Searching for the Gay Masculinity

Searching for the gay masculinity may seem, on the surface, like a fruitless journey. Our society, through the use of ubiquitous stereotypes and attempts at humor, depicts the homosexual man as completely lacking masculine characteristics. R. W. Connell notes that our “[p]atriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity.” However, it is by searching for the possibility of gay masculinity that we will break down these gender stereotypes, allowing for an unbiased, more complete understanding of gender. In the attempt to find this supposedly ‘subordinate,’ gay masculinity, we must first explore the given definitions of masculinity. This task of defining masculinity can be quite difficult. On a basic level, masculinity is understood to be one part of a dualistic gender structure. However, even when we acknowledge masculinity as part of a larger gender structure, we still tend to view manhood as an eternal, timeless, and inherent component of every man’s identity. The majority of laypersons still see gender from this essentialist viewpoint, that is, that the qualities of gender are innately given. However, there has been much theory that paints gender in a different light. This theory shows gender to be a construct of our interactions with society. This constructionist view depicts gender, and therefore masculinity, in a state of flux, changing with every shift in definition of our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the rest of society. Looking at gender through this constructionist lends will aid in locating the gay masculinity. However, even when we acknowledge the fluidity and constructive nature of gender, we still do not have a firm grasp on the meaning of gender, or masculinity. This definition can be found by contrasting different types of masculinity, namely heterosexual and homosexual masculinities.
Foremost, masculinity is inherently linked with the institution of heterosexuality. The concept of gender implicitly refers to sexuality and the roles one assumes within that sexuality.

One of the most obvious characteristics of masculinity is heterosexuality. The definition of gender spontaneously implies sexuality, who does what and with whom.\(^2\)

The sexual aspect of masculinity depicts manhood as sexually dominant, active, controlling, and above all, as penetration. The fact that masculinity is rooted in the institution of heterosexuality leads to specific meanings of gender. Judith Butler explores these meanings and their relationship with heterosexuality, through what she refers to as the “heterosexual matrix”:

[The heterosexual matrix is a] hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.\(^3\)

Within this heterosexual matrix, gender must take a specific path; that is, a male must be masculine and therefore attracted to the feminine (female); a female must be feminine and therefore attracted to the masculine (male). In other words, opposites attract. When a person is assigned a specific biological sex at birth, they are not only given a certain gener role; they are also prescribed a particular sexual script. Not only does this gender script place restriction on the gender roles of heterosexuals; it also creates quite a paradox for homosexuals. This paradox is as follows; if masculinity is based on the act of penetration, then gay men (those who are perceived as penetratrated) are inherently not masculine. However, if gay men are attracted to each other, then there must be a gay-masculine and a gay-feminine, a duality of oppositional gender, that results in this attraction. In other words,
one aspect of the matrix defines homosexuals as non-masculine, whereas another aspect points directly to masculinity. R. W. Connell goes on to describe this paradox:

[O]pposites attract... If someone is attracted to the masculine, then that person must be feminine— if not in the body, then somehow in the mind. These beliefs are not particularly coherent (for instance, they have difficulty with the fact that gay men are attracted to each other) but they are pervasive. Accordingly they create a dilemma about masculinity for men who are attracted to other men.¹

Not only is masculinity a dilemma for gay men, it also seems to be completely antithetical to the homosexual’s existence, in that masculinity is seen as strictly heterosexual. In this sense, gay men are seen as failing in the attempt of embodying masculinity. Don Conway-Longway explores the results of this perception of failure:

[I]f a man fails or a group of men fail to live up completely to the hegemonic rules of global and Western-defined masculinity, then and therefore he or they have no masculinity worth studying of his or their own, nor is it interesting even to wonder why or how he or they construct difference within the category male/masculine. The recognition of difference ‘within’ this gendered category called masculinity and an identification of the plurality of masculinities are the beginnings of the deconstruction of the dominant masculine [beliefs], because the struggle among men is equally important as the struggle for dominance over women and children.²

Don Conway-Longway points out that gay men may not have failed at all, but rather, society has failed to recognize the plurality inherent in masculinity. So that we may more fully understand this plurality and how homosexual men may exist within the framework of masculinity, we first must explore the dominant form of masculinity.

(Normative Masc.)

Hegemonic masculinity is the current, dominant form of masculinity within a society. This type of masculinity can only exist within a patriarchal structure in which men control the dominant position in the relation between the sexes. Connell explains:
Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.\(^6\)

Also, hegemonic masculinity is a particular variety of masculinity to which other masculinities—among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men’s—subordinated. In fact, only one type of man fits the definition of hegemonic masculinity, that is a white, straight, upper middle class, college educated, gainfully employed, Protestant, father, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports.\(^7\)

This definition does not apply to the majority of men, and thus, most men feel inadequate in their gender identity. Michael Kimmel relates:

> As a collection of dos and don’ts, the male sex role [is] a recipe for despair, given what it [takes] to be a real man, few, if any, men could live up to the image, and hence all men... feel like failures as men. What’s worse, the psychological costs of trying to live up to the image... lead[s] men into lives of isolation and despair, of repressed emotion and deferred dreams.\(^8\)

It is clear that the framework of hegemonic masculinity is incompatible with, and unattainable for, most men. Unfortunately, this dominant masculinity is the ultimate goal, and the standard by which most men measure their own sense of masculinity. Therefore, the current structure of gender identification for males is fragile and exists as an unrealistic framework in which men can define their self-identity.

It is not only the dominant, hegemonic form of masculinity that exists in this fragile state. Other masculinities are also unstable as a result of how they are defined. As pointed out above, the definition of masculinity remains quite elusive. This intangible nature of masculinity is primarily the result of this gender identity being based on an anti-definition. Michael Kimmel describes the relational nature of the masculinity with respect to femininity:

> Masculinity and femininity are relational constructs... Although ‘male’ and ‘female’ may have some universal characteristics... one cannot understand the
Masculinity only exists in contrast with that which is feminine. Not only is masculinity rooted in contrast to femininity, it is a complete renunciation of everything feminine. Kimmel elaborates:

Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile... This notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is. 

This process of defining masculinity as that which is not feminine is impressed upon people in our society at an early age. Ruth Hartley, a child psychologist, noted this process while studying young children 1959:

[she] realized that a little boy defines himself primarily negatively, that males generally learn what they must not be in order to be masculine, before learning what they can be, that many boys define masculinity simply as what is not feminine.

We are socialized as children and then continue to develop our self-identity in a society that perpetuates this relation between femininity and masculinity. Through this realization we can find the answer to Conway-Longway’s question:

Why do so many forms of masculinity seem to view their ‘maleness’ as so fragile, so much of an attainment, so often a goal sufficiently beyond an individual man’s reach that it keeps him struggling on for a lifetime?

It is the inherent anti-definition that affects the stability of masculine identification. This view of masculinity as fragile is firmly based in our society’s notion that manhood is based on anti-femininity.

In addition to this anti-definition, the need for a man to actively assert his masculine identity is integral to our society’s view of gender. It is common for a biological male to be told to ‘act like a man.’ Elisabeth Banditer expands on this concept:
Being a man is expressed more readily in the imperative than in the indicative. The order so often hear—'Be a man'—implies that it does not go without saying that manliness may not be as natural as one would think… Being a man implies a labor, an effort that does not seem to be demanded of a woman. It is rare to hear the words 'be a woman' as a call to order, whereas the exhortation to the little boy, the male adolescent, or the adult male is common in most societies.\(^{13}\)

It is as if feminine is the default and masculinity must first be created then sustained, forces against that which is natural.\(^ {14}\) This opposition to nature results in the instability of masculinity and leaves the construct of manhood susceptible to threat. That threat must be guarded against; this stronghold is usually built from the tenets of heterosexuality. Jeffrey Weeks describes the threat to this tenuous fortitude:

> Masculinity or the male identity is achieved by the constant process of warding off threats to it. It is precariously achieved by the rejection of femininity and homosexuality.\(^ {15}\)

Men are constantly grasping for their manhood, just out of reach, while fleeing from the ‘destructive’ powers of femininity. Femininity is seen as the ultimate evil, in both women and others who are seen as feminized (e.g. homosexual men). This view is a result of the patriarchal structure of our society, placing men in positions of power, while women are forced into subordination. In fact, the patriarchal gender order is an underpinning element that shapes masculinity. R. W. Connell explains:

> A culture that does not treat women and men as bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture.\(^ {16}\)

Thus, the same dualistic gender structure that gave rise to this anti-feminine masculinity is also the cause of its inherent fragility.

This fragility extends beyond masculinity's anti-feminine definition into the idea that men are most afraid of other men. Kimmel describes this fear:

> Throughout American history American men have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened. And men have been
afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man, afraid of failure.\textsuperscript{17}

Kimmel quotes John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* to explore this fear amongst men through the eyes of the character of Curley’s wife:

‘Funny thing,’ [Curley’s wife] said. ‘If I catch any one man, and he’s alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two guys get together an’ you won’t talk. Jus’ nothin’ but man.’ She dropped her fingers and put hands on her hips. ‘You’re all scared of each other, that’s what. Evr’one of you’s scared the rest goin’ to get something on you.’\textsuperscript{18}

This fear of not measuring up to the prescriptions of manhood is apparent in many aspects of our society. From the competition in the sports and business worlds to the playgrounds of our youth, men are in constant fear of one another. Men are constantly ‘sizing up’ the other men around them. Looking for acceptance and fearing rejection, men demonstrate their masculinity in order to gain approval from other men.

Rather than affirming a positive identity, men must react negatively to all that surrounds them, the femininity of women, and the masculinity of other men, all the while striving for an unstable masculinity. The fact that masculinity is constructed from that which is not feminine creates an anti-identity for men. Masculinities adhering to an anti-feminity definition compound the fragility of the hegemonic masculinity.

*(Gay Masc. is Found in the rubble of the Normative)*

We have now realized two important concepts: masculinity is learned and constructed, and it is tenuous and fragile in its current state. Thus, masculinity is able to change and can be rebuilt, as if comprised of the wooden blocks from our childhood. This process of gender identity construction points us in the direction of the elusive gay masculinity. The simplicity of this process is only available to those who recognize the constructed nature of masculinity in the first place. Because heterosexual men are embedded
in the gender matrix, they are blind to this constructed nature. It is as the Chine proverb says; “the fish are the last to discover the ocean.” This point is where the inability of gay men to exist within the heterosexual matrix of gender construction comes into play. Because homosexuals are inherently outsiders to the structure of masculinity, they are able to engage with gender in ways unavailable to those entrenched in the dichotomous gender system (i.e. straight men). Gay men spend their entire lives in direct opposition to the dominant sexual and gender paradigms. This opposition causes gay men to analyze, and reanalyze their personal concepts of gender and masculinity. Heterosexual men are less likely to experience, and therefore less likely to benefit from this self-reflection. Connell explores the ramifications of the contradictions that gay men have with the dominant form of masculinity, causing this self-reflection:

Homosexual masculinity is a contradiction for a gender order structured as modern Western systems are... [For gay men, this] contradiction has been realized, has even become routine. The apolitical outlook of the group itself demonstrates the stabilization of a public alternative to hegemonic masculinity.¹⁹

Indeed, this contradiction with the gender order is absolutely realized and routine for gay men. The very act of defining oneself as homosexual calls for the realization, and ultimate rejection of the dominant gender sexual paradigms. Every subsequent expression of that homosexuality results in the realization/rejection process once again. And thus, the contradiction becomes routine. This repetitive introspection leads to, as Connell says, a stabilized, alternative masculinity.

Once gay men establish this alternative to hegemonic masculinity, they are free to push the boundaries of the original definitions. In fact, there are times when homosexuals are able to achieve a sense of manhood that is closer to the hegemonic definition than
straight men ever obtain. Kimmel notes the occurrence of this phenomenon at the birth of the Gay Liberation Movement:

The gay liberation movement posited a strong riposte to the facile equation of homosexuality and masculine gender identity and made the counterclaim that gay men were as much ‘real’ men as straight men. Following the Stonewall riots of 1969, in which gay men fought back against a police raid on a Greenwich Village bar, and the subsequent birth of the Gay Liberation Movement, a new gay masculinity emerged in gay enclaves of America’s major cities. In these ‘gay ghettos,’ the ‘clone,’ as he was called, dressed in hypermasculine garb (flannel shirts, blue jeans, leather) and had short hair (not at all androgynous) and a mustache; he was athletic, highly muscular. In short the clone looked more like a ‘real man’ than most straight men.

The hypermasculine essence of gay manhood extends beyond mere appearances. Kimmel goes on to describe the sexual nature of this hypermasculinity:

And the clones... enacted a hypermasculine sexuality in steamy backrooms, bars, and bathhouses where sex was plentiful, anonymous, and very hot. No unnecessary foreplay, romance, or postcoital awkwardness. Sex without attachment. One might even say that given the norms of masculinity (that men are always seeking sex, ready for sex, wanting sex), gay men were just about the only men in America who were getting as much sex as they wanted.

Thus, it is realized that gay men, who were once locked outside of the dominant gender paradigm, have found a way to break past those walls and capture the previously unobtainable, sexually dominant, anti-feminine masculinity. However, at the same time, this masculinity is realized for what it is: a constructed façade. The label of ‘clone’ depicts the realization of the costume-like nature of gender. This flannel wearing, sexually centered masculinity is manufactured like so many Barbie® Ken dolls, a series of clones. (talk about how the hypermasculine image has shifted over the past 20 years)

(Beyond the Gay Masculinity)

But does the realization of masculinity as manufactured lead to a stable form of gender identification? The answer to this question can be found within the paradox that gay
men originally faced with respect to the heterosexual matrix. Within that matrix gay men were defined as non-masculine (in that they are perceived as penetrated, the ultimate offence to masculinity). Being seen as non-masculine, on any level, allows for a connection with femininity. It is this connection with femininity that adds stability and offsets the above negative aspects of gay masculinity. Kimmel explains this connection and its affects on homosexual gender identity:

A few [sociologists] suggested that gay men had already achieved such contact with their feminine sides, which explained what they took to be gay men’s relative ease with intimacy, sensitivity, and emotion. Perhaps homosexual manhood could be a model for heterosexual men, who were, they suggested, still stifled by homophobic fears of expressing emotion or the need for physical contact with other men.22

Because of their life long opposition to heterosexual gender, gay men realize the constructive nature of gender, as if it were a game of fluidity.

Because gay men are able to embrace their femininity, they are ultimately able to stabilize their gender identity as a whole.

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4 op. cit. Connell, R. W. p. 143
6 op. cit. Connell, R. W. p. 77
11 op. cit. Badinter, Elisabeth. p. 32
12 op. cit. Conway-Longway, Don. p. 62
14 It is interesting to note that during fetal development female is the default. Without the required androgens, all fetuses would develop into females.
16 op. cit. Connell, R. W. p. 68
17 op. cit. Kimmel, Michael. 1996. p. 6
19 op. cit. Connell, R. W. p. 162
21 ibid. p. 279
22 ibid p. 284