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from:-

CONSTRUCTING MASCULINITY

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ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK
LONDON

(1995)

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**"GOSH, BOY GEORGE, YOU MUST BE
AWFULLY SECURE IN YOUR MASCULINITY!"**

The title I have chosen for this text is borrowed from a hapless Long Island disc jockey who was overcome with admiration while interviewing a celebrity, only to finally hear himself blurring it out—"Gosh, Boy George . . .!"
My intent is to propose some axioms that may be helpful for stimulating, and even possibly disrupting, the conversation on the topic of masculinity.

The first axiom I would like to propose is what I have always imagined as Boy George's response to the Long Island disc jockey:

Nothing to do, that is, with men. And when something is about masculinity, it is not always "about men." I think it is important to drive a wedge in, early and often and if possible conclusively, between the two topics, masculinity and men, whose relation to one another it is so difficult not to presume. Even in the prospectus prose for a serious book—this book, as a matter of fact—whose aim seems to be to problematize every conceivable aspect of masculinity, it is still notable that the distinctive linkage between masculinity and the male subject, or the subject of men, goes unquestioned. In asking "What is Masculinity?" for instance, the editors begin: "Men of all ages and cultural backgrounds—straight, gay, and bisexual—are beginning to ask and explore key issues about the nature of masculinity. . . ."

Maybe we could update that to "Men of all ages and cultural backgrounds—straight, gay, bisexual, and female"?

Later in the same document, I am invited to consider how "traditional representations of masculinity have played a crucial role in shaping the economic, cultural, and political status of men"; how science views "traits that are typical to men"; whether it is "possible to imagine a critical men's movement"; and finally, climactically, "How men [can] rethink their power in an effort to reconstruct themselves personally and politically."

Of course, the last thing I want to do is to minimize the importance of questions like these. But it does seem necessary to emphasize how crucially the force of such questions is vitiated when they are presented as *the* questions about masculinity *per se*—when, that is, an inquiry begins with the presupposition that everything pertaining to men can be classified as masculinity, and everything that can be said about masculinity pertains in the first place to men.

Goshi, Boy George must really be secure in *something* when he has the courage to perform in drag—and he is a boy, at least his name says he is, so what he is secure *in* must be "masculinity," "his" masculinity. It is less obviously absurd, but all the more insidious, when, for example, nominally gay-affirmative psychologists such as Richard Friedman assume that the only form self-respect can take in boys, in boys gay or straight, is and has to be something called "masculine self-regard."² The boys I know who were so profoundly nourished, and with such heroic difficulty, by their hard-won feminine and effeminate self-regard—and for that matter, the girls who extracted the same precious survival skills from a sturdily masculine one—ought to present much more of a challenge than they have so far to the self-evidence of such formulations.



I would ask that we strongly resist, then, the presupposition that what women have to do with masculinity is mainly to be treated less or more oppressively by the men to whom masculinity more directly pertains. My purpose is not to file an *amicus curiae* brief with the "men of all ages and cultural backgrounds" who are "beginning to explore key issues about the nature of masculinity." I am exploring them myself. Nor do I mean to issue a *Consumer Reports* test-kitchen rating on the new masculinities. As a woman, I am a consumer of masculinities, but I am not more so than men are; and, like men, I am a woman am also a producer of masculinities and a performer of them.

It seems to me that the women who might better speak to these issues are some of those who are beginning to write so directly and eloquently about masculinity and/or about butch identity in women, largely but not exclusively in lesbian contexts: Leslie Feinberg, for example, or Judith Halberstam, or the contributors to Joan Nestle's "Femme-butch anthology," or Judith Frank, who originated the intractably compelling notion of "butch abjection."³ I myself, embarrassingly, can only speak from the subject position newly classified by Minnie Bruce Pratt as "adult children of mothers who couldn't figure out whether to be butches or femmes."⁴ (Actually, my mother finally did figure it out; but it took her until the age of seventy, so I am trying to be patient with my own confusions on this topic.) In another sense, though, it may be that there is an even *stronger* case to be made in this regard by a writer who self-identifies, roughly speaking, as a

confused femme (or do you consider the epithet redundant?). At any rate, that is the experience out of which I am trying to figure out how to articulate this. More specifically, in very briefly framing three further propositions on masculinity, I want to draw on what I occasionally have the composure to describe as the most interesting experiment I have undergone (or, euphemistically, "conducted") in the semiotics of gender, something I have written a little bit about before—namely, the half-year or so I spent in 1991 doing intensive chemotherapy following a diagnosis of node-positive breast cancer. The treatment involved, among other things, a by-no-means-uncommon disruption in the somatic signifiers (and for that matter the signifieds) of gender—and more profoundly and simply, of bodily health. I do not want to dwell now on the encounter with mortality entailed in this experience; rather on, for instance, the many, many encounters in the mirror with my bald and handsome father and my bald and ugly grandfather; or the phantom conversations, more haunting than a phantom breast, in which sometimes I still hear myself challenging some imaginary sexual assailant by—what? It is hard to piece this together—but I think what I am doing in these fantasies is defiantly exposing my mastectomy scar, and cementing my triumph over this attacker by making clear to him that underneath the clothing and the prosthesis, I am *really* a man whom he has had the poor judgment to mistake for a vulnerable woman.

When I first got the breast cancer diagnosis, one of the good friends who called to check in and cheer me up was a gay man I had known and loved for a long time, a psychoanalytic theorist, who reminded me that he, too, had had a pretty bad breast cancer scare several years before. But his lump had turned out to be benign—"And it was a good thing too," he said on the phone, "because you know what the treatment of choice is for male breast cancer? Castration!" I congratulated him on his narrow escape from a fate evidently seen as worse than death. And I did not make any connection between that and the moment, months later, when I was finishing chemotherapy and the question of hormone therapy came up, when I suddenly noticed that both my cheerful oncologist and the matter-of-fact medical textbooks I could not seem to stop reading apparently had the same question on their mind: to castrate—me!—or not to castrate. I did not even know what the word could really mean, in this context, but that did not keep me from bursting into the tears that mark the heaping of injury on insult: here I thought I already was! All these years my Lacanian friends had me convinced I had nothing to lose.

Maybe the weirdest part of this story is that even now, at the end of it, I actually do not know whether I got castrated or not. It turns out that for



Loren Cameron, *Loren Cameron*, 1993.

women, as indeed for men, there exist the alternatives of surgical ablation or chemical ablation (also I thought "ablation" was something done by Latin nouns) of the gonads, which for women means the ovaries—and since the chemo had already knocked my reproductive system into a cocked hat, the question of further ablation turned out to be, as they say, moot. I believe, but I am not sure, that that is a way of saying that the castration had, indeed, already happened. *Maybe* of saying that any postmenopausal woman is by definition, as Germaine Greer would put it, a female eunuch.

But the point of this shaggy-dog medical thriller, right now, is to mark how different, and how rather unpredictably different, the notion of castration is in a female context from a male context. For a man, it seems clear enough what is signified by castration: that is, a threat to masculinity. But it is still fully ambiguous to me whether the tears I was bawling out at the mention of castration were wept in response to a threat against my masculinity, or my femininity.⁶ A rather too fancy way of broaching the commonplace—but it is an important commonplace, and one that people always forget—that . . .

2. MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY ARE IN MANY RESPECTS ORTHOGONAL TO EACH OTHER

Orthogonal: that is, instead of being at opposite poles of the same axis, they are actually in-different, perpendicular dimensions, and therefore are independently

variable. The classic research on this was, of course, Sandra Bem's work on psychological androgyny; she had people rated on two scales, one measuring stereotypically female-ascribed traits and one measuring stereotypically male-ascribed ones; and found that many lucky people score high on both, many other people score low on both, and most importantly that a high score on either of them does not predict a low score on the other.*

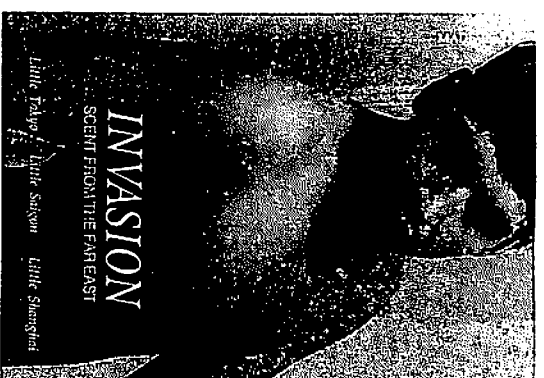
If we may be forgiven a leap from two-dimensional into *n*-dimensional space, I think it would be interesting, by the way, to hypothesize that not only masculinity and femininity, but in addition effeminacy, butchness, femmeness, and probably some other superficially related terms, might equally turn out instead to represent independent variables—or at least, unpredictably dependent ones. I would just ask you to call to mind all the men you know who may be both highly masculine and highly effeminate—but at the same time, not a bit feminine. Or women whom you might consider very butch and at the same time feminine, but not femme. Why not throw in some other terms, too, such as top and bottom? And an even more potent extension into *n*-dimensional space could, ideally, make representable a factor such as race, as well. I am thinking, for instance, of a fascinating recent paper by Riché Richardson in which she analyzes the differential meanings, in African-American men's (effeminate) drag performance, of imitations of "white" femininity compared to imitations of "black" femininity.⁷

One implication of work like Sandra Bem's is that not only are some people more masculine or more feminine than others, but some people are just plain more *gender-y* than others—whether the gender they manifest be masculine, feminine, both, or "and then some."

Which brings us to . . .

3. MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY ARE THRESHOLD EFFECTS

This includes masculinity and femininity and, we might add, some of the other gender-salient dimensions that we have also been discussing. By "threshold effects," I mean places where quantitative increments along one dimension can suddenly appear as qualitative differences somewhere else on the map entirely. I will offer only one example of this—which must also serve to introduce Proposition 4, as a matter of fact—and unfortunately it involves only my hunches about an issue on which I am probably the least expert witness available: that is to say, the reception history of my own gendered self-presentation around the time of the chemotherapy "experiment." But, for what it's worth, here is my observation. It so happened that the end of the half-year of chemo,



during which time I was totally bald, and at the end of which I suddenly developed this fabulous babylike fuzz (which I almost wore away with the sheer joy of having it to fondle), it so happened that this moment, the first moment when I felt able—indeed, irrepressibly eager—to venture out into the world without one of those little penitential ethnic beanies on my head, coincided with the fifth annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference, that year being held at Rutgers. So, of course, I went and displayed my wares, and my hairs.

Now, I had been fortunate enough to attend all four of the previous conferences in this series (three at Yale, one at Harvard). And, much as I had treasured the almost overwhelming stimulus and camaraderie that was on tap at each one of them and the sense that as scenes they were among the most fun I had ever happened on, I had nonetheless the sense, at each one, of being, as a body, erotically invisible to most of the other participants, both male and female. This did not get me down too much, but I did notice it, and at some level felt a bit forlorn. Strikingly different was the feeling of being in this particular body at that particular conference, the Rutgers conference, at that particular moment. Suddenly, it seemed to me—outlandish, near-bald, and extremely happy—that I had had the great pleasure of *clicking*, with an almost audible *click*, into visibility in the grid of a certain lesbian optic. I felt, really for the first time, that I looked exactly as I ought and wished to look, and was visible as so doing.

NOW, here is the part of it that was really instructive—and by instructive I mean that it took me forever to catch on to. It was clear to me that this vibrant sense of having a body, having a visible body, was tied to the butchness of, as a woman, swaggering around in the world, or at least in New Brunswick, with almost no hair. So far so good, I thought; I had always been attracted to very butch women, and now, it seemed to me, by some miracle, I was going to get to turn into one. And wasn't this what I had wanted?

What emerged over time, however, as I learned to read myself and to read other women's (and indeed men's) responses to my bodily habitus in a somewhat more subtle and differentiated way, was not the story of this particular miracle. It was something else: that what I had become visible as was, in fact (no big surprises here), quite femme. The surprise was in seeing that it required the crossing over a threshold of, precisely, butchness, to become visible as, precisely, if it is precisely, femme. That is to say, I had to stumble my way onto a map of sexy gender-y-ness in the first place; and the portal to that place, for women, or for lesbians, or for queers, or just for me, I do not know yet, is marked "butch." The rheostat that you might think would adjust the seamless gradations from feminine to femme seemingly has to get interrupted by the on/off switch of butch.

4. IN MASCULINITY/FEMININITY, A DYNAMIC OF SELF-RECOGNITION MEDIATES BETWEEN ESSENTIALISM AND FREE PLAY

Proposition 4 is about transformations like the one I have just sketched: about trying to find, not a middle ground, but a ground for describing and respecting the inertia, the slowness, the process that mediates between, on the one hand, the biological absolutes of what we always are (more or less) and, on the other hand, the notional free play that we constructivists are always imagined to be attributing to our own and other people's sex-and-gender self-presentation. I want to mark here a space in which there might be broached some description at a psychological level of how such changes may actually occur: namely through a slow and rather complicated feedback mechanism that I would summarize in the phrase: "Will I be able to recognize myself if . . . ?"

This proposition interests me especially because I would want to argue that, while to some degree it is probably true of everybody, it seems likeliest to be truest of people who experience their bodies in the first place as not just problematic, but precisely stigmatic. I am sure that not every visibly handicapped person, or transgendered person, or person of color, or fat person, or visibly

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Jeff Scates, *Omega Branding*, Memphis, 1988.

sick person, or person with gender-"inappropriate" voice or demeanor in fact experiences his or her body as stigmatic most or necessarily even any of the time. But it is a very plain fact that many of us do. And I would like with this proposition to open something like a door into the mix of paralysis or transfixion, with extraordinary daring and often outrageousness, with strange sites of stylistic conservatism, with an almost uncanny discursive productiveness, that many of us experience as we struggle to continue the adventure of recognizing ourselves and being recognized in these problematic femininities and masculinities that constitute us and that we, in turn, constitute.

NOTES

1. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, prospectus for *Constructing Masculinity*, n.p.
2. The phrase occurs in Richard C. Friedman, *Male Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 245.
3. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993); Judith Halberstam, "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity," in Laura Doan, ed., *The Lesbian Postmodern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Joan Nestle, ed., *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson, 1992); and Judith Frank, personal communication.
4. Pratt described herself in approximately these terms during an informal talk at Duke University, Feb. 21, 1994.
5. It is interesting to me that when I try to tell people this story, often concluding with "—but now I

realize I was castrated!" they incorrectly assume that I am describing the supposedly traumatic psychological impact of the loss of a breast. It is easy for people to arrive at the crisp homology "breast:femininity::phallus:mascularity," and that neatly metaphorical substitution offers a kind of presumptive pseudosense that altogether effaces the literal fact that women are indeed castratable; effacing, as well, the challenge that this fact offers to conventional gender schematics.

6. Sandra Bem, "The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 42 (April 1974): 155-62; Bem, "The Theory and Measurement of Androgyny: A Reply to the Pedhazur-Tetenbaum and Locksley-Cohen Critiques," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (June 1979); and Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

7. Ritché Richardson, "Sistuh Girl Terry McMillan: Crossing the Threshold to the Trenches," paper delivered at the College Language Association, Durham, N.C., Apr. 15, 1994.