



Theorizing Masculinity

The Origins of Masculinity

In order to begin to think about theoretical approaches to masculinity, I might begin with one of the most central questions about masculinity: who creates it and where does it come from? If we assume that masculinity is not simply produced naturally or biologically, how does it come about? No identifiable person or group of people creates masculinity and then forces people to follow it. Masculinity is far too widespread, diffuse, and complicated for any single person or group to create it. Because it infuses everything, one cannot ultimately determine its origin. To say that it is created by the family, by media, by sports, or by another means only oversimplifies the complexity of the issue. A boy is influenced by so many brands of masculinity that it is very difficult to isolate a single source. In the end, we can only try to determine as best we can what it is and how it functions.

Clearly, men tend to have more of a vested interest in the propagation of many types of masculinity than women do, since they more often benefit from its advantages (or at least think they benefit from them). The male body is the most common purveyor of masculinity, but that does not mean that masculinity is entirely contained within the male body nor that non-men cannot profit from its advantages. Men may aid its propagation more than women, but other groups often considered outside the field of hegemonic masculinity can and do participate in its spread as well, including women, gay men, and lesbians. In fact, the very desire to have masculinity, when one perceives oneself as a member of a group not possessing it, can be a motivating factor in attempts to obtain it and in the value attached to it. One might imagine a female business executive who feels that she

needs more masculinity because she lacks it or perceives herself as lacking it, whether because she is a woman in a male-dominated world or because culture does not automatically accord her the possibility of having masculinity. Female-to-male transsexuals might also have a vested interest in the masculinity that they desire in order to obtain a greater sense of wholeness. A further reason why men cannot simply be considered the inventors of masculinity is that many are critical of masculinity, while on the other hand some gay men and heterosexual women like it and may in fact find it erotic and attractive in themselves or in others. In short, although men may have more to gain from masculinity than other groups, the cause or the origin of masculinity cannot be directly linked to the male body in any simple or stable way.

A basic tenet of this chapter is that there is no single or simple origin to masculinity, and that it cannot be isolated as beginning in a single place or at a single point. Rather, it is constantly created and challenged in numerous ways. This chapter will outline many of those ways, with a focus on questions related to ideology, discourse, and signs. A second tenet of this chapter – and a corollary of the first – is that not only is there no single creator of masculinity, but there is no originary form of masculinity either. There is no single model that everyone turns to in order to define masculinity and to imitate it when they want to be or to act masculine. There are only innumerable copies of masculinities floating around in culture, copies that can never be brought back to an originary masculinity that invented them. Even if one takes what seems to be an origin of some key definition of masculinity, upon examination it cannot be considered the sole origin of that brand of masculinity since other copies of that origin end up taking over the definition. The construct of the bodybuilder is a case in point. Many consider Arnold Schwarzenegger the origin of the modern image of the muscular bodybuilder and, in a larger sense, of a certain influential idea of what the ideal male body should look like. Teenage boys or other bodybuilders interested in weightlifting might pin photos of him up on their walls, consider him legendary, and imitate other aspects of his brand of masculinity (perhaps from his films). The bodybuilders who are influenced by his example might imitate him and consider him a model, but they themselves then become new copies of Schwarzeneggerian masculinity that are necessarily different from the originary form, each different in its own hybrid way. One man

might become a Latino version of Schwarzenegger, another a gay male version, another a female version, etc. Those men (or women) in turn influence the masculinity of others, whether because they too become famous or because they influence other men or boys that they encounter in their day-to-day interactions. That brand of masculinity also leaves the realm of the flesh and becomes representational, in film, TV, posters, magazines, etc. As a result, the original form of masculinity, based on Schwarzenegger himself, is widely disseminated throughout culture, and turned into a series of new originals that in turn influence other people and other texts. The documentary about Schwarzenegger's career *Pumping Iron* (1977), for instance, influences bodybuilding and then the documentary *Pumping Iron II: The Women* (1985), while influenced by the figure of Schwarzenegger, portrays a form of masculinity in a new form, which in turn has an influence on other bodybuilders. The Schwarzeneggerian form of masculinity is not absent, however, from these new versions of masculinity (quite the contrary in fact), but the new forms do not exist in the same originary forms in which they had existed before. One way to express this kind of approach to gender, then, is to say that copies of masculinity come to replace what might be considered the original. A given definition of masculinity, I might say, functions in complicated ways as it spreads throughout culture, influencing other definitions even as it is constantly transformed during its spread. This approach does not imply that gendered points of origin or various definitions of masculinity cannot be isolated, or that their influence cannot be isolated. One could still study the influence of *Pumping Iron* on the representation of the muscular male body. But those origins must be thought of as plural, as ultimately unlocalizable in a single relationship of influence.

Even the seemingly original models of masculinity themselves are not pure forms, but are already hybrid forms based on a mixture of other previous forms. Schwarzenegger's masculinity, for instance, relies on precedents, images of masculinity such as early twentieth-century photos of the male body or the idealized artistic male body of Renaissance and ancient art. Even seemingly stable masculinity, such as Schwarzenegger's, refers to other forms of masculinity, in an endless chain of linked but different masculinities. The necessary hybridity of masculinity might be considered more acute in a media-dominated era like the present in which masculinities can very easily circulate via TV, film, and the Internet.

Masculinity as Ideology

One way to understand the concept of masculinity as not created by any one person or by any single group is to consider masculinity as an ideology, a series of beliefs that a group of people buy into and that influences how they go about their lives. The concept of ideology is more traditionally associated with class and with politics (we talk about a “bourgeois ideology” or a “communist ideology”), but it is possible to think about masculinity as an ideology too. One reason to think in these terms is that ideology as a concept is often aligned with those in power: we talk about a “dominant ideology” as the political ideology that prevails in a given context. To consider masculinity as an ideology makes sense since it often is, or is often perceived of as, a subjectivity linked to power. A further parallel between masculinity and ideology is that, in the same way as no single class or single group can be considered to create ideology (though some groups are more major forces in its articulation and its propagation), no single group can be seen as responsible for constructing masculinity. Various institutions clearly have a self-interest in masculinity: the government needs soldiers to defend itself, so it promotes a military version of masculinity; the business world needs a capitalistic masculinity to make money, so it makes its version of gender appear ideal. But it is not possible to isolate any given institution as the origin of masculinity. Military masculinity is also produced, for instance, by cinema and by corporations (such as by marketing military toys to young boys). Several institutions may function together to build masculinity: sport and the military might have a mutual interest in a certain brand of muscular or fit masculinity, but neither creates masculinity from scratch. Another issue with seeing institutions as creating masculinity is that masculinity is not simply created by institutions, for masculinity itself also contributes to creating institutions. The military might try to create a military form of masculinity, but masculinity has already inflected the creation of the institution of the military in the first place, as well as the desire to propagate that genre of masculinity. So masculinity can be thought of both as created by institutions and as creating them, and the process of the construction of masculinity as a constant back-and-forth movement between masculinity and institutions.

One offshoot of thinking about masculinity as an ideology is the idea that one may buy into it without thinking about it, that it appears

so natural within a given cultural and historical context that it is not questioned. In the United States, a large percentage of the population takes capitalism for granted or considers it a normal part of everyday life. Similarly, a large percentage of people take masculinity for granted as part of everyday life (if they think about it at all). Various groups tend to have different relations to the invisibility of masculinity. Men might be more prone not to see it as ideology, and women less so since they are often closed out of it, in the same way that a communist might see capitalism as far from natural because he or she functions in another economic system. Masculinity might be seen as ideological by men at times, of course, in the same way that someone living under capitalism might at times see capitalism from a distance and as one possible economic system among many. In the same way as one becomes conscious of the capitalist system when it does not function well for them, one may be more likely to view masculinity from a distance when there is a snag, a man who is unable to maintain his masculinity or a woman who is hurt by it.

Although a single origin to an ideology cannot be located, ideologies are often assumed to be created and propagated through various social forms, especially through images, myths, discourses, and practices. By virtue of their constant and unavoidable repetition throughout culture, these tools of ideology are eventually made to seem natural and thus to keep themselves from being questioned or interrogated, and they each have their own specific function in the large-scale process of constructing masculinity as ideology. We might be most familiar with the images of masculinity that pervade us: film, TV, and billboards would be some common examples of how we are given the message that a certain kind of masculinity is valid or more valid than another. Images related to advertising are particularly important in this context since they are one social form of masculinity in which capitalism and masculinity can function in tandem, as two ideologies can work together and buttress each other's propagation. A Calvin Klein underwear advertisement, for instance, may put forward a certain image of masculinity with great force because it is putting its products forward with great zeal, and some viewers' desire to possess or to be around the form of masculinity represented is inseparable (or is made to seem inseparable) from their desire to have the product pushed. These images might not be direct representations of actual or frequent masculinity, but symbolic images that require interpretation

in order to be ideologically effective. Such symbols might function directly with readily available meanings that a culture has effectively already agreed on, as in the case of phallic symbols. On the other hand, the lack of culturally agreed-on meaning in these images can paradoxically make them more available to the ideology of masculinity since symbols or signs might be so subtle that one is less aware of their functioning than widely accepted signs like the penis.

Similar to images, myths also function as a way to make certain forms of masculinity seem eternal and unchanging, not open to change or variation, and not ideological in nature. Mythopoetic or Jungian approaches to masculinity that assume an inner core or essence of masculinity with which modern society has lost touch would fit into this category. Those who see masculinity as ideological are often skeptical and critical of such approaches, which tend to assume that there is a core of masculinity that all men can or should share and that myths put that core into an expression that explains their universality. In this approach, myths have the effect of retroactively reading a given idea of masculinity back onto all masculinity in order to make it appear universal when in fact it is fabricated. This idea is closely related to the idea that there are no underlying structures of masculinity: without such structures, myths themselves are not possible. Such myths might refer to actual myths or to narratives taken as universal that play a role similar to myths, such as Adam's creation in Genesis or Odysseus' epic journey in *The Odyssey*, whose elements are considered to represent a universal masculinity that links all men. Religious stories that explain elements of human existence might be purer examples of a myth because of their widespread cultural status, often taken as truth, meaning they can explain mythologically how aspects of masculinity come to be. The common understanding of Adam's creation, for example, makes the original man a heterosexual victim of a woman's seduction, and some believe that these aspects of Adam's creation apply to all men. Certain scientific ideas on masculinity can also become mythological in this sense when they are taken to be essential truth about men, including genetic explanations for violence or warfare, biological explanations for male sexuality, or studies about how boys are biologically more or less something than girls.

Images can be turned into myths when they become so widespread that culture takes them for granted as a narrative of masculinity. When such images are so widespread, they are taken as universal and, on a

cultural level, come to appear as mythological. The cowboy's popularity as American cultural icon means that he represents an ideal of masculinity that appeals to so many boys that it effectively becomes an American myth. Male superheroes (Superman perhaps most famously) could be considered mythological figures in this sense: it is not that the creators of the Superman story necessarily set out to create a universal image of masculinity, but elements of that image appeal to so many boys (and grown men) that American culture has come to view Superman as universal and foundational to US masculinity. Cultural images not directly about men can also be related to masculinity. The hamburger has become an American myth, an essential aspect of American identity, but part of its mythological status derives from beef's link to masculinity (we talk about "beefy" men for instance). So the cultural myth of the hamburger is buttressed by masculinity and affirms, in turn, the recurring connection between meat and masculinity.

More influential than myths, discourse constructs the ideology of masculinity as well: groups of texts around a given topic with a similar function contain certain presuppositions about masculinity that are propagated among children and adults. Key examples of cultural discourses (e.g., medical, legal, psychoanalytic, religious, pedagogical, political) include official and unofficial types in written and oral forms. Pedagogical discourse, for instance, might include textbooks, teacher-training materials and courses, official publications by the government or school districts that have implicit or explicit representations of masculinity, but it also includes unofficial forms of discourse, particularly oral forms such as conversations among teachers in the teachers' lounge, actual verbal interactions between teachers and students in the classroom, or even conversations about teaching between students themselves.

Other less common, less categorical, or less official forms of discourse also create and propagate ideologies of masculinity: there might be a discourse around men's locker rooms, for instance. While there may not be much of an official collection of written texts to serve as a foundation to study the discourse on locker rooms (though there may in fact be some), there is an oral discourse on this topic that constructs masculinity, whether it is the actual discourse that men have in the locker rooms themselves, discussions or jokes among women about men's locker rooms, or gay male pornography that takes place in locker rooms. One could undertake, for example, a study of how a discourse around

locker rooms constructs or destabilizes a certain idea of masculinity or the male body. Discourse serves as a particularly important organizing format for masculinity since language is central to masculinity (more on this later), and, because it is linguistically defined, it lends itself well to study and analysis.

A fourth way in which masculinity is propagated as ideology, one less language-based than discourse and the two other categories discussed above (images and myths), is through practices. When men perform various actions on a regular basis, they may be held within an ideology of masculinity. These actions might include sport, for instance, as men play football (and do not do gymnastics); they might include games, as boys play with toy guns (and not dolls); or they might include clothing, as men dress in jackets and ties (and not in dresses). With these practices, an ideological materiality becomes inscribed in daily life and transcends language and signs. The boy may be influenced by images or discourses around guns, and then change what he does on a daily basis (buy a toy gun, play with it, go hunting with his dad, vote for a pro-NRA political candidate). As these aspects of ideology influence practices, these practices in turn also serve to construct masculinity: the more I practice football, the more I believe that sport and masculinity are related, and the more I convey that belief to others (whether directly or indirectly). And the more American boys play football, the more American masculinity seems linked to football. Abstract ideology can never really be disassociated from the physicality of practice, and the dividing line between what I believe and what I do is never really clear or stable. To return to the question of origin, I might say that masculinity's origin cannot be isolated entirely within the realm of the abstract or of the physical either. The physical and the abstract constantly interact with each other in ways that are complicated and not easily determined.

Practices cannot be totally separated from images, myths, or discourse either. In fact, despite the distinctness of these four categories of ideology, they can all overlap with one another. Images of a militarized masculinity might pervade American film, and those images might encourage (or be reinforced by) the boyhood practice of playing with guns. The reverse can certainly be true as well: practice can influence image. The cultural practice of playing with or using guns might mean that Hollywood is more likely to make films with guns to sell films. Consequently, representations of masculinity (on TV, for instance)

should be seen as having a double nature: on the one hand, they reveal a form of masculinity that already exists in culture, but on the other hand, they construct (or help construct) the masculinity that they depict in culture. Conversely, a representation might depict a critique of masculinity already in culture, or it might invent a new critique. In both cases, however, the representation of masculinity exists in a back-and-forth relation with culture.

The prevalence of these social forms suggests that masculinity is at least largely imposed via these forms. Practices of masculinity, for example, leave the boy with little choice of how to act. But oddly, masculinity is often perceived to be free, unlike femininity and its imagined constraints. One paradox of masculinity as ideological is that it often gives the illusion of freedom, the illusion that masculinity itself can be defined as freedom, whereas in fact it is this very imagined freedom that insures subjugation and hides its own arbitrary functioning. The only freedom, in actuality, is the freedom to accept or to reject forms of masculinity. Thinking along these lines, one might reconsider widespread constructs of masculinity that are dependent on an image of freedom, such as the cowboy, the Marlboro man, or the swinging bachelor. Because I imagine my masculinity as a single man who is not married and does not want or need a wife or children and can sleep with a number of different women for one night only, I may think that my gender subjectivity embodies freedom, but the very buying into these images or ideologies of masculinity suggests that these kinds of gender formations are not outside ideology. Rather, they are very much implicated in their own subjugation. The idea of freedom and solitude and of the man who needs no one is part and parcel of the illusion of freedom, an illusion that helps insure its own subjugation to a larger and more powerful ideology of masculinity in the first place. In this sense, masculinity resembles capitalism, which also seems to be predicated on the idea of freedom – whether to earn as much money as one wants, to change class status through hard work, to buy what one wants, or to select the product desired from among a large selection of products at the store. But in fact, we are subjugated by the very desire to earn money and to buy products while convinced that we are free.

At the same time as I am subjugated by masculinity, however, understanding masculinity as ideological does not mean that I am outside consciousness of my gender or outside consciousness that I am subjugated by it. Ideology is not seamlessly accepted nor is it never experienced

as imposed. It does not necessarily function as something invisible that I buy into on a daily basis without reflection. Men can and do realize that something that they are doing without thinking is a result of the ideological imposition of masculinity. At one moment, I might perform various gendered practices without thinking about them, because I blindly buy into that ideology, but at other times, I might become very aware that I am being invited or even coerced into a given ideology of masculinity. Consequently, masculinity can be experienced in two ways. On the one hand, masculinity can be viewed as an objective phenomenon: my own masculinity makes me part of a group of men who possess masculinity, such that I am simply following masculinity and the traits that normally accompany it. When I watch a football game, for instance, I am one spectator amongst many, and it is the experience of watching that game that creates my masculinity. I thus understand my own participation in a certain aspect of masculinity as one element of a larger organizing matrix, mediated in this example by a collectively imagined experience of watching a sports match. On the other hand, however, I experience my masculinity as an individual phenomenon. As a masculine man, I do not sit around all day long and imagine myself as part of a group defined by masculinity. Instead, I operate through a series of individual acts that I individually experience as part of masculinity but that do in fact relate (if I were to reflect on the topic) to the larger ideology of masculinity. So while watching a football game, I might at moments be aware of my participation in a larger community of masculinity, but at other moments (and probably more of them), I would see my own actions as perhaps masculine, but as individually defined. My masculinity would be coming from me, or more precisely, my masculinity would be experienced as coming from me as an individual. If I sit in front of the television and scream when one team scores a goal, I might be expressing a culturally defined aspect of masculinity and if someone asked me about it, I might be able to make that link between me and my culture, but, in the moment, I am unaware of that link and feel that my masculinity is coming from me. So it is not that my experience of masculinity is purely ideological, nor that it is purely individual either: it is defined by a continual move or oscillation between the idea of masculinity as part of me and as part of an ideology.

The relation between the subjective and the objective does not have to be a harmonious one. Rather, that relation might be defined as a tension between the subjective and the objective. I might go to the

movies on Friday night, watch a James Bond film, and imagine that male figure as incarnating masculinity (he is stealthy, sexy, free, and desired by women), but if I try to apply some of the principles of masculinity from that fantasy figure to my own life, I might find that I am simply unable to put them into practice. The whole idea of Bond's masculinity is predicated on his seductiveness to women, but if I do not possess the qualities necessary for seduction and am unable to put Bond's masculinity into practice in my daily life, I might experience masculinity as a tension between this image of masculinity and my actual life in which I cannot quite reproduce the image or in which I can only recreate it in minor ways. Or I might delude myself into thinking that I am a flesh-and-blood copy of Bond's masculinity, fantasizing that I can or have become like him. But that delusion or fantasy is indicative of an impossibility of ever reaching the image that I see at the movies. It is, therefore, not exactly the case that masculinity in this situation is defined by James Bond, or that it is defined only by my desire to put Bond's masculine qualities into practice in my daily life. Instead, it is the relation between that desire for a certain masculine ideology in my life and the impossibility or the difficulty of that desire that defines my male subjectivity. The relation between masculine ideologies and the actual experience of those ideologies is a key way to consider and study masculinity.

The tension between the objective and subjective can be articulated as a crisis of masculinity, a way of thinking in broad, cultural terms about a split between men's subjective experience and larger ideologies that pervade culture. Masculinity might be in crisis when many men in a given context feel tension with larger ideologies that dominate or begin to dominate that context. The late nineteenth century in the United States, for example, is often seen as a historical moment in which shifting definitions of masculinity, from agriculturally based to industrially defined, led to widespread anxieties as the subjective did not correspond to the ideology of masculinity that was spreading via industrialization. Numerous other periods have been seen as crises of masculinity. A growing feminist discourse and a growing gay discourse can provoke a masculinity crisis as they transform cultural ideologies of masculinity into something that does not yet conform to individual experiences. Some say that feminism in the 1970s and 1980s precipitated a crisis in masculinity, and some believe that the visibility of male homosexuality in the last decade or so has put heterosexual masculinity

into crisis because ideologies of masculinity cannot be easily defined in opposition to women or gay men. The idea of crisis implies that there are periods of little or no crisis when ideologies of masculinity and the male individual more or less correspond without tension. But some would say that the relation between masculine ideology and the subjective is always based in crisis, that the split between the objective and the subjective can only cause anxiety for men.

In addition to the mutation of ideologies, the complexity of ideology can end up confusing men and constantly making them wonder if they correspond to masculine ideology. For ideologies of masculinity are not only complicated when they are placed in relation with an actual man. Rather, ideologies of masculinity are already complicated on their own terms because of their own internal contradictions. Ideologies may, however, present themselves as clear, simple, and straightforward, and they may present seemingly widespread agreement on what they are. Institutions that propagate masculinity as ideology might buttress and reinforce each other, putting forth similar ideas of gender. The educational system's focus on the image of sport and masculinity might dovetail well with popular media's emphasis on televising sport. On the other hand, two institutions might put forward contrasting definitions of masculinity. A teenager might go to the movies on Friday night and see one image of masculinity, such as a war film, and then go to church on Sunday and see another very different image. That teenage boy might experience masculinity as a contradiction or as some kind of relation between those kinds of masculinities, or he might try to contextualize them by acting one way on the (imagined) battlefield and another way in church. Or he may try to reconcile them, as for instance by going to war both for religion and for a reaffirmation of his masculinity.

Another way to think about ideological contradictions is to view a given institution itself as containing contrasting masculinities within. No single ideology of masculinity is being transmitted, rather a series of ideologies are at play, some in harmony and some in tension with each other. A priest, for instance, does not give a lecture on what masculinity means to the boys of his parish, nor does a teacher to his or her students. So, without a cohesive masculine code articulated anywhere, a schoolboy might experience one construct of masculinity in his gym class, another from his civics teacher, and yet another from the principal. A boy at church might perceive one construct in his minister,

another in the Old Testament, another in the figure of Christ, and yet others in the actual men of his congregation. While one might locate certain definitions of masculinity as more predominant in a certain institution or institutional context, those definitions are inevitably challenged within that context which is necessarily composed of a collection of masculinities that are not in harmony with each other. Another way to express this idea is to say that, within the context of one institution or ideology, there is no originary masculinity that dominates seamlessly.

Masculinity, Language, and Discourse

Let us return to the question that I posed at the beginning of this chapter: where does masculinity come from? I have been discussing ways in which masculinity can be thought of as coming from many different places, as coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. One response to this question about origin is that it is created linguistically, that language can never be separated from what we think masculinity is. Language is an important aspect of understanding gender because language defines the reality that we experience and because we cannot experience reality without using language. We understand masculinity through the ways in which it is talked about, and, as a result, the ways in which language functions are important to the study of masculinity because they influence how we perceive masculinity. What we imagine when we use the word “masculinity” is strongly influenced by the way we talk about it, including the actual content of what we say, what we do not say about it, and the choice of words in what we say. Because our understanding is entirely or largely mediated by language, masculinity itself is linguistically driven, meaning that to study masculinity we have to examine how it is articulated. The double sense of the term “manhood” (as male identity and as penis) suggests a close relation between the two senses that is already an assumption about masculinity. Cultural norms around language, and resistance to those norms, also dictate what we think masculinity is. It may be culturally normal in the United States to talk about how a car reaffirms a man’s masculinity (or deflates it), but in another culture, in which few men own cars, this way of talking about it may not exist. We may be likely to talk about masculinity in relation to the

penis or muscularity in our culture, but not talk about it in relation to the prostate. Not talking about masculinity – or the absence of a discourse of masculinity – also relates to the cultural construct of masculinity. It might mean, for example, that masculinity or gender itself is not an important category in that culture, or that men are considered so dominant that there is no need to discuss it.

This link between masculinity and language can exist on the word level as key words can already contain cultural assumptions about what masculinity is, has been, or should be. Etymology can be key: “virtue,” for instance, comes from the Latin word *vir*, meaning male (and not female), suggesting in Renaissance Europe that only the man could have the quality. An impotent man, etymologically speaking, is one without power (*impotens* in Latin means “not powerful”), implicitly suggesting that the man who cannot get an erection lacks power, thus that a key characteristic of masculinity cannot be held by the impotent man. Though these linguistic connections might be under the surface, they subtend gender and help construct what we think about masculinity. There is, however, nothing natural about the relation between a word and its actual or perceived root or etymology. Rather, the relation reflects a cultural or arbitrary connection made and then presented as natural or inevitable because it is proven by etymology. So the etymology of “virtue” has been provided as evidence that men were inherently more virtuous, and women less virtuous. Appeals to the etymology of a word, then, can be disguised forms of gender stasis and resist the possibility that ideas about masculinity change over time, and in fact those linguistic connections are themselves arbitrary and invented by culture at a certain linguistic moment.

The approach to gender, in which language constitutes reality, may be objected to by those who think that there are elements of gender that fall outside language. If nearly all men have facial hair or the potential for facial hair, then aren’t these non-linguistic elements of masculinity? Doesn’t the experience of facial hair create a certain experience that is universal for men in general? The objection to this objection would be that it is impossible to understand facial hair without recourse to language. Facial hair does not have to have any necessary relation to masculinity, but it is through language that we make that connection. Discussions about young boys becoming men because they begin to shave or discussions about the machismo of thick stubble, whatever their source, create this link between facial

hair and masculinity, not the actual facial hair. Facial hair on its own, in a certain sense, does not exist if it is not talked about, and only by studying how facial hair is discussed and represented can its relation to masculinity be understood.

A crucial element of the idea of language as central to definitions of masculinity is one touched on above in my discussion of ideology, namely discourse. While institutions have an important hand in creating and complicating masculinity, discourse does not simply function as a tool created by institutions. It is such an important phenomenon that it comes to take on a life of its own, operating both within and outside the framework of institutions and having effects the official institutions may not have intended. Military discourse might be largely a creation of the institution of the military, but it also operates outside the military context *per se* in ways the military may or may not sanction (through TV, movies, video games, literature, or pornography). For this reason, I will consider discourse in more detail, both as a tool of institutions and on its own terms outside the control of institutions. We can talk about an institution's discourse of masculinity, or about a discourse of an element of masculinity that cuts across a number of institutional discourses such as a discourse of paternity, which might include medicine, psychoanalysis, politics, and religion.

One of the purposes of discourse is to normalize human beings and to make them conform to the power that institutions want to exert over people. Masculinity plays an important role in this exertion of power: because there are certain advantages and privileges accorded to it, masculinity functions as an effective carrot to normalize those within discourse. If you allow power to make you into what it wants, you will receive the benefits of masculinity in exchange. The military might inherently promise certain rewards for following a normalized masculinity (honor, glory, a better body, women who like men in uniforms, a pension, status, etc.), but one element of that masculinity is that its subjects conform to institutional power. Pedagogical discourse can perform a similar double function, particularly in contexts in which girls are not formally educated. If I allow the educational system to form me and exert its power over me, I will reap the rewards of education (a better job, cultural clout, a network of educated men, etc.).

A key aspect of power's normalizing effect is the constructing of an abnormal other. For in order to create a norm, discourse must create or invent an anti-norm, which implies that the norm is the norm

by opposition. The best-known example is the invention of “the homosexual” as a sexual morphology, famously discussed by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1.¹ Although “homosexuality” had not previously been articulated as a category, the “species” of homosexuality becomes a problem and a pathology in nineteenth-century medicine, psychoanalysis, and other types of discourses (p. 43). This type of identity is invented as a new problem, but it is invented as a problem in part to construct a group that is a non-problem, whether the articulation of that group is direct or implied. Thus, the invention of male homosexuality as a problem also creates an assumed or invisible male heterosexuality as the non-problem, even if not articulated as such. Because masculinity can often function as an invisible norm, it might be harder to locate normalized masculinity in a given discourse than to locate same-sex male sexuality or other “problem” masculinities, such as criminal, violent, or sexualized African-American masculinity, and effeminate or “castrated” Jewish or Asian masculinity. Still, discursive constructs of non-hegemonic masculinities should be constantly interrogated as to their unstated assumptions about other, possibly hegemonic, masculinities.

Even though masculinity tends to hold this role as the discursive norm in the construction of non-normal subjectivities, normalized masculinity can nonetheless function as its own other through the creation of a certain kind of problematic masculinity. Discussions around Viagra in medical discourse could be taken as an example of how a brand of masculinity not widely defined as problematic has to be made into a problem. The man with “erectile dysfunction” is discursively created as a way to make the erection an invisible norm (through the assumption of a “functional erection”). Viagra’s current popularity in the US, both in daily life and in discourse, can be viewed as an attempt to normalize masculinity and to create non-erect masculinity as problem.

It is important to stress again, however, that discourses are not coherent in themselves, that a discourse cannot simply create a type of masculinity and its others as stable identities. Rather, like the institutions to which they have a close relation, discourses are contradictory, both within themselves or between different discourses. We can talk about the discourse of masculinity, for instance, but that does not mean

¹ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 42–3.

that the entire discourse implies the same brand of masculinity. On the one hand, there is a reactionary discourse of masculinity with the aims of defragmenting masculinity and of locating an essential masculinity deep within the male body, often articulated as a series of Jungian archetypes that represent the masculine. One discourse around masculinity that has arisen in recent years depicts masculinity as wounded, as effeminized or effeminate, as victimized, or perhaps even as queered, and consequently expresses the need to masculinize men and recreate a less effeminate form of masculinity. On the other hand, however, there are contemporary discourses of masculinity with quite the opposite approach, discourses that are critical of masculine domination. Domination is articulated as a way in which men are themselves dominated by their own domination and suffer from masculinity. There is a discourse of masculinity, too, that evokes an anti-traditional masculinity, the image of the “new age sensitive man” and repositions masculinity as kinder, softer, and in touch with its feminine side. Given these differences, such discourses have the ultimate effect of constructing contradictory discursive masculinities. Similarly, masculinity may be contradictory within the context of a single discourse. In pedagogical discourse, for instance, the idea of the boy might be thought or talked about in one way by certain teachers, while official written policy might proclaim something else. Teachers might argue in the teacher’s lounge about what type of masculinity boys should have as models, how they should behave, what should be done about their homophobic or sexist remarks in class, or what novels boys should read in English class.

A further complexity around this issue is that discursive constructs of masculinity can fall into the category of more than one type of discourse. Viagra’s relation to discourse is a good example. The drug is part of a larger discourse of masculinity in which demasculinization is avoided by means of the threat of a non-erect penis and the promise of long, hard erections. But Viagra is part of medical discourse as well as of other discourses such as a discourse of capitalism. The idea of a problematic, flaccid masculinity could be seen as a result of a capitalist need to sell a product first and foremost, and explain why it is largely through advertising that this problem and its solution are constructed. The constructs of masculinity conveyed through Viagra can therefore be viewed through various discursive lenses – as about masculinity, as about medicine, or as about capitalism – and these discourses can be viewed as interacting in various ways. Masculinity might need to be a problem in capitalistic discourse so

that products can be sold, but in a discourse around masculinity, the problem might be constructed on its own without reference to advertising at all. These various discourses, thus, overlap in complicated ways that have to be examined on a case-by-case basis.

A final aspect of masculinity and discourse to consider is the possibility of resistance. Discourse may be imposed on human subjects who are transformed by its assertion, but that attempt at imposition is not necessarily successful. "Where there is power, there is resistance," writes Foucault (p. 95), but resistance can come from those considered in power and from those considered outside power. No discursive construct can remain stable once it is articulated, even when an articulation of masculinity is invested with power by virtue of its official status. When masculinity is viewed as an imposed form of power, then the imposition of power necessarily leads to resistance against it, even as that resistance may or may not be outside the original field of power. That resistance can come from marginal subjectivities' attempts to resist masculinity's discursively constructed dominance or invisibility. Women might construct narratives of various types to resist discourses of virility, showing other aspects of male sexuality as more important than intercourse-ready erections, or they might make films that resist the discourse of military masculinity as hegemonic, unreal, and oppressive. Or, gay people might respond and try to remove the construct itself as a problem by creating their own discursive categories that confuse the categories themselves. "The boy dyke," for instance, the lesbian who can be taken as a boy, can purposely resist discursive constructs of the lesbian as problematic (aggressive, militant, separatist, too masculine) by subverting the very category of lesbian needed to delineate the supposed sexual problem. In response to power's construction of the idea of the problematic, masculine lesbian and thus of men as the only truly masculine sex, the boy dyke might purposely play with the sexual ambiguity of the category, in daily life and in artistic contexts such as literature, film, or performance art. Indeed, masculinity can be resisted by actual performances (theatrical, cinematic, musical, artistic) that may have a certain effect on a viewer or a communal effect on a group of like-minded viewers. Such performances often involve the body as a tool. A male singer who changes his pitch in a song may be resisting assumptions that masculinity requires a deep voice. Performances of this type may be more palatable or acceptable to some than the gendered practices of daily life that I have discussed. A TV advertisement

for beer in which a heterosexual man mistakes a long-haired man for a woman and brings attention to gender confusion to sell beer, may have a very different response than if that event actually occurred to the viewer of the advertisement.

Resistance to hegemonic discursive masculinities does not have to come purely from groups outside the masculine norm. Discourses that privilege masculinity reject or destabilize the norm, an event that occurs with frequency when elements of masculinity are mocked. A *Saturday Night Live* mock-advertisement, for example, once pitched a pill that increases a man's urinal stream. The fake ad plays off the discourse of Viagra as a cultural commodity that some consider necessary, but it does so by using a similar format and similar language as the discourse of Viagra. The ad thus resists the cultural discourse of male erection by showing another obsession that appears entirely useless, comic, and absurd. But in a larger sense, this comic performance on network TV reveals the very link between masculinity and erections as comic and unnatural.

Discursive constructs of masculinity should not, therefore, be viewed as stable elements of institutions or of culture, since even as they are posited, they are resisted in numerous ways. As a result of this process, they should be viewed as constantly agonistic, or as in a continual relation of struggle between institutional power and other forms of power. From this perspective, it is difficult to talk about male power per se, as a stable or monolithic phenomenon. It should be seen as a diffuse, complicated form of power in constant relation to opposing forms of gendered power. To study the discourse of Viagra from this perspective, for example, would include looking at medical ads, medical studies, and men's and women's positive reactions to the drug and its effects, but it would also entail looking at negative responses to Viagra, failures and parodies of the drug, and men who refuse to use it. These two types of discourses – one positive, one negative – could be placed in dialogue with each other to determine what kind of overall response to Viagra is suggested.

Masculinity as Sign

The issue of language can be extended beyond discourse to the sign itself. Not only do we understand masculinity through discourse, but masculinity is influenced, or even constrained, by the ways in which

language itself functions. Consequently, the ways in which language functions turn into the ways in which masculinity functions. If we were to poll people on the street and ask them what masculinity is, they might tell us it is something that men have and that it is the opposite of femininity. Underlying this particular use of language is an assumption of binary opposition, an assumption that masculinity and femininity function together as a set of opposed terms and can only be conceived of in that way. This assumption about gender is related to our tendency to think of language in general as oppositional: “thick” means the opposite of “thin,” “black” the opposite of “white,” “birth” the opposite of “death,” etc. A larger supposition underlying this use of language is what Jacques Derrida terms “logocentrism,” the idea that language always means what it says, that an easily identifiable meaning is directly present in a given word, and that there is no slippage of meaning in terms of what the word refers to. We think that we can look up a word in the dictionary and find its meaning. In this gendered linguistic scenario, “masculinity” would refer to something that would be obvious to anyone hearing the word, would have a stable referent, and would stand in direct opposition to “femininity.” Further, it might be assumed that the word denotes an ontology, a core or essence of masculinity inherent in language. In order for masculinity to remain stable and to be considered to have a core of meaning, language has to be assumed to function in this way, as assumptions about linguistic stability and masculinity operate together to stabilize masculinity and to avoid thinking about signs as stable and fluid. An ontology of masculinity is dependent on an assumed stability of other words linked to that essence as well, including perhaps “man,” “power,” “virility,” or “penis.” In this way, masculinity can be accorded a linguistic stability that also implies a stability of the thing represented.

But within the realm of language, “masculinity” is unable to remain a stable sign if we think more deeply about the linguistic oppositions that we tend to take for granted. If we polled 50 people on the street and asked them to explain what the word “masculinity” means, there may be some coherence to the responses, but there would not be universal agreement. Second, the idea that the sign “masculinity” refers only to men cannot hold up: we all know women who we consider to have a certain amount of masculinity and men who we do not. In addition, the opposites that define and attempt to solidify masculinity are in fact unstable: they cannot hold up to close scrutiny since men

and women are not opposite sexes, nor are masculine and feminine opposite genders. There are traditionally feminine aspects in many brands of masculinity. The sensitive man, for instance, is one brand of masculinity dependent not on a rejection of femininity but on its necessary incorporation into what a man is or should be. Masculinity and femininity are not opposites because having more of one gender does not decrease the amount of the other. Any person can be taken to have a large amount of masculinity and femininity, or very little masculinity and very little femininity, or some other combination of the two. Acting more masculine in a certain situation does not mean that one is necessarily acting less feminine (and vice versa).

Instead of considering the two genders as opposites, one might think in Derrida's terms of femininity as "supplementary" to masculinity, meaning that masculinity can exist only by virtue of its dependence on femininity. While masculinity might be defined in language as inherently different from femininity, the very fact that it is the opposite of femininity suggests that its definition requires femininity. The need to talk in these opposing terms in the first place suggests that masculinity must be created through its assumed opposite. In other words, it is linguistically dependent on the exact thing against which it is defined. It is as though masculine men want to have their cake and eat it too: I know that I am masculine because I am not a woman, but I need a woman to know that I am a man. This gesture – articulating that masculinity is unlike femininity while at the same time needing that other – paradoxically becomes one of the defining aspects of masculinity.

Masculinity's dependence on its supposed other does not end with a dependence on women, however. For it is dependent on other signs for its definition. What happens if masculinity is not only dependent on femininity as its opposite, but on male homosexuality as other? I know I am masculine because I desire women and not other men. What about race? I know I am masculine because I am white (or black, or Latino), and not Asian or Native American. What about class? I know I am masculine because I am working class and use my body at work and because I am not a noble who lives a life of effeminate leisure. The list of potential others in any definition of masculinity is endless and can never be completed. In linguistic terms, I might say that the sign "masculinity" depends on an infinite number of other signs in order to have meaning. Masculinity is dependent on an endless list of other signs that themselves can never be nailed down. If I define my masculinity as not

woman, what happens when a professional female bodybuilder holds the position of woman? What happens when the gay man that I imagine as other turns out to be more macho than me? The impossibility of establishing stable meaning, or the inherent undecidability of the sign, means that masculinity will always need more others in order to define itself. The independence of masculinity can never be achieved, then, since it is dependent on an unlimited chain of others. For this reason, the meaning of the sign “masculinity” cannot ultimately be pinned down in any simple way since it is always in flux.

Another issue here is that, in the same way that masculinity might be opposed to the feminine but in fact require it for its definition, masculinity might include aspects of homosexuality or another other in its definition. For instance, the earring used to serve as a symbol of male homosexuality but then entered heterosexual masculine culture and became a sign of a certain brand of cool heterosexual masculinity. While heterosexual masculinity might be defined as not gay, in fact that proclamation of difference is not composed of pure difference. For this reason, it might be the very proclamation of difference, the act of articulating (whether implicitly or explicitly) that my masculinity is heterosexual and not homosexual that is the only definition of my masculinity. Masculinity is not the actual difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but the linguistic act of attempting to separate them. I might try to construct masculinity in pure opposition to other signs, to carve out a discrete meaning for masculinity, to imagine clear-cut categories of gender, but those attempts are in the end doomed to failure. In any binary opposition, the separation is not an impervious dividing line, but a permeable or porous membrane through which elements inevitably pass. In my example, the gay earring passes from being a sign of male homosexuality to being a sign related to heterosexual masculinity. This is, of course, one of the paradoxes of masculinity: on the one hand, men are often perceived as – or perceive themselves as – independent and as able to function perfectly well on their own but, on the other hand, masculinity cannot ever really be differentiated from other forms of subjectivity.

This notion of binary opposition cannot be disassociated from the issue of power. The binary opposition of male/female or of masculinity/femininity maps onto a binary notion of power since binary oppositions often arise because one element of the hierarchy needs opposition to impose (or to continue to impose) its hegemony on the other. The

commonly held opposition in the US between blackness and whiteness, for instance, is one way in which white culture maintains its hold over blackness. If blackness remains in direct opposition to whiteness, both racial definitions can also more easily remain discrete and blackness in an inferior position in the hierarchical structure. So when masculinity is part of a binarism of any type, it may be so that it can be positioned on top of the binary and as the half of the opposition that has or should have power. This does not necessarily mean, however, that non-masculinity does not contribute to gender binarism or to a hierarchy of power. A woman might need the split so that a man can be erotic for her, a boy might want a man to be a man so he can imagine what he will become, or a gay man might want a discrete sex to desire. These various subjectivities may also accord power to men or to masculinity for various reasons: a boy may want the man on top of the hierarchy so as to imagine what he can or will become, or a gay man may associate power with eroticism. Like power itself, this recurring gender–power link is not static: since power implies resistance, this power binary can be flipped or destabilized in ways akin to those in which discourses of power are resisted (see pp. 34–5).

Approaching masculinity in this way has implications for what is commonly called gender fluidity. On the one hand, this kind of approach to the sign means that all masculinity is somehow always fluid or unstable, that masculinity always bleeds or risks bleeding over into its definitional others, despite efforts to the contrary. To talk about the fluidity of masculinity, then, is simply to assert a characteristic that it always has and not to say anything novel about it. It might be the case that masculinity *appears* more fluid at some points rather than at others, but that fluidity is always present in some way and might be covered up more convincingly at some points than at others. But, on the other hand, calling gender fluid can, paradoxically, argue against the very possibility of fluidity. The idea of fluidity is based on the assumption that there is some stable notion of gender that is subsequently destabilized in some way. I might talk about how masculinity is fluid when a macho man unexpectedly acts in a nurturing or maternal way. By considering masculinity in this way, I am in fact assuming that masculinity is a stable thing in the first place and, in this case, that there is some stable notion of masculinity based on the idea that masculinity is not nurturing. I am assuming that masculinity is ontological in its non-nurturingness, and that the absence of this

non-nurturingness makes masculinity move away from its ontology and become fluid. Why can masculinity not in fact be predicated, at least in certain contexts, on nurturingness? The images of the loving father, the stay-at-home dad, or the male nurse might serve as key representations of this brand of masculinity.

The implications of thinking about masculinity as always unstable and ultimately indefinable are enormous for the study of gender. It suggests that masculinity cannot be considered alone or on its own terms, but rather has to be taken as in relation to other types of subjectivity. This means that it is not possible to consider masculinity without taking into account the oppositions that are employed to attempt to define it. As a result, most scholars of gender would say that any study of masculinity has constantly to take femininity, homosexuality, and other common forms of alterity into account in order to articulate definitions of masculinity fully. This approach also suggests that one should be on the lookout for gender's permeable membrane, for specific ways in which masculinity is seemingly differentiated from other subjectivities which in the end are incorporated into masculinity. Masculinity might be defined as "not sexed female," for instance, but then in fact play with the fantasy of giving birth (as in films like *Rabbit Test* (1978) or *Junior* (1994), or in texts in which men physically or metaphorically get pregnant or give birth). In this linguistically driven approach, masculinity as sign is in a constant process of definition, and as a result, the inability to define masculinity fully and the attempt to stabilize it can be studied as part of what masculinity is or what it is imagined to be. Texts or cultural contexts might highlight this instability in specific ways, using specific images or terms. Consequently, attempts to define masculinity in a stable way can be interpreted as responses to instability, as a kind of anxiety about undefined masculinity, and the articulation of stability might be indirectly proportional to cultural anxieties about instability. From this point of view, articulations of masculine stability should not be taken for granted, but should be closely examined for the reasons why they refuse to admit instability.

Masculinity in Dialogue

Masculinity can be revealed as unstable by considering its relation to binary opposition, or its position in an endless series of oppositions. A related but distinct lens by which to understand masculinity is the

notion of gendered “dialogue.” Extending theoretical approaches to language articulated by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, this approach assumes that masculinity as sign and as subjectivity cannot be separated from all other signs and subjectivities against which it is defined. Though masculinity might seem to function alone and on its own terms, it inevitably functions in implicit or explicit relation to a series of others. In fact, it is defined by that very dialogue.

This approach implies not so much opposition as the key element, but more a response, a series of responses, or even a kind of conversation with a number of others. It also suggests that masculinity replies to its others, and that these replies constitute part of what it is. A man does not simply say something about women, but in responding to a woman, he defines his masculinity relationally. A man who goes to a female bodybuilding show has a reaction to that show, and that relation between him and the show defines his masculinity. I do not speak or write in a vacuum: everything I say or write is in dialogue with something else, so every aspect of my masculinity dialogues with something else. The dialogue implies not a single definition of the other as not me, but a continual process of not me’s. There is no simple opposition between male and female, for instance (as in the previous approach), but a series of oppositions that never end and that are each slightly different from each other. Thus, the opposition of masculine and feminine might be frequent, but the separation of the genders is a constant process, and has to be repeatedly established rather than taken as a given.

To be in dialogue means not only that masculinity is not static, but that it changes by virtue of interactions in space and time. Masculinity might at one point be defined through spatially defined dialogue. If a heterosexual white man shows up at a gay male nightclub and dances, his masculinity would be defined in a certain way as he moves across the dance floor and blends in (or does not blend in) with the mostly gay crowd. That dialogue might be based on difference (“I am here but I have a different sexuality from everyone around me”), or it might be based on similarity (“Though I have a different sexuality from those around me, I am similar because we all like to dance”). But as he travels through rural China, he might experience his masculinity in a very different way (again, as similarity or as difference). He might identify with certain masculinities that he perceives, or he might perceive himself as more masculine than a man he encounters. That dialogue is conversational in the sense that it takes place over time and suggests

numerous back-and-forth responses over time. Masculinity does not have any single meaning, even for a given individual, but its definition changes through relations to various external factors that arise. It might be the case, however, that certain elements of a dialogic masculinity recur throughout a number of these circumstances. I might respond similarly to a gay man in situation X as I do to another gay man in situation Y, or I might respond similarly to a certain gay man in two different situations. But the specific way in which I respond necessarily changes throughout my various dialogues. As a black man, I might repeatedly define my masculinity in opposition to Asian masculinity, but I might do it one way on my trip to China and another way when I go to Chinatown in my home city in the United States, and in yet another way when I watch a Jackie Chan movie.

It is not pure opposition that defines masculinity here, but the relation between masculinity and something else perceived as another body or another sign. As Bakhtin might put it if he were discussing gender, there is no “being” to masculinity, but only “co-being.”² This means that the position or situation of masculinity is central to how it is understood. Masculinity has no meaning in itself, but only in the way it is put in dialogue with an other and in the way in which it is perceived by someone else at a given moment in a given space. Consequently, the same masculinity can potentially mean many different things, depending on how it is perceived. Jean-Claude Van Damme’s masculinity is defined in a certain way when a 9-year-old boy interested in fighting sees him, but differently when a 60-year-old pacifist does. Dialogic masculinity is not strictly binary, but because relation defines it, it incorporates both masculinity and the perceiver of masculinity. From this perspective, I might also say that masculinity itself is composed of the relation between the perceiver and perceived. A gay man might perceive the same masculinity in a way unlike the way a lesbian perceives it, meaning that the sense attached to a given masculinity inevitably varies widely. In other words, masculinity is not inside a body, but exists as a relation between the perceiver and a body or a sign. So masculinity, as in my example above, is the actual relation between a 9-year-old boy and Van Damme in a given scene of a film. A dialogic approach might mean that a man is responding to some form of non-masculinity

² The concept is coined by Michael Holquist in *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 25.

in some explicit or obvious way: a heterosexual man might position himself in opposition to homosexual masculinity, making homophobic remarks or refusing to establish intimacy with another male for fear of being perceived as homosexual. Or that dialogue might be less explicit: a heterosexual man might not respond at all, or he might only respond to himself internally. But in any case, a dialogue is taking place.

Since dialogue is a kind of conversation, masculinity can be considered a dialogue over a period of time between perceiver and perceived. A CEO might have a relation over a ten-year period with her male board that defines masculinity relationally. While that relation necessarily changes from minute to minute and from situation to situation, there may be similarities in the dialogues that recur over time. This notion of the dialogic is often applied to the novel: a male writer might construct a continual conversation over the course of a novel with another form of masculinity, in his textual responses to cultural constructs, to his own life, or to other works of fiction. That idea of conversation might remain rather static, or it might change radically over the course of the novel. This conversation can also mean that masculinity exists in response to the perception of the other, or that perceptions of perceptions can be part of the dialogue. A man might respond to women's critiques of machismo or excessive masculinity by trying to moderate himself, or he might respond to critiques of softness by trying to harden himself. But in either case, there is a response to the other that becomes part of the dialogic process.

Gendered dialogue does not necessarily have to imply antagonism between masculinity and the non-masculine. White masculinity could be in dialogue with black masculinity in certain circumstances, for example, by virtue of a white man's desire to imitate a black man's relation to rap music or the way he moves his body. What tends to be the case in this approach, however, is that masculinity is not fully incorporated or does not fully become the form of subjectivity with which it is in dialogue, but rather remains as its other. Or, I could say that there is no synthesis between masculinity and those with whom it is in dialogue. The white man who is influenced by rap music does not become ethnically black, but may remain aware of racial difference and want to incorporate only certain aspects of black masculinity into his subjectivity. This kind of dialogue could be contrasted with another synthetic approach in which the other is contained within the definitional idea of masculinity. Thus, if a man's feminine side becomes one aspect of the

masculine self to the point that it is no longer perceived as feminine but as a part of masculinity, then this notion of dialogue no longer pertains. The Californian man may have a feminine aspect to him: no longer does he necessarily position himself in relation to or in dialogue with the feminine. Rather, he has incorporated it into himself in a seemingly stable way and that form of masculinity may subsequently be in dialogue with other forms.

In a dialogic approach, masculinity cannot be considered as a simple and harmonious cultural construct since it would have to be perceived in the same way by everyone. Masculinity can be a shared phenomenon only if it is perceived in a given situation in the same way by all people. So we cannot really talk about twenty-first-century American paternity, only about how someone in a given time and space views paternity. This does not mean that an individual perception is free from cultural influence, however, for perception is already inflected or clouded by numerous cultural and personal factors. How any perception is defined is already coded in part by previous perceptions.

This approach to gender raises the possibility of its opposite, the monologic, in which masculinity appears outside relation and exists in response to no one or no thing. Does the cowboy alone on the range not embody masculinity with no inherent dialogue? After all, one might say that there may be no one to perceive him and give him meaning. In fact, the cowboy is in a kind of dialogue because the cowboy is necessarily responding to something. It may be, for instance, a domesticated form of paternal masculinity that he rejects, it may be effeminacy, or it may be his former life as a Wall Street businessman. But there is necessarily an indirect dialogue with something, and that implicit dialogue, which one may have to look closely to locate, defines the cowboy's masculinity and gives it meaning.

As this example suggests, there may be an internal dialogue, as the individual can perceive an element of his or her own masculinity and give it meaning on its own in some situation. This kind of internal dialogue can take place between parts of the self. In this sense, self and other are contained in the same subject because masculinity is fragmented: I can have a moment of distance from my masculinity and perceive my masculinity on my own. I might at some moment perceive some macho act of mine as excessive because I take some temporal distance from that act of mine. An internal dialogic relation might also exist between a perceived ontological notion of masculinity on the one

hand and a more personalized definition on the other. Thus, as an individual, if sexual virility provides one ontologically seeming trait of masculinity, I might experience my masculinity as a relation to that ontological notion. While I might try to live up to that definition on the one hand and to be sexually virile in the way that I define it, on the other hand I see that I will never in fact be able to do that, so I might think about myself in relation to the ideal of sexual virility. My masculinity, then, is defined by my perception of a certain ideal of masculinity that I internalize. But, like dialogue in general, that internal dialogue changes in time and in space. As I am having sex, that dialogue might become more harmonious (I feel virile and forget about that dialogue with virility), or it might become more acute (I cannot perform in bed and I cannot forget that dialogue with virility).

Masculinity as Continual Movement

In a dialogic approach, masculinity is imagined as momentary and spatially specific and defined by a series of individual perceptions, but those perceptions might conceivably recur. The dialogic is thus not necessarily constantly changing: young boys in a number of spaces and over a period of time might have the same or nearly the same perception, effectively stabilizing a given type of masculinity. Consequently, Van Damme's masculinity might look more or less the same because of repeated perceptions (which in turn influence other perceptions), and the dialogic would effectively end up creating certain recurring masculinities. How, then, can masculinity be imagined as in a constant process of movement?

It is sometimes thought, for instance, that gender is a continuum, with masculinity at one end and femininity at the other and that human beings (men and women) oscillate from moment to moment between the two gender poles on that continuum. Masculinity is not static: I might have a certain amount of masculinity while I am playing baseball, but less in the evening when I am at home cooking dinner for the kids, that amount being culturally or individually defined and itself open to change. Measured on a continuum, the idea of having a gender – or of having a quantity of gender – could be taken to suggest a possession that is temporary or subject to constant losses and gains. Or, if the continuum denotes how masculine one is, the extent to

which one is gendered could be seen as in constant movement (very masculine at one point, not very masculine at another). The idea of a gender continuum, movement-based as it may be, can nonetheless be considered problematic because it assumes that masculinity and femininity are opposites as it positions the two genders at each end of the continuum. To be more masculine is to be less feminine. What if the gender continuum were not conceived of in this way, but if each human was considered to have a certain amount of masculinity and a certain amount of femininity, regardless of sex? At any given moment in time, I might be considered to be more or less masculine, and more or less feminine, since perhaps I am performing certain acts or displaying certain traits that my culture codes in a certain gendered way. Moves across those two continua might also be defined by my own experiences with my gender. I may feel very masculine for certain reasons at one point and very feminine at another point, but those gendered feelings would not be opposites. Or, I might experience some of each gender while doing something. When taking care of my 3-year-old boy, I might have the experience of masculinity (as a father playing with his son) and I might experience femininity (by nurturing him and encouraging him positively). The amount or extent of gender that I experience might change over time too (I feel very masculine and very feminine taking care of my son tonight, but I felt less masculine and more feminine while doing it yesterday).

Whether gender is considered a single or a double continuum, the fact remains that, in a certain sense, these approaches both constrain masculinity to preexistent notions of gender. I am measured in my relation to how gender is already perceived or to how I already perceive it, which is necessarily already inflected with culture. In addition, while possibly more indicative of how gender functions than a single continuum, the use of two continua suggests that there are two and only two genders, constraining gender as a bipartite phenomenon. But numerous other continua could be added (a continuum of same-sex love? of transsexuality?), meaning that a double gender continuum system does not allow for gender to become other than the sum of masculinity and femininity.

How, then, could masculinity be conceived of as in movement and as not constrained by preexistent perception? How could masculinity be considered not in reaction to stasis, but as pure becoming? How could masculinity look forward to change and new forms instead of

backward to previously articulated definitions created by me and my cultural context? My masculinity might be defined by an anxiety about my ability to make money and to provide for my family at one point, but that very anxiety might lead to my financial productivity later on. It is not that my productivity is in dialogue with my anxiety, but that the anxiety turns into productivity. How could male heterosexual desire not be thought of as simply heterosexual, as a constant desire for women, but as a constant potential for new productive movement that leads to new desires and opens masculinity up to new becomings? By employing a framework influenced by the theoretical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, masculinity would be defined as a series of possibilities, a series of constant becomings: I might perceive my desire for that woman on the street, but that desire might morph into a desire of some other type for her husband, which creates the possibility of a new kind of relation with him, which might lead to another desire not coded as heterosexual or as some other prefabricated tag. Masculinity would then be constituted by a myriad of masculinities, by an endless series of different masculinities that never recur. And the other gender here would not be a problem or something to be feared or defined as other, but a possibility for movement and change, a possible springboard for pleasure in change. Viagra, for instance, might provide an example of how masculinity can be imagined this way. I might experiment with sex in a new way with Viagra, because I have been given the medical possibility of a new kind of sexuality. I can have a series of new, productive experiences related to my gender as I experiment with the drug and a sexual partner (or partners). On the other hand, the failure of Viagra might also open up new becomings. I might see that without erectile sex, my sexuality is not blocked, but that new sexual possibilities are created. I might experiment with non-erectile sex, focus on oral sex, etc. Or I might deprivatize the anus to explore its erotic possibilities, experiencing new pleasure from the prostate. From this perspective, the goal is not to see what masculinity *is*, what it represents, how it relates to power, how it is not a binary, or how it is perceived, but to focus on what it can and does become and how it continues to become something new.

A certain brand of masculinity might be thought about as constant movement. We can study the figure of James Bond in relation to political discourse or as in dialogue with 1980s feminism, or we could look at how Bond's masculinity repeatedly changes from one Bond film to

another (and from one novel to another and from novel to film), viewing the complicated and innumerable gendered moves as the ultimate definition of his masculinity. Bond's masculinity is one of a series of becomings, with no progress or linearity. By virtue of an assumption of constant movement forward instead of a relation to culture, perception, or signification, this way of conceiving of masculinity means that it is necessarily non-hierarchical. If I truly move on forever, changing and creating new possibilities, I cannot remain on top or in a position of domination. In a larger sense, notions of stable gender themselves, once this movement begins, break down, and gender stasis is no longer possible.

This approach is opposed to stabilized masculinities or systems that try to depict masculinity as fixed (such as the military), but it is also unlike approaches that aim to destabilize gender (as in the section "Masculinity as Sign" above). It might be the case that destabilizing binarism is a way to begin to enter this movement, but this movement-centered approach is really a step beyond destabilizing. It calls for a complete anti-identitarian approach, whereby terms such as "sexual orientation" or "sex" or "gender" break down and exist perhaps only as micro-component parts that might factor in to some of the movements but never fully define them. In addition, other structural elements subtending gender get broken down, with the Oedipal structure's breakdown the most important. Gender would not be defined through the Oedipal complex, in which men and women have defined desires based in family structures and repression of desire. Desire would not be fixed in object choice or identities like "heterosexual," "homosexual," or "bisexual," but in unpredictable flows of desire. The Oedipal complex, which is assumed to establish a boy's heterosexuality, is a major example of how culture attempts to create masculinities that are stable and based in stasis, and that resist being broken down. Numerous other cultural entities try to stabilize masculinity as well: capitalism, for instance, might try to create a stable masculinity to keep itself in business, to create men who can make, sell, and consume.

Masculine subjectivity would thus not be a stable, unified event, nor would it be considered as something simply destabilized as one element of some binary opposition, or as one element of a series of binary oppositions. Rather, masculinity would be conceived of as something that is fully outside a binary system, in a constantly changing process of movement, always mutating. So masculinity might become like a

woman at some point, but that becoming would be only one of its stages, one way in which it moves on to something else that may or may not have to do with the category of woman. In this sense, then, there is no masculine being, but only a series of becomings.

While this might be an unorthodox and abstract way of considering masculinity, there are in fact certain definitions of masculinity that explicitly take constant movement as a basic element. The idea of masculine self-creation, the self-invented or self-made man, or the new man who is always in the process of constructing or creating himself might be morphologies of this kind of man of becoming. The metrosexual handbook, for instance, has as its mantra “Your life is your own creation,” and suggests numerous ways in which a man can create the self as movement and ambiguity.³ It also suggests that the metrosexual take on gay-like or effeminate-like aspects in those acts of self-creation and gendered becoming.

Taken to its full conclusion, this idea of becoming could efface the very possibility of masculinity as an organizing concept. The man who truly becomes might move from a position of masculinity to another position in which his masculinity is not an aspect of who he is or in which gender has nothing to do with masculinity. Subjectivity, then, would be composed of a series of an infinite number of mini-genders and non-gendered subjectivities that move along in unpredictable ways.

The Excesses of Post-Structuralism: Toward a Moderate Approach to Masculinity

One of the common critiques of these kind of theoretical or representational approaches to the study of masculinity is that they have a tendency to ignore what some consider real aspects of masculinity, that masculinity cannot be reduced to simple games of language, and that post-structuralist approaches to gender have tended to efface issues of rights, oppression, and the concrete. The unfortunate practices of masculinity cannot be wiped away by the wave of a representational or linguistic magic wand. Are we not better off looking for chemical

³ Michael Flocker, *The Metrosexual Guide to Style: A Handbook for the Modern Man* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), 169.

or biological ways to alleviate the negative issues that masculinity raises? If masculinity can lead to rape, war, and other violent acts, should we not focus on legal or cultural ways of transforming masculinity rather than on unstable binary oppositions, discursive constructs, or productive becomings? Could we focus on masculinity as representational and fluid at some moments, and then regard it otherwise in the political realm? Another issue raised in this regard is the actual experience of masculinity. While a man might think that there is no such thing as a masculine essence and while it may in fact be true that there is no gendered essence, many men nonetheless *experience* masculine subjectivity as essence. If a number of men on the street were polled, at least some of them would say that they experience masculinity as an immutable thing within them that defines them. A number of women might say that they perceive it this way as well. How, then, can one offer a model of thinking about masculinity to bridge the divide between post-structuralist ways of thinking on the one hand, and the experience of essentialism on the other? For if so much of masculinity is perception-based, does it not make sense to include the experience of masculinity in how we theorize it? Is a man's perception of essence not part of masculinity?

One way to approach this question would be to take a middle approach to masculinity, to find a compromise between the two positions, and to locate the experience of masculinity somewhere between essentialism and non-essentialism. While walking down the street, an average man might experience his masculinity as both essential ("I am a man and I am like that man over there and like all men") and non-essential ("But I am not like your typical man" or "I am different from most men in this way ..." or "I am not acting at this moment like a typical man"). But one does not have the continual sense of essentialism over a period of time, and then move to a sense of non-essentialism for a period of time ("I am a man on Monday, but I destabilize manhood on Tuesday"). Rather, a man experiences a nearly constant move or an oscillation between these two poles. So as I walk down the street, I might move back and forth between these two kinds of experiences, one moment seeing my masculinity as essential and one moment seeing it as free-floating. That oscillation can be experienced as a tension: do I go back and forth, thinking that my gender is a diverse thing? Or rather, do I attempt, because of this tension, to cover up one of the two ways of thinking? Do I attempt to stamp out the sense of free

play and to consider masculinity as essential? Or, on the contrary, do I choose to ignore the essential aspects, perhaps to highlight the free play and to avoid feeling boxed in by essence?

The essentialism that I experience might also place me in a position in which essentialism is not exactly opposed to free play since essentialism might actually help me to understand that free play better. If I think that my testosterone is a key element of my masculinity, that thought about my gender might help frame and reaffirm my free-play definition. I might experience my biology as definitional of my gender, only then to realize that my gender cannot be fully defined by biology. My assumption of a purely biological definition of gender might make me see that non-biological elements also define my gender. The reverse can also be true: because I focus on my masculinity as free-floating and non-essential, I might have moments in which I feel masculinity as a core. So one of these two approaches to gender might be the very thing that then pushes me, that gives me impetus for another approach to my gender. What I am saying, then, is that these two approaches to masculinity operate in a relation that is not necessarily simple or antithetical, possibly defined in tension or possibly defined with each other as enablers (where one leads to its opposite), but still defined in a relation of movement.

Another way to think about this issue of negotiating essence and free play is a bit different. Instead of thinking about masculinity as a pure social or linguistic construct, it could be considered as an in-between phenomenon. Masculinity is constructed, is built up through ideology, domination, practice, language, and other related elements. Precisely because it is built up, it cannot be simply disbanded but should be taken as in place, rather than as essential. It is the perceived naturalness and the repeated build-up over time and over generations, in such a deep and profound way (on the body, in creation myths, and in other ways that make it appear natural), that mean that it cannot simply be undone, that its construction is in essence natural, or at least natural-appearing. In this case, the key question would be not so much whether masculinity is nature or nurture, but what the actual process of the construction of masculinity is. How does masculinity get built up over time? What are the techniques by which masculinity is constructed? It is not what masculinity *is*, or the end result of a series of constructs of masculinity, that is important. Rather, it is the process of the construct of masculinity that matters, the way in which masculinity is built up

and made to appear natural and eternal. The experience of the man walking down the street would make sense in this rubric: he views masculinity as essential because culture has convinced him that it is so. So his experience of a masculinity that moves between essentialism and free play is a result of the move between these constructions built up over time along with the experience of fluidity or of deviation from these constructs.

Bibliography

The approaches to masculinity in this chapter are adapted from the work of various theorists who do not directly articulate ways in which masculinity can be thought about in their frameworks. Below, I have listed for each major theoretical concept in the chapter some key works by the theorists that have influenced my discussion of masculinity here.

The concept of the indistinguishable nature of the original and the copy is often attributed to Jean Baudrillard. See *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993); *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). See also Baudrillard's essay on metaphorical transsexualism: "We are all Transsexuals Now," in *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), 9–14. Judith Butler takes this theoretical approach to the original in ch. 3 in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

This issue of copy and original could also be theorized in terms of hybridity, a term made famous by Homi K. Bhabha (but not within the context of gender) in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). For a hybrid approach to the study of masculinity, see Demetriou Z. Demetrakis, "Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique," *Theory and Society* 30, no. 3 (2001): 337–61.

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appear natural, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

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The concept of masculinity as sign is very widespread in the Humanities, though the approach is often attributed to the influence of Jacques Derrida. While Derrida does not directly approach the question of masculinity as such, questions of gender are central to his corpus. An excellent place to start is the extracts in part 4 in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). A key text is *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). See also Todd W. Reeser and Lewis Seifert, "Marking Masculinity," in "Entre hommes": *French and Francophone Masculinities in Culture and Theory* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 25–7; the essays in *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*, ed. Ellen K. Feder, Mary C. Rawlinson, and Emily Zakin (New York: Routledge, 1997). For an excellent general introduction to Derrida, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). On etymology, see ch. 4 in

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