementary*, by Debra Chasnoff (1997); *The Color of Fear*, by Lee Mun Wah (1994); and *Tongues Untied*, by Marlon Riggs (1989). In conclusion, I will offer some critical insights into how educators can challenge students to examine Western patriarchal links between misogyny and homophobia.

“HURT” VERSUS “OPPRESSION”: THE DIFFERENCE PRIVILEGE MAKES

Homophobia is deeply tied to misogyny and to rejection of any expression of femininity on the part of men in most Western societies (Mandel and Shakeshaft 2000; Devor, 1989; Kimmel, 1987). By suggesting that educators cater to men’s disaffection from masculinity, I foreground the challenge of teaching students to distinguish between the “individual hurt” of gender roles and the structural and material effects of systematic oppression. In my years of asking students to rethink the naturalized gender categories of “men” and “women,” I frequently encounter men and women saying, “Yeah well, men are oppressed as much as women. Gender roles hurt men too.” And then the usual litany is as follows: men aren’t allowed to cry or express feelings; they are expected to be “manly,” to be “athletic,” to be a “breadwinner.” Each semester, I painstakingly, and repeatedly, reiterate the difference between being “hurt” by the effects of sexism—for example, men are “hurt” by the fact that they are emotionally repressed within Western capitalist patriarchy—and being oppressed (materially, economically, educationally) by sexism. For example, women are not only “hurt” by gender roles but suffer material losses and do not receive privilege systematically from sexism, whereas men do receive privilege from the entitlements granted to masculinity within patriarchy.¹

While my ultimate goal is to emphasize this crucial distinction, I am suggesting that those seeking to shift hegemonic masculinity “exploit” men’s sense of being hurt as a productive entrée into critical reflection. To begin with, I find that the “invisibility” of masculinity—its unnamed and, hence,

largely unconscious status—manifests in men frequently responding to analyses of male privilege when they say, “Well, I don’t *feel* any sense of privilege.” Such statements are followed either by accounts of how, unlike “all those sexist men,” they did chores in their family household, or of how they don’t believe their girlfriend should be a housewife, or that because he does not conform to “*GQ* standards” of appearance or didn’t make the football team, he is thereby ostracized from the felt privileges of masculinity. As Connell (1995) reiterates, “Normative definitions of masculinity . . . face the problem that not many men actually meet the normative standard. . . . The number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony” (p. 79).

Susan Faludi’s (1999) book *Stiffed* offers a scholarly and popular backdrop against which such popular cultural depictions as the films *The Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) and *Magnolia* (Anderson 1999) resonate. What strikes me about these contemporary depictions is men’s “disaffection” from masculinity itself; men’s disaffection from patriarchy reflects a self-consumption in which a regime of domination enforces its own demise. In the case of present performances on and off screen, one hears discursive echoes articulating male grief and loss.

Consider the lead protagonist (Edward Norton) in *The Fight Club*, who becomes utterly disaffected from his “perfect,” although slightly computer-geek, yuppie world (his apartment perfectly furnished from Swedish catalogs). He opts instead to join his “alter,” hypermasculinized ego in the form of none other than Brad Pitt. The young yuppie’s new best friend, Pitt, mobilizes a popular movement called “the Fight Club,” reinstating a brawling, bloody form of close male bonding and contact through organized fights that men leave bruised and battered but satiated in their desire for meaning and belonging. Not unlike the nostalgia that propels the Promise Keepers (the Christian based men’s group calling for family values and woman at home with kids, who, in amphitheaters of hundreds of thousands, weep and beg for forgiveness for the sins of drink, women outside wedlock, and abandonment of fatherhood), this nostalgia concludes with a deeply neurotic twist in which the viewer realizes that the disaffected self (Norton) is speaking in a mute, entirely ego-bound conversation with himself and no one else—the post-modern man alienated by his own power, tongue, and teeth. In men, behavior such as that exhibited by the seriously disaffected dude who wants to destroy credit card companies with his militia of cultish brawlers is not called hysterical but rather . . . hmm . . . let’s try homophobic. The love between Brad Pitt and his mirror is deeply romantic and erotic at every turn, replete with the computer geek’s jealousy for Pitt’s attention when Pitt is distracted by a girl, finalizing the Oedipal twist.

The Fight Club nostalgia stands in stark contrast to the story line of Tom Cruise’s character in *Magnolia* (Anderson 1999). In *Magnolia*, Cruise plays the latest pop star on the talk show circuit, representing the epitome of

masculinity in a distinct contemporary form. A cross between the Promise Keepers and the drum-beating, poetry-writing, Bly-esque mens' movement of returning to the lost and wounded self, Cruise's character is a stud that performs an over-the-top parody of this masculine nostalgia. The well-acted, outrageous extreme of self-aggrandizement satirizes masculinity in a way that engages every audience member's laughter, even, I would surmise, the staunchest feminist.

These two films not only suggest possible curriculum material that will engage students in analyses of popular representations of masculinity, they also function to place masculinity into visible relief, are extreme in their characterization of male gender roles, and, in the case of *Magnolia*, use satire and humor to allow a more inviting entrée into critical analyses of male dominance. Perhaps they may serve to seduce the privileged to consider relinquishing, or at least recognize, some of their unearned entitlement.

USING INDEPENDENT VIDEO TO UNDRRESS HETERONORMATIVITY AND MASCULINITY

Debra Chasnoff's (1997) documentary *It's Elementary* depicts numerous public school teachers from around the United States who teach about issues of lesbian and gay culture and identities and experience, teachers who actively teach antihomophobic curricula. Some of the featured teachers use a general topic such as "stereotypes" to get their second graders to talk about discrimination against particular groups. In another middle school, a teacher invites a young lesbian and a gay man to come and answer students' questions in a public forum. In another, a school principal allows the photographic exhibit "Love Makes a Family" to be shown in the school auditorium, much to some parents' dismay.

For those of us who teach about lesbian and gay inclusive curricula in education, this video is a classic and, indeed, one-of-a-kind. The positive responses to *It's Elementary* from some of my students are heartening. One student came to my office and reported how she went home to her husband after class and engaged him in a long discussion of how she now sees ways she can teach about these "controversial" issues under such generalized rubrics as "stereotypes." She is excited to find a way around the frequently feared necessity of sending home "parental permission slips" to receive consent for teaching about controversial issues. Instead, she sees a way to teach about "stereotypes" and thus tread lightly around the permission issue.

In general, students who are interested and willing to consider teaching a lesbian and gay inclusive curricula are excited by the concreteness of watching how teachers teach in *It's Elementary*. However, a vast majority of stu-

dents respond, "That's fine if you live in San Francisco, but it's not gonna' happen here!" Countless numbers of my students view *It's Elementary* and immediately focus on the fact that every public school depicted in the film is in a much more liberal part of the country (Amherst, Massachusetts; San Francisco, and New York). These students may appreciate the depiction but feel that such curricula are simply out of the question in rural Virginia.

Students' resistance to lesbian and gay-inclusive curricula appears *prima facie* to be about the explicitly policed climate of the schools. To understand this resistance, I argue, requires examination of the extent to which homophobia is related to misogyny and related quite specifically to fear of any expression of feminine behavior in men. Two other documentary videos explicitly raise issues of masculinity as it relates to race and racism: *Tongues Untied* (Riggs 1989) and *The Color of Fear* (Mun Wah 1994).

One of my students offers the following nice summary of the aesthetic structure of *Tongues Untied*: "Marlon Riggs documentary-style film *Tongues Untied* examines contemporary lifestyles of gay black males. The film is part testimonial, part spoken word/poetry, and part interview. The film is unconventional and nonlinear, but it is held together by the beauty of the poetry and spoken word pieces that lace together the different parts to form a holistic view of gay black life." Her summary reflects an aspect of Riggs's powerful social documentary, which profoundly affects many of the viewers. The use of poetry, which ranges from the work of Essex Hemphill to mantras in Riggs's own voice, conveys the inner conflicts, the humor, and the vulnerability of black gay men.

I have been using *Tongues Untied* in classrooms for nearly a decade, and I still consider it possibly the most powerfully crafted and evocative independent documentary produced in the last two decades. The spoken rhythms, the rhythm of juxtapositions, the pacing, the combination of humor, the sequencing of quite different scenes depicting black gay experience make for a musical and lasting impression. It opens with the unforgettable chanting of "brother to brother/brother to brother" (try saying that one fast ten times). Riggs manages to convey the particular anguish faced by black gay men in several powerful ways. One of my students picks up on this thread: "One [intersection of racism and homophobia] is when the young men are asked to choose between their blackness and their homosexuality. This is not possible. As the poet says in the video, 'choose between your left or right nut.' This . . . is a mindless question. One cannot choose between two parts of themselves."

Tongues Untied foregrounds the ways in which black masculinities are constructed through contradictory cultural intersections. Caught between warring tensions of allegiance to the "black community" (depicted in Riggs's coming-of-age story and learning that his forays with other young boys his age warranted him being called "punk/faggot/homo"), religious values (depicted by the voice of the black preacher quoting from the Bible, mouth-

ing “Sinner!”), and racism (detailed in the story of Riggs’s being the victim of a gay bashing and having a white man come to his rescue, an event to which he attributes his “immersion in vanilla,” his taste for “snow”—for white male lovers). The effect of this racism is foregrounded again when Riggs critiques gay porn for its hypereroticization and objectification of black men. Then, in a very poignant scene, Riggs shows himself walking down Castro Street in San Francisco and passing another black gay man, the two of them unable to look one another in the eye. “What are we afraid to see? One another’s hurt and pain?”

I asked students to respond to the significance of the final refrain of the video: “Black men loving black men is THE revolutionary act.” As one student emphasizes, Riggs is pointing out the “taboo” of this love of one black man for another. “We are worth wanting each other,” Riggs reiterates.

Finally, I want to comment very briefly on the “nonhegemonic” representations of masculinity in the video *The Color of Fear* (Mun Wah 1994). This video documents a group of men who, during a facilitated weekend retreat, confront issues of racism through an ongoing dialogue between men of Anglo, Asian, Black, and Hispanic descent. The film has some very heated moments—in particular, one in which an exceptionally articulate man named Victor confronts one of the white men’s ignorance and white-privileged denial of racism. I have found this film an effective pedagogical tool when used later in a semester after setting groundwork for students to understand “internalized racism” and how “structural oppression” functions.

However, the relevance of the video here has to do with its portrait of masculinity. I will never forget one semester, when two male students were profoundly affected by witnessing men embracing at the end of the film (at the end of the weekend retreat, the men embrace and hug one another in what is a very emotional goodbye). The young men in my class—who had, up until this point, not engaged in any critical discussion about issues of gender—now shared publicly that they were very moved by this simple embrace between men, and they shared that they had never seen or experienced such intimacy between (heterosexual) men.

A second interesting aspect of the masculinity represented in *The Color of Fear* is that the effectiveness of this portrait of men emotionally expressing their experience of racism contradicts the hegemonic depiction of men as nonemotional. I find it fascinating to think that were *The Color of Fear* depicting women’s confrontation of one another’s racism in emotional scenes, the film might have much less of an effect. It is precisely the vulnerability and emotional expressivity of the men in this video that conveys the powerful messages about how racism is internalized.

MISOGYNY AS THE ROOT OF HOMOPHOBIA

As I reflect upon my three years of teaching in these viewless classrooms in the Bible Belt, I am struck by what may be a coincidence—that it is almost only men who have the nerve? the courage? the gall? to express their repulsion toward homosexuality. I find myself wanting to theorize a connection between late-postmodern crises of masculinity and homophobia.

Richard Friend (1987) states that homophobia is a direct result of patriarchy and misogyny. The notion of using a “gender-violating exit from masculinity” (Connell 1995, 222) is not new. In the early 1970s, the “necessary effeminacy of gay men, and the repressed femininity of straight men” were upheld by some as a “‘transsexual’ strategy for liberation” (p. 222) But as Connell (1995) and others show, for heterosexual men to adopt gender-violating roles is to adopt a sexual identity—not simply a political one. In other words, Western cultures are so deeply homophobic that any effeminate expression in men codes them as “gay.” This is powerfully illustrated in *Ma Vie en Rose*, in which the cross-dressing six-year-old boy comes out into his parent’s garden party in female drag. The shame suffered by the family is not the effeminacy per se, but the correlative assumption that the little boy is homosexual.

To recognize patriarchy as the root and source of homophobia doesn’t always feel like a satisfying explanation for the virulence of male-dominated homophobia expressed by those socialized as “men” in the United States as well as the world over. As scholars have well documented, male homosexuality is often a more visible and frequent target of public homophobia, such as sodomy laws. It is also well documented that gay bashing and violence perpetrated against lesbians and gay men occurs almost exclusively at the hands of men, not women.

In a women’s studies course, we recently discussed the ways in which misogyny is reflected in the contradictory masculinist fears that shape what is acceptable sexual expression in pornography. One of the questions asked was “Why is lesbian pornography found titillating to men while gay male pornography is totally unacceptable?” This question highlights the power of the male gaze; pornography is designed for the pleasure of the male looker. Women having sex with other women is, in most Western cultures—when safely framed within photographs or film—titillating rather than threatening to masculinity. Of course, as my class then discussed, “butch” women are not the women represented in patriarchally produced lesbian porn. The laughter in my class when students even imagined two butch women as possibly titillating to a male viewer reveals the cultural impossibility of the construction.

Patriarchy is founded in part on misogyny; homophobia is inextricably linked to patriarchal fear of any expression of effeminacy in men. This hatred

of effeminacy is intimately bound with patriarchal devaluation of anything feminine. It becomes nearly impossible to divorce the extent to which the repudiation of representations of gay male sexuality—at least as a source of titillation to heterosexual men—is about hatred of effeminacy.

CONCLUSION: WHO ARE WE TRYING TO SEDUCE?

We've all known for a long time that to commence a course about "feminism" can tend to put the boys off, contrary to the optimistic hope expressed in an essay that states, "cannot feminism itself provide sites of productive disidentification . . . that dislodge the categories of 'men' and 'women?'" (Carr 2000, 327). Despite my most gracious attempts to invite men (and women) down the feminist path, we need alternative seductive strategies. The pedagogical strategy suggested here avoids the demise of masculine seduction, which occurs through appeals to feminism, and instead offers up bruised masculinity on a platter of popular culture. Yes, we see you men are wounded. Yes, you too are alienated. This is what I will say next fall when I encounter the next young man who informs me, "I wonder if these authors who say they are gay or support alternative lifestyles are religious and ever read the Bible, I Corinthians 6:9-10, which says, 'Neither the sexually immoral . . . nor homosexual offender . . . will inherit the kingdom of God.'" Fortunately, I have no desire to inherit this particular kingdom, so I suppose I have nothing to lose. It makes the desire to seduce the righteous all the more attractive. Can I win the virulent over to a position that sees beyond tolerance? I'll try Cruise and Pitt as my trench work in the Bible Belt.

NOTE

1. "Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige, and the right to command. They also gain a material dividend. In the rich capitalist countries, men's average incomes are approximately double women's average incomes (the more familiar comparisons, of wage rates for full-time employment, greatly understate gender differences in actual incomes)" (Connell 1995, 82). This one statistic represents but a small sampling of the forms of material and social privilege granted men in industrialized countries.

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