Masculinities in Theory

An Introduction

Todd W. Reeser

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This book is the outcome of countless discussions with countless people in countless places about masculinity. If I have learned one thing while writing this book, it is that few are those who have nothing to say on the topic. One of my great academic pleasures over the last five years has been the dialogic relation between teaching and composing *Masculinities in Theory*. I owe a special intellectual debt to the students from my gender and sexuality courses, especially those from my graduate seminar "Masculinities in Theory and Practice." Watching them think so intelligently about gender has been a constant source of inspiration. Thus their dissemination throughout my text. Portions of this book were also conceived on the front porch over pastis and antipasto with Thomas McWhorter whose care and guidance over the past decade has been my greatest personal pleasure. For this reason and innumerable others, it is to him that this book is lovingly dedicated. Though she lives 2,000 miles away, Thérèse De Raedt remains as interactive and warm as she was on that fateful day when we first talked over cognac. I thank her for commenting on the manuscript. I thank Lewis Seifert for his faithful academic partnership and for his intellectual feedback on the project. The wonderfully collegial staff and faculty in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Pittsburgh have directly and indirectly helped me write this book, as have my sister and the rest of my family. I am greatly indebted to the four external readers of the manuscript who helped improve the text immensely (though all remaining flaws belong to me). My thanks to the staff at Wiley-Blackwell and to Jayne Fargnoli who first took on the project, and to my friend Paul Bowden for having sculpted the perfect men for the cover. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge support from the Richard D. and Mary Jane Edwards Endowed Publication Fund at the University of Pittsburgh.

Introduction: The Study of Masculinity

Why Masculinities?

It might seem odd to some to devote an entire book to the study of masculinity. After all, masculinity seems like an obvious thing, something we can and do take for granted. We know what it is when we see it: it is commonsensical, produced by testosterone or by nature. We can easily ascribe a series of characteristics to masculinity: "muscular," "strong," "hard," "brave," and "in control" are words that come to mind. We know that it is the opposite of femininity. We can also make a list of adjectives that do not describe masculinity, such as "weak," "soft," and "emotional."

Even if many of us would agree what masculinity is when asked, we may not necessarily think about it consciously as it passes by us invisibly and we take it for granted in our everyday lives. It may be only when something goes wrong or when it goes into excessive overdrive that we really notice it. A crying man might seem like such an oddity that we cannot help but think about his masculinity (or lack thereof). We all know certain men whom we would not label as "masculine" or whom we might call "effeminate" or something else denoting an absence of masculinity. When we see such men, masculinity becomes visible because of its perceived absence. On the other hand, we might become aware of masculinity when we see a very muscular bodybuilder or a man eager for a fight. The excess of masculinity in these kinds of cases makes us aware of it. Yet, even when we notice these types of masculinity, we may still perceive them as natural: the bodybuilder is taking the male body to its natural extreme and the effeminate man is naturally unmasculine.

Our assumptions of a natural masculinity are greatly complicated, however, when we begin to think more deeply and more broadly about the topic. By going back in time and by looking at definitions of what a man used to be, it becomes clear very quickly that masculinity has a history that does not always affirm our own modern ideas about what a man is. Students of the European Renaissance, for instance, are often struck when they read heterosexual men's writings about their intimate love for other men. They are even more struck when they learn that this writing does not make male writers seem effeminate or homosexual in their socio-historical context, but that, quite the contrary, expressions of male–male intimacy are more likely to reaffirm their masculinity. The nineteenth-century dandy is an important figure of masculinity which, to modern eyes, might seem odd: a man who makes the male body into a work of art might appear to many in the twenty-first century as an incarnation of the made-up, anti-masculine man. Yet, for people of the time, this would not necessarily have been the case, and the dandy was one figure of what a man could or should possibly be.

The concept of masculinity as natural is problematized by moving across cultures and looking at examples different from our own. There is such wide cultural variation in masculinity that considering various cases leads to the inevitable conclusion that it is something that is very difficult to ascertain. While some French men might appear effeminate by other cultures' standards, in context this is usually not the case. American students who travel to India are often surprised to see men walking arm in arm together. While this might not be a standard masculine behavior in most segments of modern American culture, it may not make sense to people used to a certain way of thinking about masculinity.

With innumerable variations in time and in space, masculinity is more complicated than we might first believe and, consequently, masculinity can be studied not as a single definition, but as variety and complexity. The range of masculinities comes into particular relief when someone used to one definition goes somewhere else, whether on an actual trip or whether they travel by reading texts, surfing the web, watching films, or viewing paintings from another time period or cultural context. Such cross-cultural or cross-temporal differences make us aware of masculinity as particularly relative, since we come to see that what is taken for granted is not at all a given, but a fabrication or a construct of a given historical and cultural context.

Yet even within a single cultural and temporal context, ideas of masculinity are far from stable and fixed. While there may be some agreement among some people about a given definition, such a definition is never entirely agreed upon, and it is always contested in some way. A construct of masculinity might be challenged through explicit external critique of the model or through another construct presented as more valid. A male college professor may be viewed as unmasculine by a factory worker, for whom the idea of masculinity is closely linked to physical labor. But equally importantly for this book, any construct of masculinity is already challenged on its own, before any external critique. Because masculinity requires constant work to be maintained and because it can never fully remain at rest, it cannot be maintained in the way that men way want it to appear. The confident, successful Wall Street businessman suffers from anxiety on some level and, if one looks closely, he can be read as faltering and not always confident and successful. Even the most courageous soldier falters in some way in his masculinity, whether on the battlefield itself or in his psyche.

Masculinity appears even less stable once what is perhaps the most basic assumption about masculinity is stripped away, namely that masculinity belongs to men. What does masculinity look like when we do not assume that masculinity and men are directly related? What happens when masculinity is disassociated from the male body altogether and the possibility of female masculinity is considered? Masculinity might suddenly become very visible because it is seen to reside somewhere it is not normally or naturally housed or somewhere it should not be. In this case, it may be the threat of women appropriating masculinity that makes it seem so visible, as a cultural anxiety about men losing masculinity to women is expressed. An even more radical way to strip away natural assumptions about masculinity is to consider what happens to masculinity in an age in which the body can be altered and a woman can acquire masculinity hormonally. How can masculinity be natural if a woman can become a man?

We might also notice masculinity when it starts to take unexpected shapes, when it morphs into something unfamiliar or ambiguous. What does it mean about masculinity when a heterosexual late-night talk-show host makes homoerotic jokes about himself and his male guests night after night? We might wonder what masculinity means while watching football players in their tight pants slapping each other on the butt. What happens to masculinity when a heterosexual man

puts on female clothing or dresses as a woman for Halloween? The cross-dressed man might call attention to himself because men do not appear in this state very often, but the situation also calls attention to masculinity itself. These kinds of ambiguous gender manifestations might make us laugh, but their unexpectedness calls attention to masculinity as more unstable and more complex than we may have originally thought.

Why Masculinities in Theory?

Masculinities in Theory is intended to help readers make masculinity an explicit and visible object of analysis, when situations call for explanation as well as when they do not seem to need analysis at all. It will not, however, focus on describing actual or ideal definitions or constructs of masculinity, nor will it do a history of masculinity. Rather, the central goal of this book is to discuss how masculinity can be conceived, how it can be theorized, and how it can be studied. Certain texts (whether literary, cinematic, digital, or artistic) take as their principal subject matter the phenomenon of masculinity, but at other moments, when masculinity passes as more invisible or unnoticed, we have to work a little harder and read between the lines, interpreting what we see, hear, or read. For, as we go about our daily lives, we come into repeated and frequent contact with less obvious forms of masculinity: in meetings, in class, on the television, on the web, on the street, at the movies, and in advertisements. Whether visible or invisible to the observer, masculinity is so varied and complex that this book will not discuss so much what it *is* or how it is something stable that can be easily understood.

Consequently, this book reveals how complicated masculinity is as a cultural and theoretical phenomenon. I am particularly interested in how masculinity functions in ways that might not be obvious to the naked eye, how various thinkers have thought about this functioning, and how various literary and cultural theories can be employed to think about the traditional invisibility of masculinity. I am also interested in how masculinity is a changing phenomenon, how it is fluid, how it morphs, and how we can think about and study it as something ever changing and in movement. What does it mean to think about masculinity as something that cannot easily be located or pinned down, or

ever really defined in any simple or coherent way? We may think of masculinity as hard, solid, stable, or reliable, but that illusion may simply be part of the way in which it functions. The goal of this book, then, is to present key models of masculinity in order to avoid a simplistic or purely descriptive approach to masculinity, even as the models that it presents will and should be questioned and interrogated as to their limits. This book is not a study of versions of masculinity across time and across space. I will not discuss the construct of masculinity in a socio-historical context such as ancient Rome or twenty-first-century Mexico, nor will I analyze literary images of masculinity such as those in Homer or Jane Austen. I will not take a category or morphology of masculinity, such as the businessman or the bachelor, and study its evolving role across time or across cultures. Numerous books on masculinity have now been written from the perspective of a defined place or time. Rather, instead of doing a literary, historical, sociological, or anthropological study of masculinity or of a certain definition of masculinity, this book treats approaches to the study of masculinity. I aim to think about how masculinity has been or can be approached in theoretical terms, while never forgetting about the specific and about relations between the theoretical and the specific. Some of these approaches have been previously discussed by various scholars and theorists, whereas others can be discussed only by considering the gendered implications of given theories. Still others are articulated here for the first time.

A second, more practical reason for *Masculinities in Theory* is to provide readers with ways in which they can study masculinity from an academic point of view. As a book of approaches, *Masculinities in Theory* could be taken as the first step in an academic process of the study of masculinity. Readers interested in thinking about some aspect of the study of masculinity, perhaps in some particular socio-historical context (e.g., the Italian Renaissance, Victorian England, twenty-first-century Cuba) or in some medium (e.g., literature, film, painting, digital media) may take this book as a starting point, as a place to locate models of masculinity that might lend themselves to their own texts or contexts and provide a jumping-off point for further study and analysis. These models can also be rejected as unworkable in a given context, and the reasons for their unworkability can provide greater understanding of that context and of gender itself. The model articulated in chapter 2, for example, is predicated on basic cultural assumptions of homophobia and sexism. So what happens to the model when

a culture is less homophobic or has a greater degree of gender equality than most others? What happens in a culture in which the concept of homophobia is not articulated at all? The theoretical basis for the models in this book is Western, and largely French and Anglo-American. So what happens to these models in non-Western contexts? Are they unusable or can they be fully or partially adapted to other contexts? Can we even talk about masculinity in the first place in cultures that lack a word for masculinity or the concept itself?

My inquiry into categories used to make sense of masculinity in the study of gender and sexuality may not employ categories that the general populace uses to understand or to define masculinity, despite the fact that for me these categories are central to the task of thinking through masculinity. Even though most people would agree that sport and work are closely linked to masculinity, I do not have a chapter on how they define masculinity, for instance. Rather, I look at theoretical, hard-to-locate, often invisible, ways in which masculinity functions, and I show how these categories, upon close examination, reveal more aspects at work than might be immediately obvious on the basketball court or in the office. For example, I will discuss in chapter 1 how the concept of discourse relates to masculinity, and readers interested in the discourse of masculinity around sport or work may take the analytic techniques that I outline and apply them to their texts or contexts. Some of this book's categories do, however, overlap with widespread notions of masculinity (e.g., race, the male body), while others can be applied to conceptions of masculinity not discussed here.

Roughly speaking, the book is divided into two parts. In the first section of the book (chapters 1–3), I lay out some key theoretical models that have been or can be used in the study of masculinity. The approaches discussed in chapter 1 are adapted from the work of theorists who do not directly articulate ways in which masculinity can be thought about within their framework. By virtue of their theoretical nature, most of the models in these first three chapters are more abstract than concrete, and part of the task of theorizing masculinity is to consider how these models filter down into the concrete. I will provide some concrete examples in my discussions, but I anticipate that readers will do this on their own, based on their own interests and backgrounds, and that this book will serve as a springboard to discussions about gender. In the rest of the book (chapters 4–10), I examine key categories in the study of masculinity that often rely on those theoretical models.

Thus, the concept of gendered triangulation is discussed in chapter 2, and then in chapter 9 I think about various ways in which the model of triangulation relates to race and racialized masculinities. In chapter 3, I discuss the idea that gender creates sex, and in chapter 4, I bring this idea to bear on the study of the male body.

Presenting a series of important approaches to masculinity does not mean that this book will provide all the answers or all the keys to crack the code of what masculinity is, or of how it can be studied. On the contrary, one of the ultimate goals of *Masculinities in Theory* is to complicate the study of masculinity, to make masculinity seem even more complex than the beginning student of masculinity may ever have imagined. When I teach courses on masculinity, I tell my students on the first day of class that if they do not have more questions about masculinity on the last day of class than they did on the first, then I have not taught them properly. Indeed, having worked and published on masculinity for a number of years, I have found that masculinity has only become more complicated and opaque to me over the years, and that the more I study it the more questions I have and the more slippery it becomes. For these reasons, one way to imagine this book is as a series of possible theoretical questions, instead of definitive responses, that can be posed around the phenomenon of masculinity.

While it may often be perceived as invisible or men may try to make it invisible, masculinity has a determining effect on many or most aspects of culture. A number of the problems of modern society could be thought of as a result of various elements of masculinity: violence, war, sexism, rape, and homophobia all have some connection to masculinity. Masculinity is very often tied to power, whether in government, the household, or the military. One of the recurring features of masculinity – as opposed to femininity – is that men go to great pain to hide it and, by extension, to hide the way that it functions and operates. Hiding can allow masculinity to function without challenge or question. Masculinity is not always about an obvious use of power and muscle to overcome an enemy, and can work by detours in insidious ways. While the president of a country might not announce that he is invading a foreign country to reaffirm his or his country's masculinity, it still factors in to the military equation, but it may not be articulated as such for fear that it be critiqued or challenged. Masculinity also functions by detour when men talk about those against whom they define themselves (e.g., women or gay men) instead of by talking about

masculinity itself. Male misogyny and homophobia are, in part, forms of masculinity in disguise. Consequently, to understand some of the ways in which masculinity functions or the techniques employed to maintain masculine hegemony is an important aspect of thinking about oppression, power, and subjection in a larger sense.

Even as questions of power are central to the study of gender and should never be forgotten, the study of masculinity should not assume that all men have power or hegemony at all times. One reason not to make masculinity monolithic in this way is that it can be oppressive to those that wield it. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu talks about how men are "dominated by their domination," how masculinity can cause internal problems for men who deploy it for various ends.[1] Thinking about ways in which masculinity tends to function, then, is a way to better understand how men also do physical or psychological harm to themselves. If masculinity is a factor contributing to war, then it easily doubles back on to the men fighting that war, causing them pain in the process. Another important consideration in this book is to bring out positive models of masculinity in which masculinity operates in a non-hegemonic way, moments in which men break or attempt to break their own hold over power and ways in which purely critical views of masculinity can be supplemented by more positive ones. If masculinity's hegemonic operations can be hidden, they can also be subverted, male power can be destabilized, and experiences outside hegemony can be created. To understand the subtleties of masculinity, then, helps us to understand important elements of culture and of individuals, ones that affect everyone in some way.

To talk about this invisibility in academic terms, I might say that masculinity tends to function as "unmarked." Because meaning is made through opposition (e.g., the word "man" and the concept behind it make sense because they are assumed to be not "woman"), theorists often consider "masculinity" as one element of a binary opposition with "femininity." In the opposition of two elements, one element can be considered unmarked – more frequent or less noticed than its marked counterpoint. Heterosexuality is unmarked because we tend not to think about it while homosexuality is marked, and whiteness is unmarked while blackness is marked. If masculinity is

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 69.

unmarked because it is taken to be the norm and not thought about unless in opposition to something else, femininity is the marked category because people tend to think about it more often when they see it. Traditionally in Western culture, women are considered to have a gender, while men are more often considered genderless. But as the French theorist Roland Barthes writes, the unmarked term is not simply and purely absence of meaning, but what he calls "a significant absence."[2] Precisely because a term is unmarked, its silence speaks. In other words, the fact that masculinity has tended not to be thought of as gendered is a hole that should draw attention to its very absence. Because masculinity has traditionally not been taken to be a gender to be studied, its invisibility can be studied as one of its elements. So it is not just that masculinity is something that must be studied, but rather attempts to keep masculinity quiet – without a mark, without a gender – is one of its recurring characteristics that can and should be studied. How, precisely, has masculinity attempted to keep itself under cover of darkness and to pass unnoticed? How has masculinity created distractions to keep attention away from itself as gendered? How is masculinity's absence significant? And how does masculinity's silence speak? The covering-up process can be studied and discussed in specific contexts. By marking masculinity and by taking it as an explicit object of analysis, then, we can begin the process of better understanding what masculinity is and how it functions.

In twenty-first-century academic settings, marking masculinity has become an increasingly important goal, a fast-growing approach to gender studies in a number of different domains across the disciplines. There are various ways to go about a book that treats ways of thinking about masculinity: it could be discipline-specific, it could be social-science-based, it could be scientific, or it could be interdisciplinary. This book takes an interdisciplinary, humanities-based approach to the study of masculinity and, as such, aims to make a contribution to the field of gender studies. Because I will not take a scientific or a social science approach, I will not talk about methodology based on experiments, interviews, studies, statistics, or facts and figures. There will be no charts with statistics on stay-at-home dads over the past 20 years. My approach is to focus on masculinity as it is often studied

[2] Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 77.

in the Humanities, as representational or depicted in a way that we can contemplate and study, with language and signs as the prime object of analysis. Reading critically between the lines and behind the signs is central to my book, as I will provide interpretive models that can be employed, revised, and reworked for various questions. I will take into account select but important ways in which masculinity has been thought about in scholarship in the Humanities, and thus provide some element of what might be called disciplinary coverage. At the same time, I include many of my own ideas and thoughts on the topic and thus aim to expand the scope of gender studies.

Why Masculinities in Post-Structuralist Theory?

My humanities-based approach will be inflected with literary and cultural theory, and particularly with theory that comes out of post-structuralist thought. I will think about how theoretical models can be lent to the study of masculinity and what this kind of approach can help us understand about masculinity. In many ways, post-structuralism provides a language that can be of great use in gender studies. This book, however, is meant for readers who may or may not have a firm basis in various approaches that the way of thinking provides. I will discuss various theoretical concepts as needed to explain the aspects of masculinity presented. This book will not cover post-structuralism (which would be impossible given the length and scope of my project), but will employ some of its key tools and techniques in order to think about what masculinity is and how it functions.

One inevitable question that must be answered is: what is it about post-structuralism that makes it appropriate as an intellectual basis for the study of masculinity? One response is that many of its concerns and premises (e.g., discourse, power, instability, representation) have direct application to gender studies. With post-structuralism, one tends to look behind the signs that one sees in order to find meaning that might not seem immediately apparent or might not seem to correspond to the visible sign. Because what one sees is often not what one gets, if we can take theoretical techniques for looking behind the sign, we might be able to look behind the signs, the images, and the discussions of masculinity that we see at first glance. This approach is especially important for masculinity, because of a tendency to present it as a stable and

impermeable surface that hides meaning and hides its functioning so that it can work seamlessly. Post-structuralism is also helpful to a discussion of masculinity because it tends to consider that there is no essence or ontology for any given sign. For my purposes, I might say that it assumes that masculinity has no natural, inherent, or given meaning, that it does not have to mean something predetermined, and that whatever meaning it has is in constant movement. Masculinity's resistance to interpretation is alleviated, at least in part, with the aid of post-structuralism's interpretive tools. One of the things that we will see when we begin to look behind what is visible, for instance, is that masculinity is in fact connected with numerous other forms of identity or subjectivity, even if men claim or assume that it is not connected to or dependent on them for its definition. Masculinity is in dialogue; it is dependent on the very others that are defined as different from it (as we will see in chapter 1). Relations between masculinity and its others, or relations among types of masculinities, will thus be one focus in this book. These relations and instabilities are so definitional to masculinity that, while writing this book, I often found myself wondering if there was such a thing as masculinity at all, if it is not a contradiction in terms to write a whole book from this point of view. It often seemed to me that masculinity's slipperiness made it difficult, if not impossible, to discuss. While this intellectual lens underlies much of the book, there is no unified school or method in post-structuralism, so a constant and systematic application of its theories is impossible. I will thus bring out various aspects of post-structuralism as needed, as a kind of theoretical bag of tricks, within gendered categories that are not necessarily endemic to the approach but are logical extensions of it.

With this purpose, my book aims to bring out some of the tensions and contradictions inherent in masculinity, and to show how the study of masculinity might reveal that masculinity does not always make coherent or intuitive sense and is in fact often predicated on incoherencies. The male body, for instance, can be thought of as a contradiction in terms. On the one hand, the male body can stand in for masculinity. The body-builder is a key morphology of masculinity, an ideal of masculinity followed by many young boys who wish to have a bigger, better body. Other aspects of the male body could also be factored in here: chest hair or a large penis, for instance. These aspects of the male body put masculinity on display as masculine, their visual qualities a key aspect of how they function as signs. But on the other hand, masculinity is also predicated on

hiding the male body, as ignoring the male body can reaffirm one's masculinity. The man who ignores and overcomes his sickness or illness can be seen as masculine, or certain potentially sexual aspects of the male body may be considered something to avoid (e.g., nipples or the prostate). So how can we think about masculinity's relation to the male body if the relation between masculinity and masculinity's most common corporal home is neither direct nor clear? What do these kinds of contradictions mean about how we go about studying masculinity? I will not try to flatten out these contradictions within masculinity, but rather I will try to bring them out and make them explicit objects of study. My assumption is that tensions and contradictions are one of the most important elements of what masculinity is and another indicator that masculinity is never a stable or monolithic phenomenon. It is not that masculinity requires hiding the male body, nor that it requires displaying it either. Rather, masculinity could be defined through both of these approaches and ultimately be about the movement of the male body between hiding and displaying. While the contradictory character of masculinity might be hidden to make it appear stable and to maintain its traditional hegemony, in fact it may very well not be that way at all. I aim, then, not to smooth over these contradictions, but rather to place them at the center of masculinity which is in part defined by tension and contestation.

Although post-structuralism often counters the idea of nature or the natural as given and immutable categories, it is not the case that there is no biological relation to masculinity, that testosterone or genetics or the male body do not influence masculinity. But a biological approach to masculinity is best left to other books to discuss. In my approach, culture and representation are considered so pervasive that they cannot be separated from nature and the natural and that they necessarily have an influence on what nature is assumed to be. The very dividing line between nature and nurture is so unclear and so unstable that it makes sense, for my purposes, to think solely about the cultural and how the cultural constructs the natural. I leave it to others to consider how nature constructs culture. When we think about the supposed natural aspects of masculinity, we usually employ language, but because language already contains so much cultural baggage, it is impossible to think about masculinity without wondering what kind of cultural assumptions are already at play just by talking about the seemingly natural. Someone might say that having a penis is a natural element of masculinity, but definitions of what the penis is – including the ways in

which it is described and the importance attributed to it – are so bound up with cultural assumptions about masculinity that any purely natural approach to the penis as outside culture is impossible. So even seemingly objective medical studies of male impotence or premature ejaculation are necessarily already bound up in a whole set of cultural and linguistic assumptions about the penis.

My choice of terminology is largely dictated by the intellectual approach taken here. Whereas for me the terms "masculinity" and "male subjectivity" imply instability and a whole host of tensions and complications that this book will discuss, terms such as "manhood," "male identity," "masculine identity," and "male gender role" tend to connote a more stable approach to gender, and perhaps even a biologically based one (it is no accident, for instance, that "manhood" can also refer to the male member). Throughout my book, I will employ the terms "masculinity," "masculine subjectivity," and "male subjectivity" interchangeably, with the sole difference that the last two terms suggest masculinity within the context of the male body while "masculinity" allows for the possibility of a non-male subjectivity (especially with respect to female or transsexual masculinities). Because "subjectivity" is often taken as a less stable equivalent of "identity" and suggests complications and a closer relation to cultural and psychological influences, I avoid the term "identity" in this book (unless I mean to evoke stability) and use other terms (such as "male subject") to suggest these kinds of instabilities and influences.

Another way to articulate why post-structuralism is an appropriate analytical tool for this book is by opposing it to its predecessor, structuralism. A classic example of structural masculinity is the coming-of-age ritual. In this approach to gender, one is born a boy and then becomes a man through various symbolic and non-symbolic processes. The coming-of-age novel (the *Bildungsroman*) in Western culture, for instance, would be read as a series of transitions to masculinity, which could be discussed as a series of steps that a boy must go through in order to achieve masculinity. One could delineate, then, what the necessary steps are in the process and how masculinity is unlike its opposite, boyhood (or femininity, or whatever else it is defined against). A post-structuralist approach to this question, however, would not allow for a linear move from one type of identity (a boy) to another (a man), nor would it allow for strict delineation of identities. Rather, the notion of a man would already be considered implicit in the boy: he would, in part, be a man

even before he goes through this rite. The boy would also still be implicit in the man: he cannot actually *become* and then *be* a man since subjectivity is too unstable simply to *be* a man. The man would have to continue repeatedly to become a man at many points of his daily life. He might slip in and out of masculinity, never able simply to remain a man without constant help and effort. In short, in a post-structuralist approach one cannot simply *be* a man, and masculinity cannot simply *be* defined in a certain way since structures do not underlie a male identity and since masculinity is inherently unstable.

My approach can also be juxtaposed with approaches based on thinking about stable categories of masculinity. For instance, in his well-known and ground-breaking book *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell presents four "patterns of masculinity in the current Western gender order": hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization.[3] The first category is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77). There is no doubt that these kinds of relations circulate in culture, that some people conceive of dominant models of masculinity in a given cultural and temporal context (e.g., the bodybuilder or the father-provider), that other models are marginal to the hegemonic (e.g., Asian-American or gay male masculinity), and that one could define what those models are in a given context (e.g., what are the qualities of a knight in twelfth-century France?). My approach here, however, tends to focus not on articulating what these relations are or how masculine hegemony functions (though these qualities are crucial to my discussion), but on the fluidity or the instability of these relations, on the cracks and fissures in these relations, or on the successful and unsuccessful attempts by hegemony to hide itself as dominant. In this way, hegemonic masculinity is thought of as a model not only inextricable from subordination, but also very much dependent on it for its own definition. I focus, too, on ways in which a man oscillates between various relations of masculinity, how he is never really simply in any one position in any relation, but often somewhere in between. Thus, a successful businessman who might look like Western hegemony embodied may in fact be defined by his location

[3] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 77–81.

between hegemony and subordination if he is examined very closely. I am interested in how hegemonic masculinity employs subordination for various ends, how it is indistinguishable from it from time to time. How, for instance, does one explain that the most hegemonic of male subjects can take on certain aspects of subordinate masculinities, as when they joke about being gay, dress as women, or appropriate African-American masculine traits? So while I will employ relations of masculinity such as Connell's and am greatly indebted to them, they will not be expressed in stable terms, even as many of the concepts behind these kinds of stable categories will be implicit in my discussion. In my view, a post-structuralist approach better reflects the actual experiences of masculinity and reveals gender in its full complexity. In this sense, *Masculinities in Theory* is an extension of previous work in masculinity or in "Men's Studies," a field of inquiry largely social science in origin that often takes male hegemony and identities as its objects of study with the practical aim of reversing sexism and homophobia and of transforming men. This book takes a different approach by focusing on the instabilities of those categories, providing a concise and comprehensive discussion of such an approach.

One advantage to this way of examining masculinity is that it helps to destabilize stereotypes of masculinity. It is often said that stereotypes do not come from nowhere, that they cannot simply be disbanded with a wave of a magic wand. The jock, the macho man, the knight in shining armor, the man who runs from commitment, the drifter, the action-movie hero, the Marlboro man, the cowboy, and the butch lesbian are all masculine stereotypes that circulate widely in US culture. While it may be true that certain elements of these stereotypes can hold (cowboys may tend to be independent), the stability of the characteristics that these stereotypes imply (the cowboy is always independent; the jock cannot be intellectual or intelligent, and never has anxiety dreams about sports) cannot always hold. Stereotypes of masculinity do not point to a reality: few cowboys always act or dress the way the stereotype suggests. A stereotype of masculinity is an attempt to stabilize a subjectivity that can never ultimately be stabilized, to create a brand of masculinity as not in movement, and as such stands as proof of the unstable nature of masculinity. To think about masculinity as in movement, as fluid, and as unstable, then, necessarily keeps us from thinking in these culturally sanctioned molds that do not correspond to the complexity of masculinity.

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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