Queer Masculine Bodies? The Role of Marginalized Men in Contemporary Western Culture

Derek Jones (Gerda Saunders)
Department of English

What exactly is masculinity? And why is it a major component in the formation of identity by men, and indeed, women, in contemporary Western society? One apparent and almost clichéd response is that our world was formulated upon and through a patriarchal schema. While many feminists have advocated the more equitable arrangement of power relationships, men often continue to construct "the rules of manhood so that only the tiniest fraction of men come to believe that they are the biggest of wheels, the sturdiest of oaks, the most virulent repudiators of femininity, the most daring and aggressive. We've managed to disempower the overwhelming majority of American men by other means—such as discriminating on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, age, or sexual preference.”

As a result of the way masculinity is defined, recent popular culture and contemporary literature seems to increasingly limit masculinity as a category and the kinds of sexual and social practices it affords men. Historian George Chauncey has made it evident that within the present hetero/homo binarism that governs men's lives in contemporary society, male sexuality seems to be allowed less mobility than male sexuality sixty or seventy years prior.

Yet, despite its circumscription the notion of masculinity still plays a prominent, if not central, role in both gay and straight men's lives.

I will discuss notions of masculinity as performance and social praxis. My research will focus on what contemporary masculinity means for marginalized men and how they relate to and interact with masculine templates set before them. I will particularly focus on the role that the male masculine body plays in the lives of marginalized men. What effect does the ever-increasing discourse on the shrinking limits of masculinity have on queer masculine bodies? As one critical theorist has postulated, "In their pathetically minute attention to the styles of a power from which they have been permanently excluded, the oppressed perform nothing more subversive than their own submission to being brainwashed; safely sequestered, and, if necessary, readily for annihilation." Is this indeed the cultural position of marginalized men? While conceding that this critique may be partly true, this paper argues that the dominant culture's representations of marginalized men—and the ways in which those who are marginalized re-present and relate to cultural definitions of masculinity—first and foremost (or, to avoid the clichéd expression, primarily) reflect on the dominant culture itself.