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SEXISM, HOMOPHOBIA AND THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY: A GAY MALE PERSPECTIVE ON WHY SEX EQUALITY MATTERS

By CHRISTOPHER N KENDALL

Introduction: When Did Sexualising Hierarchy Become Our Path to Liberation?

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MARINES ($39.95): Marines are the macho men with the most of everything important. Watch with eager anticipation as they stroke their weapons into a shooting frenzy. Are you man enough for the marines?

DON'T KISS ME ($42.95): Body builders, gymnasiums, sweat, muscle, showers, sex. The bodies and meat are hard. Give my muscle a good work out. Can you remember the first time? I can, but don’t kiss me. I’m straight.1

Something has gone terribly wrong with gay male liberation. The notion of empowerment, of encouraging a self confidence that ultimately leads to the public expression of dissent and the rejection of those values that daily result in all that is anti-gay, has been replaced with a selfish, misguided commitment to male dominance and the right to overpower. Equality, in the form of compassion, mutual trust, and respect, has been abandoned for a community ethic and identity politic that encourages and promotes the very essence of inequality: hyper-masculinity and the harms which arise from a system in which gender is polarized such that “male” equals top, equals power.

For gay men who have always been ridiculed and abused for their perceived failure to achieve the hyper-masculine ideal, the power offered from conformity, while initially appealing, is both a facade and politically myopic. The result is a gay male liberation committed to hierarchy and the inequality, including gay male inequality, that results from heterosexual male dominance and the power that sustains it -- a movement committed more to the idea of being “men”, socially defined, than to challenging those character traits and enforced gender stereotypes that have always

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been the source of our inequality and which will continue to result in the suppression of any discourse which strives to validate our right to be gay.

Gay men need to re-evaluate what being gay means, why being gay is deemed socially unacceptable and how we, as a community, respond to systemic stigmatization and hate. More importantly, however, we need to re-examine what we are saying to each other about appropriate gay male behaviour. We need to determine if the model of behaviour we are advocating is a positive and effective challenge to homophobia and systemic inequality or simply another medium through which to sustain male gender privilege and the harms that result from gender hierarchies.

In this paper, I aim to argue that the gay male community’s present obsession with physical and psychological masculinity, to obtaining and benefiting from male power and privilege, represents a commitment which only supports those who seek to render gay men socially and politically invisible. Commencing with an analysis of gay male pornography,2 I will argue that the message conveyed in it, a message now readily defended by gay male activists and academics alike as liberationary and progressive, pervades all aspects of gay male culture such that we now find ourselves promoting a model of behaviour more concerned with self-gratification and the right to dominate and control than with self-respect and respect for others. This adherence to power in the form of hyper-masculinity simply reinforces those models of behaviour that are the source of heterosexual male privilege and the homophobic rejection of any public expression which challenges it.

This paper will argue that what is needed on the part of all gay men is a definition of gay male sexuality and identity that is radically subversive -- one in which erotic empowerment is linked to companionship, trust and partnership. What is needed is an identity that rejects assimilation, masculine mimicry and the notion that power over someone is sexy -- one which instead finds strength in compassion, self respect and respect for others. What is needed is the gay male rejection of a community and culture that has bought into the myth of male entitlement and which continues to valorise and eroticise sexist and homophobic power relations. What is needed is a community and identity which encourages justice-doing and which is based on mutual trust and the type of pleasure which can only be found in relationships built on equality -- in other words, a community which embraces sex equality and which turns its back on the homophobia and sexism that presently permeates our sexual and social practices.

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2 This paper focuses on arguments advanced by gay men and those who claim to represent their interests. It only discusses the harms resulting from the production and distribution of gay male pornography. It does not discuss what is referred to as lesbian pornography. Although I am not convinced that many of the harms of inequality that result from gay male pornography do not also arise within the context of lesbian pornography, this issue will not be addressed here. See generally, however, Sheila Jeffreys, “Eroticizing Women’s Subordination,” in Dorchen Leidhold & Janice Raymond eds, The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); Irene Reti, Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties (Santa Cruz: Her Books, 1993).
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Why Sex Equality?

One might have hoped, given the amount of political effort expended by feminist women on behalf of gay men, before and after the onslaught of AIDS, that the gay male community might join in and participate in the feminist struggle for sex equality. Unfortunately, quite the opposite has occurred. Confident that gay male liberation is just that -- gay male and gay male alone -- many gay men have severed the ties with early and present feminist commitments to social justice and have instead embraced a "men only" ideology far removed from the fight for sex equality. They have developed and now promote a movement which they believe promotes social justice but which actually goes a long way in ensuring that sexual and systemic equality will never be achieved.

I suppose the question for many gay men is so what? That is, why sex equality if the real issue is homophobia? Admittedly, the fact that our present obsession with being "male" typifies all that is sexist, discriminatory and selfish should be reason enough for rejecting it. Unfortunately, given the incredible reluctance on the part of many gay men to look outside their own community, I remain sceptical that the reality of other disenfranchised persons and our role in creating this reality will prove sufficient as a means of convincing these men that they need to radically re-think their attitudes and behaviours. Instead, sadly, what is needed is a rather blunt analysis of the meaning of homophobia for gay males and society at large -- what it does, who it benefits and why. More importantly, however, what is needed is a timely reminder about the relationship between homophobia and sex discrimination and the need to

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3 See generally, Becki L Ross, The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

Sheila Jeffreys expresses similar frustration when she writes:
The feminist challenge to the prostitution model of sexuality has been especially resisted by many gay men . . . . In gay male culture we see the phenomenon of a sexuality of self-mutilation and slavery, of tattooing, piercing, and sadomasochism, turned into the very symbol of what gayness is. Commercial gay interests have invested powerfully in exploiting this sexuality of oppression as constitutive of gayness. . . . The cultural influence of gay male resistance to feminist challenges to pornography and prostitution has been extensive, heavily financed in gay media by advertising from the gay male sex industry. . . . Gay men, raised in male supremacy, taught to worship masculinity, also have to struggle to overcome their eroticization of dominant/submissive hierarchies if they are to become friends of feminism.

attack both simultaneously. This is vital for I remain convinced that until gay males fully understand that sexism and homophobia are inextricably linked, they will not understand that their present drive towards manhood is also of necessity anti-woman and as such, very much the source of all that is anti gay.

To reap the benefits awarded those who are “men” means to accept, indeed worship, masculinity -- ie, a socially constructed set of behaviours, ideas and values which ultimately define who belongs to that gender class and which dictates who gets and maintains the power commensurate with male gender privilege. To benefit from male privilege also requires that one support compulsory heterosexuality -- an ideology and a political institution which embodies those socially defined sets of behaviours and characteristics that ensure heterosexual male dominance generally and resultant gender inequality. The hostility directed at gay males finds its source in a male power structure directed at preserving compulsory heterosexuality. The notion that relationships, monogamous or otherwise, can function without gender inequality, without male power expressed over and in control of a female subordinate, sends a rather disturbing message to those for whom male power and the gender inequality that results from it is so very important. As “Act-Up” member Robert Goss notes:

[gl]ay and lesbian sexual identities form a counter-practice that deconstructs the rigid definition of masculinity and femininity and social constructions based on these definitions. They transgress many dualistic strategies that support heterosexist sexual identities. . . . Gay and lesbian power arrangements [thus] challenge the unequal production and distribution of heterosocial power in our society.

On gender differences as a social construct defined by specific behaviours which ultimately result in the gender categories “male” and “female,” rather than something which is determined biologically, Catharine A MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1987). As MacKinnon explains, “gender is an inequality, a social and political concept, a social status based on who is permitted to do what to whom. Male is a social and political concept, not a biological attribute, having nothing whatever to do with inheritance, pre-existence, nature, essence, inevitability, or body as such.” Catharine A MacKinnon, *Toward A Feminist Theory of the State* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1989) at 114. It is this social definition of male and female, with defining and rigidly enforced characteristics for each, which ultimately results in gender inequality.


Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 1-26. As Marc Fajer notes, this notion that relationships need not be constructed upon hierarchical gender roles can be quite socially subversive:

[gl]ay couples, operating without gender-based definitions of their proper roles during marriage, often create new roles for themselves based on sharing and equality, rather than on gender stereotypes. Thus, many gay relationships operate on a more equal basis than most heterosexual marriages and might well serve as a model of equality for marriage. . . . The rejection of gender based roles in relationships is part of a greater challenge to gender norms implicit in openly gay lives; the strict dichotomy between male and female.

Marc A. Fajer, “Can Two Men Eat Quiche Together? Storytelling, Gender Role Stereotypes and Legal protection for Lesbians and Gay Men” (1992) 46 U. Miami L. Rev. 511. To this I would only add/clarify that gay male power relations have the potential to challenge the patriarchal definitions of “male” and “female” through which those who subscribe to compulsory heterosexuality find privilege, not that present gay male power relations do indeed
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Gay males, to the extent that they choose to build same-sex relationships based on mutuality and respect, relationships which reject hierarchical gender roles and the power relationships that result from gender polarization, are seen as a threat to male supremacy because they challenge the social constructions assigned to the definitions "male" and "female". In a world built on sexual hierarchy, nothing is more threatening to those who benefit from it than the notion that there can be love and justice between equals, that inequality need not be. Homophobia -- which is a reaction to the actual or perceived violation of gender norms -- is aimed at silencing gay men because the public expression of their sexuality is seen as undermining male dominance, for which gender inequality is necessary. Its effect is to ensure that men do not violate those gender roles central to male power and that gay men are stereotyped and ultimately suppressed to the extent that they do so. For gay men, this results socially in silence, for fear of being identified, and results in invisibility. And that is exactly what homophobia is about: ensuring that gay men, to the extent that they do not conform, to the extent that they do not partake in a system of sex inequality, are brutally suppressed and ultimately rendered invisible.8

It is this last point upon which the remainder of this paper will focus, for this is exactly what gay male pornography and the community built around its value system is about -- promoting conformity through masculine mimicry, a system that upon examination can be seen to ensure all that is pro-male dominance, hence anti-woman and of necessity anti-gay. It is my belief that gay male pornography is at a very basic level homophobic,9 having at its core the idea that power can only be found via hyper-masculinity and that those who fail to adopt that power are disempowered and ultimately stripped of male privilege. Homophobia works to maintain gender roles because it silences those whose sexual identity and behaviour, it is believed, will bring down the entire system of male dominance. Gay male pornography works to maintain gender roles by encouraging gay males to adopt an identity that valorizes male

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8 See generally, Suzanne Pharr, Homophobia: a Weapon of Sexism (Little Rock: Chardon Press, 1988). Pharr argues (at 19) that: [g]ay men are perceived also as a threat to male dominance and control, and the homophobia expressed against them has the same roots in sexism as does homophobia against lesbians. Visible gay men are the objects of extreme hatred and fear by heterosexual men because their breaking ranks with male heterosexual solidarity is seen as a damaging rent in the very fabric of sexism. They are seen as traitors, as traitors who must be punished and eliminated... When gay men break ranks with male roles through bonding and affection outside the arenas of war and sports, they are perceived as not being "real men", that is, as being identified with women, the weaker sex that must be dominated and that over the centuries has been the object of male hatred and abuse.

dominance and by stating unequivocally that those who do not, have no value, no power. It is thus homophobic and, as such, is also a form of sex discrimination, Ensure that those models of sexual behaviour which might undermine sex inequality are suppressed and that women and those men who do fail to conform remain unequal.

By supporting a medium which is homophobic, gay men ensure their own oppression by guaranteeing that sex inequality remains intact, for without sex discrimination, without the need for a compulsory heterosexuality through which sex inequality is maintained, society would not need homophobia -- one of the means through which sex discrimination is preserved. By rejecting pornography as identity, by rejecting a model of identity replete with homophobic deployments of gendered and genderizing power relations, gay men would reject that means of maintaining sex inequality. In so doing, they would further erode homophobia as an oppressive system of sexual regulation. By failing to do so, gay men commit to a male, heterosexist power structure central to their own oppression and the oppression of all women -- a commitment which, in addition to being all too typically sexist, is politically shortsighted given the extent to which sexism and homophobia are intimately connected. This is made even more apparent once we examine what gay male pornography is and what it says about the meaning of “gay male” and the community through which gay men aim to find support, confidence and empowerment.

Gay Porn’s Muscle: Power Without Consent, Mimicry Without Subversion

It’s important to understand that I’d always been on top. That I’d always gotten what I wanted. That I’d never been fucked, never taken the submissive position once. It just wasn’t in me. I had to be in control, I had to be the one making the decisions. That spilled over into all aspects of my life, and I saw myself as keeper and guardian of everyone around me, especially my friends and family.

From “Isle of Bondage”, Manscape Magazine

Nowhere is the definition and meaning of gay manhood more evident than in the now widely produced, distributed and consumed reality of gay male pornography. Defended as free speech, promoted as the source of all that is liberation and

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11 As Pharr (supra, note 8 at 8) explains, homophobia is central to preserving sexism and ultimately patriarchy: Patriarchy -- an enforced belief in male dominance and control -- is the ideology and sexism the system that holds it in place. The catechism goes like this: who do gender roles serve? Men and the women that seek power from them. Who suffers from gender roles? Women mostly and men in part. How are gender roles maintained? By the weapons of sexism: economics, violence and homophobia.


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justified as self-affirming. Gay male pornography has been effectively marketed as radical and anti-establishment.

As a gay male, too often silenced for challenging the idea that heterosexuality must be compulsory, I am acutely aware of the need for free speech. As a gay male, raised in a society in which same-sex sexuality, my sexuality, remains taboo and not discussed, I am also aware of the need for positive images of that/my sexuality. As a gay male now educating students about gay rights and the need for gay liberation, I am also aware of the need for effective education and the need for communities of support. To me as a gay male, free speech, liberation and self-affirmation mean a great deal. What I would like to know, however, is what exactly pornography has to do with my right to be free from homophobic attack, my right to express dissent and my right to develop a gay male identity free from socially encouraged self-loathing and self-hate.

Gay male pornography offers the male who uses it two choices. It tells him that he can either be the straight/dominant “man” society has told him he has never been or he can be the feminized/subordinate “other” used by that “man”. In so doing, it invites him to participate in a sexual dynamic premised on hierarchy, the polar opposite of all that is equality. With titles like “Fuck Me Like a Bitch”, “I Was a Substitute Vagina”, “Beat Me Till I Come”, “Muscle Beach” “Slaves to the SS” and “Stud Daddy”, gay male pornography sends a very clear message about what the gay male is or should be today: young, muscular, “good looking”, preferably white, definitely able-bodied. In all of these materials, it is the physically more powerful, more dominant, ostensibly straight male who is idealized. Racial difference is a factor but only to the extent that racial stereotypes are sexualized and perpetuated and this too contributes to a sexuality that is rarely, if ever, mutual, based on compassion or equality-based. What one gets from gay porn then is a sexuality that epitomizes inequality: exploitation and degradation of others, assertiveness linked with aggression, physical power linked with intimidation and non-consensual behaviour advanced and sexually promoted as liberating -- in sum an identity politic

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16 See Christopher Kendall, “Real Dominant, Real Fun?” supra note 9 at 31.

which encourages/is all that is "top" and masculine and which rejects all that which is non-masculine, feminised, hence gender "female". The result is a sexualized identity politic which relies on the inequality found between those with power and those without it, between those who are dominant and those who are submissive, between those who are top and those who are bottom, between men and gay men, between men and women -- a politic which is the very essence of homophobia and sexism.

By referring to the presentation of gay men as "feminised" and therefore "female," I am not suggesting that gay men and women are equally oppressed. As Andrea Dworkin explains, "devalued males can always change status; women and girls cannot."18 What I am saying, however, is that to the extent that some gay men reject socially defined "male" behaviour, and express a sexuality and politic which has the potential to subvert male gender supremacy, their behaviour is deemed unacceptable and is devalued as such. The gay male who does so is, as John Stoltenberg explains, "stigmatized because he is perceived to participate in the degraded status of the female."19 Once "smeared with female status" the gay male assumes a position inferior to those who, not feminised, reap the benefits of male/female polarity.20 Feminised men thus assume an inferior position in a gendered power hierarchy.

Gay male pornography tells gay men that in order to become more valued, they must become more "male," less "female". It encourages them to do what they can do: "change status". Note, for example, the all too typical quotation below, taken from an article in Manscape Magazine. It reminds the reader that to be "male" is to be empowered, but that to be male requires conformity to a clearly defined gender norm -- a gender role according to which some are entitled to sexually abuse and control, while others, because they are descriptively less "male," are socially less relevant, less equal, and not entitled to the respect, compassion, and human dignity that only true equality can provide:

I pushed him lower so my big dick was against his chest; I pushed his meaty pees together. They wrapped around my dick perfectly as I started tit-fucking him like a chick. His hard, humpy pees gripped my meat like a vice. Of all the things I did to him that night I think he hated that the most. It made him feel like a girl. I sighed, "Oh, my bitch got such pretty titties! They was made for tittie fuckin, made to serve a man’s dick."21

This quotation is neither extreme nor atypical. As in all written or pictorial gay male pornographic presentations,22 the physically more powerful, ostensibly straight male is

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20 Id. at 251.
22 I am not stating that the type of harm arising from pictorial presentations is the same as that which arises from purely written or descriptive pornography. On the contrary, pornography
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glorified. In sum, its message reinforces a system in which, as MacKinnon explains, “a victim, usually female, always feminised” is actualized.23 The result is the promotion and maintenance of those gendered power inequalities which reject a non-assimilated gay male sexuality and which ensure that homophobia and sexism remain intact.

It has been argued that any perceived inequality evident in gay male pornography is immediately rendered non-harmful, indeed subversive, because in it, unlike in heterosexual pornography, women are not sexually exploited. Men thus assume the submissive role normally afforded women and the whole idea of male dominance is thus questioned because it becomes evident that men too can be dominated.24 This argument is not sustainable.

Power is not dependent on the biological capabilities of those who exert it. Straight pornography is harmful not simply because it presents a biological male violating a biological female, but because of the model of behaviour offered the biological male and presented/sexualized as normal, gendered male behaviour. The mere absence of biological “opposites” does very little to undermine the very real harms resulting from materials in which “male” equals masculine, equals dominant, equals preferable.25 The fact that a biological male can also be bottom is in many ways irrelevant if in order to be that bottom, he is required to assume those characteristics which ensure that those who are “men”, socially defined, remain on top and are worshipped as such. The coupling of two biological males does nothing to undermine sexual and social power hierarchies divided along gender lines if those behaviours central to the preservation of gender hierarchy (cruelty, violence, aggression, homophobia, sexism, racism and ultimately compulsory heterosexuality through which heterosexual male dominance is preserved) are not themselves removed from the presentation of sexuality as power based. Because gay male pornography reinforces gender stereotypes and the inequalities inherent in them, it reinforces those characteristics and behaviours which ensure that heterosexuality remains the norm and is compulsory because it does little to advance a model of gay identity that subverts those socially prescribed gender roles through which heterosexual male privilege is maintained.

The argument has also been made that the harms of gendered power inequalities evident in straight porn are undermined in gay porn because the men in gay porn and gay men generally have the “option” of participating in a role reversal not normally afforded women -- that is, they can “take turns” being top and bottom,

23 MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, supra. note 5 at 141.
24 See, eg, Carl Stychin, supra. note 14 at 878.
thus further challenging the idea that gender roles are fixed or immutable and thereby questioning the assumption that men must always be on top.26

What arguments of this sort overlook is the fact that although roles can be reversed, there are still clearly defined roles—roles which support a “which of you does what to whom” mentality. There is always a top and there is always a bottom, carefully articulated so as to differentiate between those with and those without power. What proponents of gay porn are really advocating is that we participate in a rather bizarre form of mutuality based on reciprocal abuse. In other words, we are expected to find strength in and be empowered by a model of equality which liberates by stressing that while I might at one level be expected to assume the status of a weak, submissive, subservient “bottom” at the hands of a descriptively more masculine “top”, any resulting disempowerment is rendered non-harmful because I also have the option of becoming that top if I so desire. Frankly, I desire neither. I neither want to control or be controlled. I neither want to dehumanize or be dehumanized. I neither want to overpower or be overpowered. What I want is real equality, something not offered in gay male pornography. For what this focus on role reversal as a means of undermining gender inequality overlooks is the fact that the pleasure to be found in gay porn remains very much the pleasure derived from being controlling and dominant. Hierarchy remains central to the act and while there is “mutuality”, it is only to be found in the form of shared degradation and sexualized inequality.

Admittedly, some will argue that they find validation in the pornographic representation of dominance and submission because it reaffirms that they can be sexually penetrated and should not feel ashamed of the pleasure found in anal intercourse.27 In other words, while there is strength to be found in power-over,28 there is also affirmation in power-under. I would probably be more willing to accept this argument if the pleasure promised did not require that the person penetrated (in the context of all pornography, dominated) assume the status of someone being punished for their failure or inability to be a gendered equal. To those men who find validation in the pornographic sexualization of submission, I want to ask what it means for their liberation and mine that power is found only in the ability to emulate those sexual/social behaviours that, once accepted,


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In male homosexual sex, gay men wield “power” over other men (instead of women) at the same time as they allow themselves to be rendered “powerless” by men (like women are supposed to be in the orthodox world of sexuality). The gender power system breaks down in homosexual sex. Gay men embody both masculine and feminine traits, thereby disproving the constructed quality of absolute gender and gender roles. Orthodox sexuality’s untruths are made visible, and when this occurs, new truths can be constructed and substituted.


28 Mathew Fox, A Spirituality Named Compassion (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1979) at 63-66.
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ensure that sexual power is afforded only to those who reject equality and who in so doing reinforce the very foundations of compulsory heterosexuality and the harm, including homophobic harm, that results from it?

The “pleasure” which pro-porn advocates argue is found in role reversal is a pleasure which relies on sexualized hierarchy. It is a pleasure defined by power and by those who already have it. While some might find pleasure from being dominated, from being verbally and physically abused and ridiculed (and again one must ask why), it is worth noting that not all of us are quite so eager to participate in any process of shared dehumanization. By promoting its distribution, by defending/justifying its message, however, and by masking the abuse presented as an issue of consent or free will, gay men do little to offer protection to those of us for whom this deemed consent is anything but consensual.

I also query whether the pleasure allegedly found in being the bottom to a masculine top and the ability/willingness to take turns being that bottom (the pornographers’ corrupted version of reciprocity) is in fact as readily promoted in gay porn as advocates would have us believe. For while we all acknowledge that there is always a bottom in gay porn, it is I think probably also widely accepted that the real power promised by gay porn, the real focus of all that is deemed to be sexually stimulating, is found in the hands of those who are presented on top and who, as such, assume the status of real men. And while this top might assume the role of a submissive bottom, the fact remains that when he does so, he becomes descriptively less relevant, less powerful. He is stripped of the male power derived from eroticized masculinity and instead assumes the role of someone whose gay manhood is lessened. Hence, while gay men have the option of being both top and bottom, the fact remains that there is always a top and he is very much the focus and idealized masculine norm. As that top, he alone is given liberty to refer to those beneath him as “girlie”, “whores”, “bitches”, “sluts” -- read “female” socially defined. In essence, because he is overtly masculinized, he ensures that those beneath him are in turn feminized. Because gay male porn focuses on the party who ultimately penetrates, and because in gay male porn the characteristics of the more aggressive, more masculine, more male penetrator are always valorised, this offers much support to the argument that in order to “fuck” you need to be superior and that in order to be “fucked” you need to be sexually accessible and socially inferior.

Some have argued that, gender inequality (that “feminist issue”) aside, gay male pornography is necessary as a mechanism for the dissemination of safe-sex education. Again, I remain unconvinced. To begin with, most gay male pornography today fails to deliver a safe sex message. The condom is neither seen nor discussed.

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As Mark Simpson explains within the context of gay male porn “star” Jeff Stryker:

...the portrayal of anal sex seems to have become even more constructed as “the desire to the goal of visual climax” -- the desire that is, of the fucker, who in the person of Jeff Stryker is one who never experiences the pleasure of anal sex in any other position except that of the fucker. In other words, Stryker’s screen persona in gay videoporn seems to deny his own anality and just endorses the pleasure a “stud” can get in plugging any hole.

In addition, however, in discussing safe-sex it is very difficult to put the issue of gender inequality aside. Safe sex within the context of sex between unequals is also very much a feminist issue. What one sees in gay porn is a sexual model that copies the power inequalities present in straight sex -- sex through which (male) power is gained by controlling/dominating those you fuck; power which “is predetermined by gender, by being male.” Gay sex today attempts to look (and does so quite successfully) a lot like the sex that straight men have. Socially, the act of penetration, of fucking, determines who controls whom and who, as a result, gets male power. All pornography focuses on the right of the masculine top to penetrate the disempowered bottom, be they a woman or a less aggressive male who as such is socially feminized and rendered socially less significant. It is not surprising, therefore, that gay porn continues to present unprotected penetrative sex -- ie penetration in which the condom is neither used or, for the purposes of pornographic sale, carefully concealed. Because AIDS is still viewed as a gay disease, safe-sex has come to be regarded by society at large as gay-sex. For gay men desperate to be real men, rejecting safe sex thus allows them (or so they believe) to become less gay, more masculine, more like the straight men they are told they should be -- the real identity sold in gay male porn and one which, once accepted, has particularly horrific results.

Given what the sex in gay porn has come to represent, it is clear that in many ways safe sex stands to emasculate the pornographic symbol. For safe sex to work, one needs to accept that both parties have rights -- the right to protection and more importantly, the right to a recognized human existence. In a sense, safe sex represents a form of negotiation imposing limits on sexual conduct -- negotiation between relatively equal parties. More importantly, however, it recognizes that there are limits on what you can do without the consent of the other. Given then that gay porn presents a sexuality in which men do not need consent and safe-sex undermines the apparent right of men to do as they please, it is not surprising that any “appliance” which imposes a limit on this right, is not promoted. In straight sex, women are made responsible for protecting themselves physically with contraceptive techniques and devices which often cause irreparable harm and sometimes death. In straight sex men are deemed to have no responsibility whatsoever for the safety and comfort of their partners. Similarly, in gay porn, real men do as they please while fags simply hope for

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30 Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987). As Dworkin explains (at 125): intercourse occurs in a context of power relation that is pervasive and incontrovertable. The context in which the act takes place...is one in which men have social, economic, political and physical power over women. Some men do not have all those kinds of power over all women; but all men have some kinds of power over all women; and most men have controlling power over what they call their women -- the women they fuck.


32 A point brilliantly articulated by Mark Simpson (supra. note 29 at 136) who notes that condoms “remind the viewer not just of AIDS -- the gay plague -- but also safer sex, something invented by gay men and now something of a credo, a sign of belonging, in the gay community.”
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Like heterosexual pornography, gay male pornography thus glorifies those in our society who have always had power and who have always benefited from dominance and social inequality -- white, able-bodied, straight men. It tells gay men that they can choose between an identity which requires that they remain that which society has told them they already are (ie weak, feminized) or one which requires that they become that which society has told them they are not (ie masculinity linked with aggression) -- an “option” which does nothing to undermine the very power dynamics which result in the often violent rejection of any gay male expression not supportive of heterosexual male power.

Pornography as Community: The Meaning of Invisibility

Sydney: Slave looking for businessman/lawyer with speedos. I will obey your every command. Me: 32 (look much younger), average looks, solid. Bottom only, into hot oral and big equipment, receiving dildos and into fist-fucking. Ready to meet heavy, strict, cruel, use anyway you want master. Punish, torture if it pleases. I’m yours for the taking. Box 13234. 

Classified Advertisement, Campaign Magazine.35

“It’s like a fraternity and the initiation is working out.”

“Dom”, self-described muscle boy.34

Pornography does not end on the page or on the screen. In addition to the very real harms caused to the young men used to produce it, gay male pornography has a much larger systemic effect and one which is now more apparent than ever before -- ie, a gay male culture and community obsessed with manliness and a sexuality defined by power and the right to overpower. Whether it be within the confines of the gay bar, the gym, the bathhouses or cruising parks, or even on the street, gay male identity today is an identity concerned less with compassion and any commitment to others than with self-gratification and the satisfaction of knowing that gay men can also reap

35 Campaign, Sydney, July, 1993 at 83.
36 As quoted by Kevin Dickson in “Gay Tribes: Skinheads, Punks, Leather Men and Muscle Boys -- the many faces of the gay male of the ‘90s”, Campaign, Sydney, February, 1994 at 36.
37 Gay male pornography frequently places its “models” in scenarios which promote and hence are violence, cruelty, degradation, dehumanization and exploitation. While deemed merely representational, hence “fictional”, the “fantasy” offered in gay male pornography uses real people -- a factor most pro-porn advocates overlook. The men used in gay male pornography are frequently involved in it precisely because they are psychologically and financially at their most vulnerable (see generally, “I’m Ready For My Cum Shot Mr De Mille: Gay Porn is Hot, Dirty and Sometimes Sad” in Outrage, Sydney, August, 1995 at 12-15). As such, they are easily exploited by an industry driven by its ability to manipulate those least likely to possess real life choices. See also, Christopher Kendall, “Real Dominant, Real Fun”, supra. note 9 at 32-37.
the benefits afforded “real” men as long as they are willing and able to become real men. Gay men argue that they have redefined manhood by cloning their oppressors, such that it is now difficult to distinguish between straight and gay. This is not a redefinition. It is merely mimicry and assimilation leading to gay male invisibility. Gay men have excelled at becoming the men society has told them they should be. But it has not come without a price.

The gay male entering a gay bar or seeking physical, sexual contact in gay zones like the bathhouses, is confronted with a community quick to define his status, his role in that sexual “game” we call cruising. Cruising, objectifying others or waiting to be objectified, relies heavily on the role play and models of behaviour offered in gay pornography. Gay men in bars cease to be people. They are denied a human identity and are instead offered a predetermined sexual identity void of humanity. They (attempt to) become the chests, buttocks and bulging biceps meant to turn others on and if they fail to meet the sexual standard, they simply cease to exist. The result for many is a concerted effort to become the embodiment of physical perfection. They follow a recipe for success in which masculinity is the main ingredient and soon define and are defined according to what they think they are going to do to others or for others.

This need to “blend”, to be all that a community obsessed with manliness says a man should be, results in incredible self-loathing, low self-esteem and self-hate. The standard set is a standard that is not easily met and it is one that cannot easily be maintained. As Dr Richard Quinn, a Sydney-based, gay physician explains:

People can develop serious psychological problems from images presented to them, and images in porn videos contribute to this. So many gays feel they haven’t got anything to offer because they can’t live up to the expectations that are thrown at them on how they should look. They feel that because they don’t have that certain look that nobody wants them.36

For many gay men, gay men who have for too long been denied participation in a society quick to suppress their self-expression and individual development, the imagery the gay male community offers as identity also results in overwhelming despair and a sense of non-belonging. Should it surprise us then that this too, combined with the effects of homophobic rejection generally, has already taken its toll on our community and the community at large? The spectre of AIDS has shown us that we can care and we must care. We have not, however, carried this over into our sexual relationships and, perhaps ironically, this has only worsened the reality of AIDS in our community. Gay men assert that we are not to blame for AIDS. I agree. We cannot, however, state with the same certainty that we offer our youth any incentive to care about themselves, to look to the future and to recognize that their lives are worth preserving. We tell our youth that to be gay is live for the moment – to use it while you have it and to make sure that if you don’t have it you work hard to get it. Because we are encouraged to participate in a sexual game devoid of caring and compassion, both for ourselves and others, a game which focuses only on controlling

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or being controlled, we define our personal integrity through our sexual encounters -- by how often we get sex and with whom. For many, the power of sex, of finding approval and validation in the sexual act, of longing to be told that you still have what it takes, far outweighs any need for self-preservation. Believing that you have no right to question, that you should simply be happy that a real man wants you, and desperate for approval, self-respect and personal safety take a back seat, with often catastrophic results.37

Blade Thompson, an American porn “star” is quoted as stating that “people who have problems about their appearance or weight shouldn’t blame porn videos or magazines for their problems.”38 Really? If, as advocates assert, gay porn is for many males a sole sexual outlet, then why should it surprise us that for many, gay porn videos and magazines -- with their presentation of “pumped up blondes and smooth dark men with large penises” -- only compound already socially enforced feelings of poor self-image? Of course, the argument is made that gay men do not have to use gay porn. They can instead find validation elsewhere. Like in the bars perhaps? The bars which promote the same imagery and where they can again be reminded that they fail to meet the expectations of an image-conscious scene obsessed with muscle and beauty?39 If not, then where? Should they avoid being judged and sneered at by others and instead resort to that “sole outlet” of positive imagery where the only ones sneering and judging are themselves? The choices offered are far from appealing. Criticism, from others or self-inflicted, takes its toll. For many, it results in the silence found in disempowerment; empowerment being the very thing most needed by a minority community in search of justice. Aware that they cannot participate, they simply refuse to do so, thus limiting the public strength found in numbers; thus ensuring that the mass visibility needed to effect change never emerges.

And what of those who do “fit in”, who find the validation promised in assimilation through masculine mimicry, who become what our community and its models of masculine behaviour say they should be? Will they alone ensure gay male liberation? I think not. Mimicry only ensures that those who cannot or who choose not to conform -- and who, as a result, continue to threaten heterosexual male privilege -- become the victims of greater physical and emotional abuse and discrimination. Because they continue to challenge the normality of gender polarity -- a system in which, as Stoltenberg explains, real men are as different from real women as they can be and with real men’s superiority to women expressed in public and in

37 A 1993 report by the San Francisco Health Commission found that “almost 12% of 20 to 22 year old gay men surveyed were HIV positive, as were 4% of 17 to 19 year olds. If those figures are not quickly reversed, health officials say, the current generation of young urban gay men will have as high an infection rate by the time they reach their mid 30s as middle age gay men are thought to have today -- close to 50%.“(Chris Bull, “The Lost Generation; the Second Wave of HIV Infections Among Young Gay Men”, in the Advocate, Los Angeles, May, 1994 at 36).
38 As quoted in Will Harris, “Porn Again”, supra, note 36 at 50.
private in every way imaginable\textsuperscript{40} -- and in the process undermine male supremacy, these “non-conformists” will remain the objects of brutal suppression. This in turn reinforces the idea that gay men can either fail to conform to male standards and be the feminized other society has always told them they are (and thus be further abused) or they can copy them. Copying them, however, will not make their effect less harmful. Gay men who choose concealment through assimilation do little more than eroticise their own oppression -- making a fetish of that which ultimately muzzles them.\textsuperscript{41} The result is a politic which ensures that masculinity remains the only gender construct allowed to speak -- a politic that straight male culture has supported all along, resulting in gay male silence and heterosexual male superiority.

The desire to mimic manhood is, in a homophobic society, socially appealing. While no one should underestimate the power of homophobia and the extent to which it literally terrorises gay men into wanting to pass as real men, this construct must nonetheless be rejected. Becoming a man ensures only that the elimination of male gender dominance, necessary for gay male liberation, will be more difficult. For some, it will result in self-hate. For others, assimilation and the invisibility that results from it. In either case, the only “victors” are those most served by homophobia and sex discrimination -- those straight men for whom gay male invisibility and female subordination are a must.

**Conclusion: At What Price Manhood?**

Gay men stand to benefit from the efforts of all persons committed to sex equality. Theirs is an agenda we would do well to emulate. By defending gay male pornography, however, we only stand in its way. Indeed, to those who are gay, who defend gay male pornography, and who, in the process of doing so, are so quick to reject sex equality, I say only the following. Swept up in the rhetoric of those anxious to promote their right to speak as the ultimate and only right worth protecting, you have promoted “speech” at the expense of real equality -- your equality and the equality of those persons most in need of it. To defend gay pornography as speech and as a source of liberation is to forget that not all speech is equal and to deny that some speech is in fact the very source of that inequality. Gay porn is about speech but it is the speech of those who already have it and the right to silence commensurate with it.

Andrea Dworkin accurately notes that homosexuality is generally perceived as a failure to learn.\textsuperscript{42} Gay men today are “learning” but continue to read from the wrong book. They mimic but do not subvert. Gay rights has come to mean male dominant rights, the very essence of all that is anti-gay. Defined solely by the pornographic sexual exploitation of others, from whose presentation we are told to define our identity and community, we have now accepted and promote a model of identity which

\textsuperscript{40} John Stoltenberg, “You Can’t Fight Homophobia and Protect the Pornographers at the Same Time -- an Analysis of What West Wrong With Hardwick” in Leidholt and Raymond, eds. The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990).


\textsuperscript{42} Andrea Dworkin, Pornography: Men Possessing Women (New York: Plume Books, 1989) at 105.
is more concerned with the use and abuse of others found in the form of sexual hierarchy than with liberation from that hierarchy.

What I long for is a gay male sexuality which includes, and is, compassion, sensuality, tenderness, intimacy, inclusive love-making and the equality found only in a life-affirming reciprocity that does not depend on reciprocal harm. What has happened in the name of gay liberation is quite the opposite. Ultimately, gay men may find that they have at last achieved manhood and the power that comes with it. But at what price? Becoming a man, learning to be one, does nothing for gay male liberation. It ensures only that some of us become more heterosexually acceptable -- a liberation tactic devoid of strategy and which is neither radical nor empowering.