

Modifying Masculinity, Forging Femininity: Male Feminist Discourse and the Manifestation of an Independent Female Identity

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This article uses male feminist discourse surrounding rape culture as a platform for analyzing the relationships between masculinity and femininity and the theoretical manifestations of each. By deconstructing this discourse with a methodology inspired by bell hooks's writings on race, the essay interrogates the possibility that specific discussions about sexual assault from a male feminist perspective may risk marginalizing femininity. The conclusion of the article outlines a "feminist femininity" that speaks back to male feminist discourse.

In his work "Masculinity as Homophobia," Michael Kimmel asserts that homophobia—defined as beyond the fear of non-heterosexuality and instead understood as "the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men"—is at the crux of a cultural interpretation of manhood (104). He then makes explicit that this "unmasking" process will reveal not just a lack of masculinity but also a presence of femininity. Kimmel writes that men who ascribe to this performance of masculinity understand femininity to be tantamount to "humiliation" or "being laughed at," but besides this, he does not delve into what else actually characterizes femininity besides its status as abhorrent relative to masculinity (105–6).

Kimmel does, however, assert that the performance of masculinity is manifested most often by violence, or by carrying out what he identifies as the "politics of exclusion": the "manhood of racism, of sexism, of homophobia" ("Masculinity" 108). He argues that a performance of masculinity is inextricable from privilege and oppression, regardless of the identity of the people who suffer at the hands of this oppression. Contemporary scholarship echoes and builds upon this idea: "Men who do not conform to the hegemonic definition of masculinity—being white, heterosexual, aggressive, dominant, competitive, muscular, class privileged—are equated with women and thus feminized" (Yeung, Stomblor, and Wharton 6). Given this framework, if femininity is understood to be the inverse of masculinity, or what masculinity and its performance attempt to escape, we must question the characterization of womanhood. Does womanhood mean embracing nonviolence as an actor, or does it mean becoming the passive victim of masculine violence? Does femininity signify the deconstruction of hierarchies that establish dominant and subordinate groups, or does it entail becoming part of the oppressed class by default? If we identify the latter outcomes as what the men in Kimmel's analysis seek to avoid, then this means that masculinity is intrinsically not just the state of having power, but also the condition of wielding that power to harm others. It means that being feminine is mutually exclusive with being powerful in any way.

This becomes problematic even when we examine efforts to reframe masculinity. The cam-

paign “My Strength Is Not for Hurting” by the DC-based organization Men Can Stop Rape operates on the idea that masculinity can “transcend” its existence as a harmful force while retaining its power in a way that is positive for men and women. In the campaign, posters depict heterosexual couples or male homosexual couples under the slogan “My strength is not for hurting” followed by an example, such as “so when I wanted to and she didn’t, WE DIDN’T.” In this way, the campaign seeks to appeal to men by assuring them that they can retain the masculine quality of strength (whether physical or in terms of the power dynamics of the relationship) even if they do not overpower their partners. Strength, whether manifested in a negative or positive way, is still presented as a feature of masculinity; women of strength are absent from this model.

An observer might position these campaigns and other literary efforts to redefine masculinity as mere acknowledgments of the fact that men do enjoy privilege over women in current society. However, it may be that such messages go beyond reflecting societal constructs—showing that men maintain the power to choose whether or not to listen to their partners, while women lack access to that power. We must confront the possibility that this rhetoric may at least partially reinforce such constructs. In his article “Keeping the Lady Safe: The Regulation of Femininity through Crime Prevention Literature,” Alex Campbell writes, “Representations . . . of gender more generally, and gender and crime more precisely, . . . help to create a fertile environment for rape. I am here referring to images and texts which constitute a femininity—vulnerable and (often) helpless—and in contrast, a masculinity which is in turn potent and dangerous” (126). Masculinity in these scenarios is still characterized as “potent and dangerous,” at least potentially. Even if men are able to harness their dangerousness, this is still exemplary of their potency and ultimate control of the situation at hand—and, more importantly, emblematic of how helpless women are in response.

In other words, this idea of “transcendence” manifests itself as the purely masculine ability to decide whether one will actively choose to refrain from oppressing others instead of remaining (and passively so) within the first definition of masculinity (the “real man” model). Perhaps, then, relative to this, femininity is defined as the inability to transcend, to act. The fact that the choice to “transcend” substantiates a spectrum of transitive masculinity (which we here can understand as being measured from “real” to “strong”) is evidence of the existence of male privilege even within the sphere of self-identification as feminist or nonfeminist.

The Privilege of Purging Women from Conversations about Women

In his lecture “Mars, Venus, or Planet Earth? Men and Women in a New Millennium,” Kimmel rightly argues that privilege is invisible to those who have it, and that it is only when men are forced to confront their own male privilege that they can begin to understand the actualities and importance of gender inequality in today’s world. The issue of acknowledging privilege in feminist spaces and discussions is hugely important. However, if the discussion that acknowledges and scrutinizes privilege occurs within the same conversation that excludes any and all discourse about the collective identity of the group at whose expense this privilege is maintained, that conversation may be problematic.

The negative space formed by the absence of privilege is a significant factor in the development of a collective identity of oppressed peoples. As members of an oppressed group, women share—at some level—a common history and experience in a way that cisgender men—those men whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth—do not. If this identi-

ty is made expendable from a discussion that ideally should promote the interests of the oppressed group, even for the sake of a discussion admitting the privilege of the group exempt from that oppression, that discussion is arguably incomplete, as it becomes a reiteration of that overarching negative space.

This issue becomes even more complex when we distill one measure of oppression to reveal intersecting forms of subjugation: all women, for example, may share the experience of being women—but white women do not share the experience of racial discrimination that women of color may share. Cisgender women do not share the same experience of discrimination that transgender women may share. Able-bodied and able-minded women do not share the same experience of discrimination that disabled women may share. And within intersecting forms of oppression, individual experiences add to this nuance. A discussion of masculinity in the context given, then, marginalizes not only the experience and identity of the feminine, but also the experiences and identities of all of the other intersecting qualities womanhood might encompass; this becomes especially pertinent when discussions of “the manhood of racism, of sexism, of homophobia” again shed light on the identity of the oppressor but leave the identity of the oppressed—in all of these varying strata of intersecting marginalized identities—largely ignored.

The importance of this notion is underscored even further when advocates of progressive movements emphasize to the oppressed *and* to the privileged that they will both benefit from the advancement of the movement. Much of the discussion surrounding men’s involvement with the feminist movement reflects this argument: that feminism is good for men and women, while gender inequality hurts men and women. While there is a considerable amount of truth in that sentiment, the utilization of such a strategy to appeal may produce extensive ethical perils.

To apply this to the material at hand, we can examine how Kimmel discusses the benefits of gender equity within the arena of marriage in his lecture:

When men share housework and childcare their kids are happier, their kids are healthier and their kids do better in school. Okay, maybe that’s not enough of a motivation for men. When men share housework and childcare their wives are happier . . . and healthier. Okay, maybe that’s still not enough of a motivation for men. When men share housework and childcare the men are healthier. . . . Alright, maybe that’s not enough of a motivation for men. When men share housework and childcare they have more sex. (“Mars, Venus”).

Kimmel ends his lecture by quoting a male feminist from 1916: “Feminism will for the first time make it possible for men to be free.” Not only do Kimmel’s arguments actually uphold and rely on gender stereotypes about men, they frame gender inequality in a way that disproportionately represents the extent to which men are disadvantaged by sexism and would benefit from feminism in comparison to women. While Kimmel’s arguments in favor of a male consciousness of privilege and the role masculinity plays in the oppression of women in all its forms—including sexual violence—are valid, I argue that the strategies he uses to make those arguments are to a certain degree themselves oppressive.

While acknowledging that there are significant and undeniable differences between racial oppression and gendered oppression, and by making it clear that these differences make the two impossible to compare directly, I seek to deconstruct the limitations of Kimmel’s argument by quoting black feminist theorist bell hooks’s criticisms of white-centered efforts against racism:

Many unlearning racism workshops focus on helping white individuals to see

that they too are wounded by racism and as a consequence have something to gain from participating in anti-racist struggle. While in some ways true, a construction of political solidarity that is rooted in a narrative of shared victimization not only acts to recenter whites, it risks obscuring the particular ways racist domination impacts on the lives of marginalized groups. Implicit in the assumption that even those who are privileged *via* racist hierarchy suffer is the notion that it is only when those in power get in touch with how they too are victimized will they rebel against structures of domination. (13)

Kimmel's deliberation of the pressures of masculinity on men and the fear of humiliation that follows them throughout their lives, which I mentioned earlier, is reminiscent of the victimization discourse hooks describes. Even in the context of pro-feminist discourse, this focus on masculinity at the explicit expense of a discussion about womanhood at best hinders or distorts the progress of gender equality, and at worst actually may contribute to patterns of oppression.

Keeping the "Man" in "Humanity"

The second facet of this discussion, from which privilege is inextricable, is the idea of sameness between men and women. In his lecture, Kimmel says, "Now, my argument to you tonight is not only are men and women more similar than we are different in every available measurable trait, attitude, and behavior, but in fact we are also more similar than we are different, politically" ("Mars, Venus"). In his discussion of male privilege, however, Kimmel underscores what may in actuality destabilize his argument with a satirical retelling of his realization of privilege: "You know, I'm a middle-class white man. I have no race, no class, no gender. I'm universally generalizable [*sic*]" ("Mars, Venus"). The "human" similarities that Kimmel draws between men and women are in fact defined by a male reality, a male identity—the differences wrought by gender and gendered oppression are minimized in his argument, again at the expense of a feminine identity.

In her book *I Love to You*, French feminist scholar Luce Irigaray explores this concept, characterizing the resistance to the development of a feminine identity independent of men as "upheld by men in the name of their culture: they must not lose their monopoly of the model of human kind, the privilege of representing human kind" (64). I argue that, to a certain extent, this feeling of being threatened by the idea of a femininity stronger than masculinity is visible not only in the anti-rape culture discourse focusing on masculinity, but also in events exemplary of rape culture itself, such as the incident in which Yale fraternity pledges chanted, "No means yes, yes means anal" outside the university's Women's Center, an area meant to be a safe space for female students (Bonus).

Kimmel's analysis of the Yale incident reasons that the men felt threatened by a "sexual landscape which they feel has been thrown terribly off its axis" by feminism, which has empowered women to have sexual agency ("The Men"). The perception that the "normalcy" of sexual behavior hinges on a sexual landscape in which men are dominant and women feel unsafe or are entirely passive supports this idea of a standard of "maleness"—any sexual setting that involves a woman with agency, with her own individual ideas and expectations of sex independent of her male partner's ideas and expectations, is somehow dangerous, destabilizing.

Similarly, the perception that the "normalcy" of gendered behavior hinges on a social landscape in which a male identity is dominant and women are homogenous with that male identity

(or otherwise ignored) supports this idea of a standard “maleness”—any social setting that involves a woman asserting a feminine identity apart from and independent of men is somehow dangerous, destabilizing, or merely indefinable within the context of a world that defines everything in “male” terms. We can see this notion reiterated comparatively in qualitative data about rapists: “65% of rapists’ accounts of their offenses expressed the belief that women are dangerous, manipulative, and untrustworthy” (Zurbriggen 542).

Alternately, male feminist rhetoric revolving around a new or transcendent masculinity may simply be the product of shifting political valences surrounding hegemonies. Arlene Stein interprets this shift as a cultural transition away from the masculinity of sexism and toward the masculinity of homophobia:

Because the old strategy of blaming women’s growing independence for many of the social changes they see around them, including the decline of male authority in the family, is no longer politically tenable, neopatriarchal rhetoric does not attack women per se, does not call for the subordination of women, and does not explicitly support practices and arrangements that buttress gender inequality. Rather, it speaks of the importance of gender differentiation in the family, strong but compassionate fathers, and heterosexual marriage. (604)

In this way, masculinity, though characterized as “strong but compassionate”—words that we might find resonant with the male feminist masculinities proposed earlier—is still used to maintain a certain order, femininity is still restrained and left undefined as anything other than negative space, and domination through the feminization of another group (in this case, queer families) is still maintained.

The concept of pushing the teaching of masculinity towards a more holistic incarnation is not impossible; models that accomplish such a goal have been proposed. In their work “Toward a Genderful Pedagogy and the Teaching of Masculinity,” Shaun P. Johnson and Brenda R. Weber argue that “the ability to practice gender should be multi-faceted or pluralistic rather than essentialist or dichotomous; additionally, the opportunity to practice gender should be open, inclusive, and equal.” Further, they provide a rough schematic for the ways in which this kind of pedagogy of gender might be manifested: “A genderful pedagogy must model and communicate a conception about gender that is critical of master (and masculinist) tropes and categories, while being more fluid and negotiable in nature and providing opportunities to experience gender and sexuality that is free from bias and stereotype” (149). This fluidity might perhaps allow not only for an exploration of femininity, but also for an exploration of nonbinary affectations and the methods by which masculine individuals might reconcile their own feminine aspects with their identity. While Johnson and Weber’s scholarship reiterates the need for this pedagogy and even provides a foundation for its production, its model remains in the margins of masculine pedagogy.

If male feminist rhetoric neglects to address the issue of a separate femininity, or upholds the idea that men and women are the same, it perpetuates a positioning of women dictated by these “male” terms. It upholds the logic that female or feminine agency is something to be distrusted, annihilated, dismissed—*dominated*. If the dynamics driving discussion about rape culture that is meant to be pro-woman rhetorically and ideologically mirror the dynamics driving rape culture itself—or if violence against women is simply being transposed on another feminized group—is progress being limited?

In Search of a Feminist Femininity

In his book *Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida attempts to gauge the level of actualization possible for a form of democracy independent of the language in which it is traditionally framed (and therefore limited by), and concludes: “For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept” (306).

In using Derrida’s line of inquiry as a lens through which to assess Luce Irigaray’s theory of equality through the acknowledgment of difference between masculine and feminine, I have found the description of a “non-presentable concept” to befit Irigaray’s idealization of the feminine. Irigaray asserts, “If women are to accede to a different sort of social organization, they need a religion, a language . . . of their own” (*Ethique* 169). That Irigaray parallels religion with language reveals another truth: a masculine identity has become inextricable from the concept of God in much of the world. Irigaray moves on to characterize the relationship between the masculine and the idea of God as a relationship that facilitates transcendence. Here, we must recall the narratives used by male feminist organizations that imbricate masculinity in the ability to transcend: I view Irigaray’s depiction of a quality of spiritual transcendence defined by patriarchy as a strictly masculine model, which supports my theory of a quality of moral transcendence (in which men reject the “dominant story of masculinity”) defined by patriarchy as strictly masculine.

Irigaray also writes, “[Women] lack . . . a God in which to share, a word/language to share and to become. Defined as . . . the word/language of men, we lack our subject, our noun, our verb, our predicates: our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy” (*Sexes* 83). Thus, a distinct definition of femininity is prevented from coming to fruition because the preconditions of a masculine-dominated cultural discursive preclude it; this too prevents the feminine from grasping the capability of transcendence.

How, then, does Irigaray assess the actualization of femininity, beyond its absence? Penelope Deutscher understands the Irigarayan manifestation of femininity as

a hypothetical possibility on the border of histories of representation of femininity. Not within them, because it has been excluded. Not entirely exterior to them, because insofar as it has been excluded it has been indicated as a possibility. For this reason the concepts of femininity and sexual difference generated by Irigaray have a paradoxical inside/outside, possible/impossible status. (29–30)

Irigaray’s work supports this, especially her description of “[a] world for women themselves. Which has both never existed and at the same time is already there, repressed, latent, potential” (*Sexes* 106). In this way, Derrida’s “non-presentable concept” description applies to Irigaray’s assessment of femininity as simultaneously present and absent.

Interestingly, other scholars who have explored Derrida’s writings on femininity posit that “the feminist is caught within the ‘same,’ destined to repeat the phallogocentric gesture, at best to be a maverick, undecidable, elusive like meaning, not to be pinned down, for Irigaray feminist discourse is an indication of a possible ‘other of the other.’ . . . She [Irigaray] assumes the utopian position that Derrida is reluctant to risk” (Whitford 45). For Derrida, democracy can qualify

as a “non-presentable concept” simultaneously present and absent; however, femininity is doomed to reiterate itself in a form defined by the masculine.

The lack of an actualization of femininity has multiple implications when transposed onto male feminist discussions of rape culture. We must reevaluate male feminist discussions of rape culture that reveal the fear of being “unmasked” and reveal as feminine a key component of masculinity—since there is no real actualization of femininity. In this framework, then, we could argue that the male fear of the feminine is at some level actually a fear of being stripped of personhood altogether, or—if we continue the discussion of masculinity as partially defined by the existence of a male god—the fear of God’s inexistence (and thus, men’s fear of the inexistence of their own capabilities concerning spiritual transcendence). The masculine invocation of rape culture as a device to perpetuate the dehumanization of women supports this; sexual assault and the societal institutions that support it are key components in the continuation of this “man as humanity” discourse.

Here we must interrogate how we might begin to conceive of an independent femininity. Again with the acknowledgment that gender politics are vastly different from racial politics, I seek to expand upon bell hooks’s ethical framework. hooks explores black theologian James Cone’s interrogation of the effect of “whiteness” on black identity and black culture, writing: “[Cone] insisted that the politics of racial domination have necessarily created a black reality that is distinctly different from that of whites, and from that location has emerged a distinct black culture. His prophetic call was for whites to learn how to identify with that difference—to see it as a basis for solidarity” (12–13). While people of color have been marginalized by a culture dictated by a white supremacist dialectic, an identity independent of that dialectic has come to fruition, according to Cone’s work—even if it has yet to be fully embraced by people of color as well as by white culture. Even if the history of womanhood is a history of subordination, attempting to build a cohesive unity from that shared history—and extracting from that history a set of positive feminine characteristics—may be the beginnings of at least a partial feminine identity.

Conclusion

Without being able to operate within the context of Irigaray’s “world for women themselves,” the manifest identity of femininity is limited—undoubtedly so. However, even if we invest in a model of femininity that is a “non-presentable concept”—a concept simultaneously existing and nonexistent—we can continue to hold fast to that fluid existence. A “repressed, latent, potential” femininity is a femininity nonetheless. To bring forth that femininity from its dormant state—to embrace femininity in an echo of hooks’s and Cone’s philosophy of race—women themselves must claim that femininity, must question that femininity, must define it for themselves. We must use this analysis of masculinity and femininity to nuance discussions about gender; we must refuse to let this analysis fall into binary language and instead flesh out the idea that gender is not dualism, nor a spectrum, but a vast, multi-dimensional expanse of possibility and varying experiences. By claiming and validating these identities, we interrupt a long-standing dialogue moderated by masculine institutions.

This interruption—this idea that does and does not yet fully exist—must ultimately transform into a shift in conversation: creating a conversation that affords humanity to people of every gender and every identity, while celebrating the differences between them.

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