

# EXPLORING MASCULINITIES

IDENTITY, INEQUALITY, CONTINUITY,  
AND CHANGE

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## 32. MASCULINITIES AND POST-HOMOPHOBIAS?

Two white, male, straight fans of Chick-fil-A, Skyler Stone and Mike Smith, found themselves disturbed by the company's public stance opposing same-sex marriage in 2012. The two men wanted to eat Chick-fil-A's delicious fast food, but did not want to compromise deeply held values about equality and civil rights for all. So they decided to stage a protest at their local Chick-fil-A. Theirs was not the usual protest featuring signs, urging boycotts, or presenting a list of demands. Instead, their protest consisted of showing exactly how far two straight guys were willing to go in support of both gay rights and the love of Chick-fil-A: they staged a kiss-in . . . with each other. While cameras rolled, these two handsome twenty-something heterosexual-identified men called their girlfriends to secure permission, washed their mouths with mouthwash, and asked gay men for kissing advice. Duly prepared, the pair walked up to a Chick-fil-A "take out" window, placed their order, and passionately embraced—kissing (with overdramatic use of tongue and leg movements) in full view of a gathered crowd and restaurant employees.

Stone and Smith are both comedians and played their protest for laughs. That a protest by two straight men in support of gay rights even happened, much less involved a same-sex kiss, however, signifies important social transformations underway. Indeed, the past decade has witnessed a sea change in gay rights, both in terms of visibility and in terms of response from heterosexual men to homosexuality. Take, for instance, the reaction to Jason Collins, a professional basketball player who came out after his first year playing in the NBA. While his story made front-page news, prominent basketball stars, politicians, and other public figures responded with support and praise. Similarly, straight men are publicly standing by their gay brethren, whether it be hip-hop artist Mackelmore singing his support for marriage equality in his anthem "One Love" or straight male Canadian

teenagers holding a school-wide "pink out" to protest homophobic bullying.

On first read, these changes seem to challenge understandings of homophobia as a central component of masculinity in the West (e.g., Kimmel 1994; Pascoe 2007). In her essay for this volume (Reading 10), Melanie Heath offers one way to more critically consider whether these practices are inconsistent with the enduring significance of homophobia. Heath refers to these practices as part of what she calls "soft-boiled" masculinity. Looking at the practices of evangelical Christian men, she argues that new masculine practices can sometimes work to conceal existing forms of inequality, but perhaps in new ways.<sup>1</sup>

In discussing the contemporary relationship between masculinity and homophobia, Heath's claims about the complexity of contemporary gender practices as both changing *and* reinscribing inequality in new ways is a useful starting point. In this essay we examine the contemporary relationship between masculinity and sexuality in three identity practices. In doing so we suggest that a useful way to think about the relationship between masculinity and sexuality is not to think of sexuality as inhered in male bodies (heterosexual or homosexual), but as *discursive practice*. That is, when we think of sexuality as located in particular homosexual or heterosexual bodies, it means that heterosexuals are the homophobic ones and that homophobia is being directed at gay men. Instead we argue that homophobia is best understood—as Connell (1995) suggests of masculinity—as multiple (e.g., Stein 2005). Homophobia is often discussed as a psychological or political disposition. But homophobia can also operate as complex forms of *gendered practice*.

The iterations of homophobia we address here do not necessitate the fear or hatred of gay men. Rather, they are contemporary forms of gender practice that recuperate existing relations of power and inequality

among men and between men and women. A central mechanism of this "emergent homophobia" (Stein 2005) is what Pascoe (2005, 2007) refers to as "fag discourse." *Fag discourse* is a gendered and sexualized disciplinary practice, policing selves and others into acceptably masculine identities, dispositions, relations, and enactments. Within this framework, heterosexuality is not only about desire or identity, but also about gendered practice involving twin strategies: "repudiation" and "confirmation." Fag discourse is a gendered practice that simultaneously rejects a "fag" identity (repudiation) and enforces dominance over women (confirmation). In investigating practices of what Bridges (2014) refers to as sexual aesthetics (or the appearance of gayness or straightness), we complicate the face-value interpretation of changes in masculine practice as indicative of a transformation in gender and sexual relations. Although men's actions are often laudable and well intended, these new practices and performances often have the less visible consequence of shoring up particular masculine identities under the appearance of "open mindedness," progress, and change. What we are seeing is not necessarily a kinder, gentler form of masculinity, but a "soft-boiled" masculinity, discursively repackaged in light of feminist critique and challenge (e.g., Demetriou 2001; Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). We argue that fag discourse, compulsive heterosexuality, and heterosexual men's comfort with and adoption of "gay aesthetics" are practices associated with emergent forms of homophobia. They illustrate the tenacity of gender *inequality* behind a façade of gender and sexual equality.

### A POST-HOMOPHOBIA ERA?

The story about homophobia as a foundational element of contemporary manifestations of masculinity is a familiar one at this point. The argument may have emerged out of the fact that men have traditionally expressed more sexual prejudice than women on surveys (e.g., Herek 1986). As Michael Kimmel famously argued, "Homophobia is a central organizing principal of our cultural definition of manhood" (1994: 214). Similarly, Raewyn Connell (1995) situates "subordinated masculinities" as those against

which "hegemonic masculinity" is most powerfully defined. Gay masculinities, for Connell (1992, 1995), best illustrate contemporary configurations of subordinated masculinity. Homophobia is a central mechanism by which hegemonic masculinity is constituted and maintained (Connell 1992, 1995). Gay men, in other words, perform a constitutive role in shaping hegemonic masculinity.

This analysis makes intuitive sense. Popular examples of boys' and men's homophobia abound. Take, for example, the recent spate of stories about young men who have left this world by their own hands, unable to bear the homophobic bullying of which they were targets (Pascoe 2013). Indeed, homophobic epithets permeate popular culture—from the military, to Hollywood movies, to sporting events to schools. The phrase, "Hijack (sic) this Fags" was scrawled on the side of a bomb to be dropped on Afghanistan during 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom.<sup>2</sup> The "Bleacher Creatures" at Yankee baseball games regularly serenade fans of the opposing team by singing homophobic lyrics to the tune of the Village People's anthem "YMCA."<sup>3</sup> In 2012, a public school principal punished two young men for fighting by forcing them to sit and hold hands in front of the student body.<sup>4</sup> A brief glance at the online world reveals the prevalence of these sorts of epithets in mediated spaces as well. A project at the University of Alberta's Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Service—[www.NoHomophobes.com](http://www.NoHomophobes.com)—has been tracking the use of the words "faggot," "dyke," "that's so gay," and "no homo" on the micro-blogging service Twitter since July 2012. By September 2014 the word "dyke" has been used almost 3 million times, "so gay" 8.2 million times, "no homo" 8.1 million, and "faggot" more than 29 million times. Given the role of homophobia in contemporary understandings of masculinity, the prevalence of a masculine homophobic insult on Twitter seems little accident.

Empirical studies show that these are not isolated incidents. Men continue to espouse higher levels of homophobic sentiment and behavior compared to women (Burn 2000; Falomir-Pichastor et al. 2009). Homophobic language and attitudes are disproportionately deployed by young men, and boys rate these insults much more seriously than do girls (Poteat and

Rivers 2010; Thurlow 2001). Men are also more likely to direct this homophobia at gay men, rather than lesbians (Herek 2002; Moskowitz et al. 2010). In fact, homophobic behavior, especially among young men, might even be considered *normative* behavior. These types of homophobic sentiments are tied to men's understandings of themselves as masculine. For instance, research shows that the more men express conformity to traditional masculine norms, the more they express negative attitudes toward gay men (Keiller 2010). Similarly, when men are told they are emasculated in experimental research, they are more likely to express homophobic attitudes (Willer et al. 2013).

Yet, evidence from popular culture such as the Chick-fil-A protest, openly gay professional athletes, or hip-hop songs evidencing straight male ally-ship seem to contradict some of these claims. If homophobia is so central to contemporary constructions of masculinity, these examples implicitly ask, why are straight, normatively masculine men kissing each other in public in support of gay rights? Recent survey research indicates that these examples illustrate a larger trend.

For instance, a 2014 report from the Pew Research Center indicated that support for gay marriage has reached an unprecedented level of 52 percent of Americans.<sup>5</sup> This is a dramatic and rapid rise from their 2003 survey indicating a level of support of 33 percent. Men still approve of gay marriage at lower rates than do women and older people at lower rates than younger people. But between 2003 and 2013, men between the ages of 18–49 changed the most in their approval of gay marriage, increasing their approval by 18 percentage points. Similarly, in 2010, Gallup reported that men were, for the first time since it has been measured, *more* likely than women to classify “gay/lesbian relations” as “morally acceptable.”<sup>6</sup> Although we are not suggesting this is a tipping point, these changes—at least implicitly—question the continued centrality of homophobia to masculinity. If nothing else, they require explanation.

In this chapter we suggest a way to reconcile this seeming contradiction posed by these twin trends apparently happening side by side. Rather than suggesting that homophobia is *either* still a bedrock of masculinity *or* that it is in decline, we suggest that

both of these trends are occurring. To understand how homophobia can *both* remain a normative foundation of contemporary Western masculinity *and* that men's homophobic attitudes can be drastically changing, we need to understand two issues. First, we need to understand sexuality as something that does not necessarily reside in particular bodies, but as gendered discursive practice. Second, we need to understand that there are multiple ways to measure and express homophobia; some may be declining, others remaining, and still others emerging. New forms of gender and sexual inequality materialize even as others are called into question. Indeed—as with masculinity—it is more appropriate to speak of “homophobias” than the singular homophobia.<sup>7</sup>

#### REFRAMING HOMOPHOBIA: REPUDIATION, CONFIRMATION, AND SEXUAL AESTHETICS

Think for a moment about the findings of the following study: in a survey of 111 Canadian undergraduate men, *none* of them answered affirmatively to the question “if you were to call a straight man a ‘fag’ or ‘faggot’ would you seriously be suggesting that you really and truly believe the man is gay?” (Brown and Alderson 2010). Yet, only 21 percent of them stated that they would *not* use a homophobic epithet to refer to another man (Brown and Alderson 2010). How can we make sense of this? One the one hand, the men in this study say they would use these terms to insult someone; on the other hand, they say this has nothing to do with a sexual identity. Brown and Alderson's study illustrates what others miss: when we only think of sexuality as inhering in particular bodies and identities, we miss the ways it operates to discursively construct masculinity as well. In other words, we have to think of sexuality as a form of gender policing, rather than solely as an identity, desire or practice. Below, we discuss three ways this happens—through “fag discourse,” “compulsive heterosexuality,” and straight men's strategic use of “gay aesthetics”. Through examples drawn from different research projects, we suggest that these three phenomena exemplify the complex relations by which contemporary gender and sexual inequalities are challenged and reproduced (sometimes at the same time).

#### REPUDIATION: FAG DISCOURSE

One critically important aspect of the two young men who protested at Chick-fil-A is that they did so humorously.<sup>8</sup> Their protest was undertaken in ways that strategically ensured (throughout the protest) that no one could mistake them as *actually* gay. They signaled that they were explicitly not gay in a variety of ways: asking their girlfriends for permission to kiss (situating each of them within heterosexual relationships), asking gay men for advice (underscoring the fact that authentically straight men could not accomplish this without advice), cleaning their mouths out in ways that one usually would not for a kiss, and finally kissing in a manner that looked more like attacking each other than something erotic, passionate, tender, or loving. Their intentions merit celebration. On another level, however, Stone and Smith's protest accomplished something else: they made a big display of exactly how *straight* they are while making a joke about same-sex desire all in support of gay rights. How in the world could these men be making a homophobic joke while supporting gay rights? We suggest that answering this question means critically dissecting exactly what we mean by “homophobia” and how it works.

While researching contemporary understandings of masculinity among high schoolers in Northern California, Pascoe came to understand that for contemporary American boys, masculinity entails displaying power, competence, a lack of emotions, heterosexuality, and dominance. Said Kevin, one of her respondents, to be masculine is to be “tough.” The ideal man is “strong” and “can't be too emotional,” added Erik. Maleness does not confer masculinity on boys. Rather masculinity entailed repeatedly signaling power, competence, emotional stoicism, heterosexuality, and dominance. In Pascoe's research with teenage boys, she finds that this signaling appears in two ways: repudiation and confirmation. Repudiatory practices take the form of a *fag discourse* whereas confirmation practices take the form of *compulsive heterosexuality*.

Thinking of young men's gendered and sexual behavior as a fag discourse makes clear that the homophobia and homophobic language that is so central to shaping contemporary heterosexual masculine identities (Kehler 2007; Levy et al. 2012;

Pascoe 2007; Poteat et al. 2010) is not just about gay men. Rather, young men's homophobia is also a primary mechanism through which they socialize each other into normatively masculine behaviors, practices, attitudes, and dispositions (Pascoe 2007). A fag discourse consists of jokes, taunts, imitations, and threats on which young men rely to publicly signal their rejection of that which is considered “unmasculine.” In other words, homophobic harassment has as much (if not more) to do with masculinity as it does with actual fear of gay men (Corbett 2001; Kimmel 1994). Homophobic insults are levied against boys who are not masculine, if only momentarily, *and* boys who identify (or are identified by others) as gay. Recent research has also documented the deployment of “no-homo” as having similar meanings (Brown 2011). Indeed, it is possible to rely on fag discourse with different terms (Fair 2011) or even without deploying a derogatory term at all (Bridges 2010).

Young men actively assert that “fag” is the ultimate insult for a boy. One respondent, Darnell, stated, “Since you were little boys you've been told, ‘hey, don't be a little faggot.’” Another, Jeremy, emphasized that this insult essentially reduced a boy to nothing: “To call someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that's like saying that you're nothing.” Young men's daily lives often consist of interactions in which they frantically lob these epithets at one another and try to deflect them from themselves. Practices that seem to reflect basic homophobia such as imitating same-sex eroticism, calling someone queer, or mincing about with limp wrists are also about policing gendered identities and practices (see also Bridges 2010). Through making homophobic jokes, calling other boys gay, and imitating effeminate men, boys assure themselves and others of their masculinity.

Many young men explained their frequent use of insults like queer, gay, and fag by asserting, as Keith put it, “guys are just homophobic.” However, analyzing their homophobic practices as a “fag discourse” shows that their behavior reflects not only a fear of same-sex desire, but also a specific fear of *men's* same-sex desire. Many reported that homophobic insults applied primarily to boys, not to girls. Whereas Jake asserted that he didn't like gay people, he quickly

added, "Lesbians, okay, that's good!" Now, Jake is not situating lesbians as "good" because of some enlightened approach to sexuality, but because, as Ray said, "To see two hot chicks banging bodies in a bed, that's like every guy's fantasy right there. It's the truth. I've heard it so many times."

Furthermore, several boys strongly suggested that descriptors like fag, queer, and gay had little to do with actual sexual practices or desires. Much like the surveyed Canadian undergraduate men (Brown and Alderson 2010), Darnell claimed, "It doesn't have anything to do with being gay." Adding to this sentiment, J. L. said, "Fag, seriously, it has nothing to do with sexual preference at all. You could just be calling somebody an idiot, you know?" As David explained, "Being gay is just a lifestyle. It's someone you choose to sleep with. You can still throw a football around and be gay." David's final statement clarifies the distinction between popular understandings of these insults and young people's actual use of them. That is, they have to do with men's same-sex eroticism, but at their core they are best understood as discursive strategies that discipline gender practices and identities. In asserting the primacy of gender to the definition of these seemingly homophobic insults, young men reflect what Riki Wilchins (2003) calls the "Eminem exception." Eminem explains that his use of the term "faggot" does not refer to sexual orientation; rather, he claims that it simply means that they are weak and unmanly. Although it is not necessarily acceptable to be gay, if a man were gay and masculine—as in David's portrait of the football-throwing gay man—he does not deserve the insult.

Being subject to homophobic harassment has as much to do with failing at masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, or in any way revealing weakness as it does with sexual identity. Homophobic epithets such as "fag" have gendered meanings and sexual meanings. The insult is levied against boys who are not masculine (even momentarily) and boys who identify or are identified by others as gay. This sets up a very complicated daily ordeal in which boys continually strive to avoid being subject to the epithet but are constantly vulnerable to it.

This sort of homophobia appears frequently in boys' joking relationships. Sociologists have pointed

out that joking is central to men's relationships in general (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1987). Through aggressive joking, boys cement friendship bonds with one another. Boys often draw laughs though imitating effeminate men or men's same-sex desire. Emir frequently imitated effeminate men who presumably sexually desired other men to draw laughs from students in his introductory drama class. One day his teacher, disturbed by noise outside the classroom, turned to close the door, saying, "We'll shut this unless anyone really wants to watch sweaty boys playing basketball." Emir lisped, "I wanna watch the boys play!" The rest of the class laughed at his imitation—collectively repudiating a gendered and sexual performance of masculinity. No one in the class thought Emir was actually gay, as he purposefully mocked both same-sex sexual desire and an effeminate gender identity and performance. Rather, this sort of ritual reminded other youth that *masculine* men do not desire other men, nor do they lisp or behave in other feminine ways. It also reminded them that those men who do behave in these ways merit laughter and social derision. Additionally, this is a powerful illustration of the ways that fag discourse is often at work even when no one explicitly uses the word "fag."

Because so many activities could render a boy vulnerable to these insults, perhaps it is little surprise that Ben asserted that one could be labeled for "anything, literally anything. Like you were trying to turn a wrench the wrong way, 'dude you're a fag.' Even if a piece of meat drops out of your sandwich, 'you fag!'" Although this research shows that there are a particular set of behaviors that might provoke the slur, it is no wonder that Ben felt this way. In that statement, he reveals the intensity and extent of the policing boys endure to avoid the epithet.

Indeed, examining fag discourse explains the humor contained in Smith and Stone's protest. Fag discourse can exist alongside support for civil rights for gay people. On the one hand, much like Emir, Stone and Smith are drawing laughs for their performance of same-sex desire. On the other, much like the other boys in Pascoe's study, they show how such homophobic jokes can also be divorced from actual dislike of gay men.

#### CONFIRMATION: COMPULSIVE HETEROSEXUALITY

Looking at young men's homophobia as a fag discourse—as a discursive engagement with masculinity—allows us to understand young men's practices of heterosexuality differently as well. They defend against the homophobic teasing and harassment of fag discourse by assuring others of their heterosexuality. In the same way that boys' homophobia is not specifically about sexual identity, compulsive heterosexuality is not only about expressing love, desire, and intimacy. "Compulsive heterosexuality" is about demonstrating a gendered and sexualized dominance over girls' bodies. In other words, the sort of gendered teasing in which boys engage takes a toll on girls as well as other boys; girls' bodies are physically and symbolically mobilized to shield young men from homophobic epithets.

Perhaps the most obvious example of compulsive heterosexuality is the process of and talk about "getting girls." Getting girls is such a hallmark of masculinity that students at River High laughed uproariously as two students lip-synced a Chris Tucker routine making fun of Michael Jackson for not being able to "get a girl." Indeed, young men suggest that "getting a girl" through having a girlfriend (and assumed sexual access to her body) is an important component of masculinity. For young men identified as feminine and teased for unmasculine practices, having a girlfriend functions as a form of symbolic protection against homophobic harassment. Justin, for instance, suggested that some boys have girlfriends "so they look like they're not losers or they're not gay." Because of the difficulty of avoiding all of the behaviors that might render one vulnerable to teasing, having a girlfriend helps to inure boys to accusations of the fag discourse.

Similarly, young men engaged in cross-gender touching to establish heterosexual reputations. Their physical interchanges may first appear to be harmless flirtation, but on closer inspection, the behaviors are integral in reinforcing young men's dominance over young women's bodies. The use of touch maintains social hierarchies (Henley 1977). Superiors touch subordinates, invade their space, and interrupt them

in ways subordinates do not interact with social superiors and these relationships are often gendered ones. Young people of both genders touch each other as part of daily interaction, communication, and flirtation. In many instances cross-sex touching was lightly flirtatious and reciprocal. But touching rituals ranged from playfully flirtatious to assault-like interactions. And even playful touching can also be understood as interactionally shoring up relations by which men dominate women's bodies. Young men might physically constrain girls under the guise of flirtation. For instance, Pascoe watched as one teen wrapped his arms around another and started to "freak" her, or grind his pelvis into hers, as she struggled to get away.<sup>9</sup> She watched as another young man wrapped his arms around a young woman's neck and hold her while his friend punched her in the stomach, albeit lightly, and she squealed until they stopped. Perhaps most dramatically, she watched as one young man jabbed a female classmate in the crotch with his drumstick as he yelled, "Get raped! Get raped!" Touching and constraining female bodies in these examples get translated as masculinity. Demonstrating dominance requires someone to (at least symbolically) be dominated.

Although people jokingly refer to young men's sex talk as "boys will be boys" or "locker room talk," this kind of sex talk is part of the process of constructing a masculine identity. Young men enact and naturalize their heterosexuality by asserting "guys are horndogs" or by claiming that it is "kind of impossible for a guy" to not "think of sex every two minutes." Thinking about young men's sexual performance in terms of compulsive heterosexuality shows that asserting that one is a "horndog" is actually a gendered performance. Young men's sex talk often takes the form of "mythic story telling" (Kehily and Nayak 1997) by which they tell larger-than-life tales about their sexual adventures, their bodies, and young women's bodies that do not reflect love, desire, or sensuality, but rather dominance over them. Pedro, for instance, laughed and acted out having sex with his girlfriend by leaning back up against the wall, legs and arms spread and head turning back and forth as he continued to say proudly, "I did her so hard when I was done she was bleeding. I tore her

walls!" His friends surrounding him cheered in amazement. Violence frequently framed these young men's stories. At other times, young men shared stories about making girls bleed, fart, or defecate during sexual interactions. These stories are about sexual interactions, but have little to do with sex or intimacy. Rather, they are examples of how young men can manipulate young women's bodies. It does not matter whether they are true; what matters is that these young men enact discursive dominance through stories of heterosexual conquest.

To understand the role of sexuality in constructing and maintaining masculinity it is important to look at sexuality—and heterosexuality in particular—not as a set of desires, identities, or dispositions, but as discursive practice. In this way we can understand Stone and Smith's calls to their girlfriends to not actually be about respecting their girlfriends' wishes, but as a discursive practice that positioned their girlfriends as masculinity resources attending to their heterosexuality. Compulsive heterosexuality and fag discourse are twin practices through which young men reinforce linkages among sexuality, inequality, and gender.

#### STRAIGHT MEN AND GAY AESTHETICS

Importantly, Stone and Smith's protest at Chick-fil-A did not involve violence against women. Nor did they rely on derogatory homophobic terms. Arguably, however, they were engaging in a form of fag discourse, albeit unintentionally. They strategically framed their kiss, for instance, in a way that echoed Emir's temporary performance of a stereotype of gay masculinity. Certainly, Emir seemed not to have had a political motivation for his behavior in the classroom. As such, Stone and Smith's temporary performance of gay masculinity is different from Emir's in an important way. They were motivated to raise awareness about sexual inequality and to stand up against it. But, in doing so, like Emir, they had a complicated interactional task in front of them: they performed gay masculinity, but strategically framed that performance as "straight."

To fully appreciate this process as well as its relationship with gender and sexual inequality necessitates a discussion of what Bridges (2014) refers to as "sexual aesthetics." *Sexual aesthetics* refer to the

cultural and stylistic distinctions utilized to delineate boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals. A wide variety of "things" can "count" as sexual aesthetics: interests, material objects, styles of bodily comportment, language, opinions, clothing, behaviors, and more. Sexual aesthetics are what allow us to put our sexual identities on display—even when we are not being "sexual." And sexual aesthetics (gay or straight) are deeply gendered. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that sexual aesthetics are an integral component of gender performances. In fact, we often read gender transgressions as indicative of gay identities (or, perhaps more generally, "non-straight" identities) and gender conformity as indicative of straight identities. Yet, Stone and Smith, and some of Pascoe's heterosexual-identifying research participants, strategically rely on temporary transgressions that have the effect of shoring up (rather than calling into question) their *heterosexual* masculine identities. As Steve Seidman writes, "[M]ore and more Americans [are] becoming aware of homosexuality and skilled at reading signs of sexual identity" (2002: 56). Indeed, research suggests that young straight men are not only able to identify gay aesthetics, but also increasingly emboldened to accessorize their heterosexual identities with bits and pieces of gay culture (e.g., Demetriou 2001; Bridges 2010, 2014; Arxer 2011). There is, however, no necessary relationship between this process of cultural appropriation and gender or sexual equality.

For instance, in the pro-feminist group of men in Northern Virginia Bridges (2014) studied ethnographically for just over a year, it was common for men in the group to claim that they were "mistaken for gay" and to identify with aspects of gay culture in the process. Like Stone and Smith, one member of the group—Shane—claims to strategically mobilize a symbolic protest against sexual inequality: "I take it as an opportunity to help gay people. . . . I'll usually say something like, 'Because I'm stylish? Or because I'm nice to people? . . . What? Because I'm healthy and care about my clothes and the way I look?' You know? Like, 'Oh, because I have good taste in music?'" On the face of it, Shane is actively resisting heterosexism and attempting to emphatically illustrate to others that he is not homophobic. He may also be attempting to critique

heteronormative configurations of masculinity if being "nice," "clean," "healthy," and "stylish" call men's (hetero)sexuality into question.

Yet, Shane is also relying on fag discourse—but he does so in a way that is qualitatively different from the young men in Pascoe's research. Fag discourse relies on clear boundaries between gay and straight. This is why boys and young men feel comfortable flirting with the boundary: their performances rely on and reproduce the belief that this boundary exists. And although Shane might appear to be calling the boundaries between "gay" and "straight" into question by illustrating that a straight man can look and act "gay" too, he also participates in (re)defining those behaviors, interests, and qualities as "gay" in the first place. When others in the group discussed having been mistaken for gay, it wasn't uncommon for them to joke about how to avoid a similar kind of mistake in the future. For instance, Ben, a school counselor in the group, shared that students mistake him for gay. He shared, "Maybe I'll put a car engine in [my office]. Or like hang some porn on my wall." Similarly, Jacob, a bank teller who loves to wear extremely colorful, fitted clothes, shared that his clothing has caused others to question his sexuality. In response, he joked, "Would it make you more comfortable if I looked like some oppressive Bible salesman, like telling women to get back in the kitchen?"

Shane, Ben, and Jacob are all doing something similar here. As feminist-identifying men, they strategically rely on gay aesthetics to discursively distance themselves from masculinities that have earned a bad reputation among feminists.<sup>10</sup> Their gendered performances and discussions often appear to be a sort of anti-fag discourse. That is, they wear being read as sexually illegible as a badge of honor rather than an insult. However, the ways Bridges's participants trade stories of having been "mistaken for gay" share a great deal of common ground with the "sex talk" Pascoe observed among high school boys. Whether the stories are objectively true misses the point. These stories are traded as a form of masculine capital, validating specific masculinities by implicitly "Othering" masculinities that fail to meet the criteria they interactionally define as worthy of status and respect. Thus, similar to Pascoe's participants, these men are

attempting to authenticate their masculinities. Like Stone and Smith's awkward protest at Chick-fil-A, these young men claim identities as "allies" or "feminists" that render any discussion of how their behavior might entail a gendered form of sexual inequality as impossible, or at the very least, unfair.

Yet, the pro-feminist men in Bridges's research transgress gender and sexual boundaries in ways that not only leave those boundaries intact, but also simultaneously symbolically reinforce them. One effect of this practice, for instance, was to discursively produce an understanding of gender and sexual inequality as one with "good guys" and "bad guys." In this way, mistaken-for-gay stories performed a bit of cultural work for these men, situating themselves as outside the very systems of inequality this group organizes to oppose. This is clearly a qualitatively different kind of cultural work than that performed by Pascoe's research participants. Problematically, however, a common set of consequences are associated with each: they strengthen symbolic boundaries separating "gay" from "straight." Whereas Pascoe's participants reiterate symbolic boundaries and hierarchies between gay and straight culture and people, Bridges's pro-feminist respondents who trade mistaken-for-gay stories do so in a way that attempts to symbolically invert sexual hierarchies for considerations of gay and straight aesthetics. Indeed, these men are not only claiming to be mistaken for gay, but also wear these instances as badges of honor. And although this is an important step in challenging inequality, the practice simultaneously obscures the fact that little is being done here to challenge inequalities between gay and straight *people*.

Thus, rather than calling this boundary into question, gender transgressions involving heterosexual men's strategic discussion of or reliance upon gay aesthetics to (often momentarily) perform gay masculinities or subjectively claim ownership over elements of gay culture. Yet, unlike Pascoe's participants, the young men in Bridges's (2014) research invoked fag discourse toward a different end. Although the repudiation and confirmation going on here is certainly a qualitatively different ilk than that associated with Pascoe's research, a set of common consequences unite young men's behavior and discursive strategies surrounding masculine identification and recognition in both studies.



## CONCLUSION: MASCULINITIES AND EMERGENT HOMOPHOBIAS

In some ways, the cultural transformations we describe here can be interpreted as a sign of feminist progress—social change. We suggest, however, that rather than reading them as a *sign* of progress, they are better interpreted as a *consequence* of feminist progress. As Demetriou writes, "Patriarchy was in need of new legitimacy strategies and many men were asked to renegotiate their positions in patriarchal societies, their power, and the masculine identities" (2001: 349). As feminist critiques of normative masculinities have made their way into the mainstream, performances, discourses, ideologies, and practices that have historically upheld gender and sexual inequality have been put into the spotlight and publicly challenged. *Labeling* privilege, however, is not tantamount to *dismantling* privilege. Our research indicates a need to theorize homophobia—like masculinity—as multiple, as flexible (e.g., Johnson 2005). Powerful systems of inequality, like sexism and homophobia, are flexible and capable of adapting to new historical circumstances. Thus, sometimes, what might initially look like social *change* is actually *continuity*.

Our research supports Arlene Stein's (2005) analysis of what she refers to as "emergent homophobias." Stein suggests that it is not the case that new "variants of homophobia are supplanting earlier forms that focused on homosexual gender nonconformity. Rather, they may coexist alongside them, becoming more or less salient depending on the local context" (2005: 617). In other words, homophobia is not just about a simplistic fear of homosexuality (Bryant and Vidal-Ortiz 2008; Herek 2004; Plummer 1981); rather, homophobias can occupy a complex constellation of practices, ideologies, and discourses, some of which may even seem, on the surface, progressive. Whether emergent homophobias are "soft-boiled" or not, we must continue to focus not only on their form, but also on their associated consequences.

Emergent homophobias provide a language for understanding connections among fag discourse, compulsive heterosexuality, and straight men's engagement with gay aesthetics. Taken together, these are complex and often contradictory expressions of

homophobia. Each, however, is connected by being tied to masculinity.<sup>11</sup> Pascoe's research found a form of homophobia among students that has as much to do with gender (and race) as it does with sexuality or fear of gay individuals. This is a *transformation* in gender and sexual inequality. Indeed, many students expressed, in earnest, that they would never direct "fag" maliciously at boys and young men identifying as gay. Rather, Pascoe argued that these boys' homophobia is best understood as a casual form of gender policing wherein they rely on and reproduce systems of gender and sexual inequality in interactions as a part of interactionally constructing their own gender identities vis-à-vis those of others (both young men and women) around them.

Bridges's participants too exhibit a transformation in masculinity. Historically, few heterosexual men have sought recognition as heterosexual men by associating themselves with gay culture. Yet this is precisely what Bridges's participants are doing. A superficial reading of these men's behavior might situate them as completely at odds with Pascoe's participants. Indeed, men in the group would have never used the term "fag" in any way other than to critique its use. Many men in the group used the term "the 'F' word" to refer to the epithet because many felt it was too offensive to say. At a more general level, just like Pascoe's participants, these men are attempting to demonstrate masculinity—attempting to prove they were "the right kind of man." It is a practical discourse enabling these men to gain symbolic distance from some of the more odious and publicly challenged elements of hegemonic masculinities. So, whereas Pascoe's respondents seem to be engaging in masculinity practices that might look familiar—homophobic and heterosexist behaviors—Bridges's respondents' identification with minority sexual identity practices and culture can obscure their participation in similar practices. The way in which men engage in masculinity projects and the role of homophobia in those projects is not always straightforward. This all suggests that emergent forms of masculinity and homophobia are best analyzed in terms of *both* their forms and their consequences. Whereas a great deal of research asks whether masculine practices are either challenging

or reproducing inequality, our research illustrates that it is possible for gender and sexual inequality to be simultaneously challenged *and* reproduced.

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8. Humor and social protest are not incompatible. Yet, as Bridges's (2010) study of men's (mis)behavior in "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes" marches indicates, the uses of humor in social protest merit critical attention and reflection.
9. "Grinding" has been more systematically studied as well. For instance, Ronen's (2010) study of the gendered dynamics of grinding addresses the ways that the practice reproduces gendered interactions that privilege men's pleasure and sexual agency and afford them higher status than women.
10. See Bridges and Pascoe (2014) for a more thorough analysis of the diverse ways research has found that young, straight, white men are engaged in a diversity of practices we identify as "discursive distancing."
11. We connect the emergent homophobias addressed here with other emergent configurations of masculinity largely enacted by young, straight, white men with a larger issue in a separate article, referring to them as "hybrid masculinities" (see Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Much of the research on related social practices by contemporary young, white, heterosexual men has found that these changes more often shore up existing systems of power and inequality in new ways rather than dismantling them.

## NOTES

1. See also Messner (1993, 2007), Donovan (1998), Demetriou (2001), Heath (2003), Stein (2005), Bridges (2014), and Bridges and Pascoe (2014) on related points.
2. <http://la.indymedia.org/news/2001/10/12221.php/>.
3. <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/yankees/bleacher-creatures-agree-stop-gay-chant-ymca-song-yankee-stadium-article-1.192948/>.
4. <http://nbclatino.com/2012/12/03/controversy-after-principal-makes-two-boys-hold-hands-in-public-after-fight/>.
5. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/09/24/graphics-slideshow-changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>.
6. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/135764/americans-acceptance-gay-relations-crosses-threshold.aspx/>.
7. See the special issue of *Sexualities* 2008 11 (4) on "Rethorizing Homophobias" for more on this line of theorizing.