

Ramzi Fawaz

Feminism Is for *Beginners*: Learning from Straight Men Doing Queer Feminism

Though many of the chief producers of United States feminism are women with husbands, women with boyfriends, women who have sex with men, and women with sons, . . . there seems to be no urgent need in their feminism to understand women's version of what Leo Bersani . . . has called "love of the cock."
—Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (2006)

If you hate what you desire . . . *that's tense*.
—Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette* (2018)

The time has come to think about men. More than a half century since the astonishing rise of US women's liberation, feminism remains synonymous with *women's* oppression. Even though men are directly implicated as both perpetrators *and* victims of patriarchal conditioning in recent political catastrophes like the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*; the increase in mass shootings carried out by men; and the MeToo movement's meticulous documentation of male sexual assault on women, no robust feminist dialogue exists aimed at identifying the practical incentives that might encourage men to partner with feminists in combatting these trends. And despite the growing conviction

among many, and terrifying suspicion among others, that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon grounded in cultural inscriptions on the sexed body, popular feminisms focused on redressing women's trauma still frequently conceive men and women as diametrically opposed, and rigidly hierarchized, polarities in an intractable war rather than registering men as coproducers of a complex, often dysfunctional but also sometimes pleasurable, thrilling, and difficult-to-quit *arrangement* between "the sexes."

This essay seeks to better understand the role of cisgender men in the history of feminist theorizing: as feminism's most self-evident "bad object," as a site of meaningful knowledge about gendered performance, hierarchy, and socialization, and as ordinary persons whom feminists often love, desire, emulate, detest, struggle with and against. Toward this end, I flesh out a queer feminist theory of male masculinity that might sit productively alongside the sociological framework of men and masculinity studies, while rebutting the radical feminist contention that male feminists merely appropriate women's rightful intellectual and political territory. I aim to carve out renewed conceptual space for imagining men as critical interlocutors and potential comrades to feminist theory and practice, who may have something important to tell us about both the most gratifying *and* cruelest aspects of our long-standing gender and sexual dynamics.

One of the insights to be gleaned from paying attention to cis straight men in particular is that many frequently enact their own types of queer feminism. This is a consciousness born less from men's impeccable absorption of feminist and queer ideology critique, but more so as an organically evolving response to their commonplace relationships with the women, queer, and gender nonconforming people in their lives. This includes straight male resistance to heteronormative social and sexual regulations; the articulation of genuine care, investment, and affinity to women, other men, and gender and sexual outlaws who occupy significant roles in a given man's social universe; and men's capacity to recognize their own complex socialization into gender by way of conflicting familial, cultural, and social influences. Despite the vast structural inequality and brutality of a patriarchal culture, then, many men who understand themselves to be putatively cisgender and heterosexual are still directly, intimately, and positively shaped by the presence of other gender and sexual formations, including femininity and queerness, *without necessarily becoming them*.

Despite masculinity studies' nuanced unpacking of the social, cultural, and political dynamics of maleness—as a set of embodied behaviors, a site of vested power interests, a cultural lexicon of images representing "proper" manhood, or a social process of gender differentiation—an under-

standing of the *salutary* mutual influence between male masculinity, femininity, and queerness remains largely underexamined. Certainly, the inter-related subjects of men and masculinity constitute vast, variegated and interdisciplinary fields of inquiry, yet twenty-first-century queer and feminist interventions into the study of masculinity and male gender formation have tended to organize around three broad trends. Feminist sociologists like C. J. Pascoe (2007), Jane Ward (2015), and Vanessa R. Panfil (2017) have, respectively, conducted ethnographic research on high school teenagers, straight white men who have sex with men, and gay male gang members, to show how masculinity operates as a complex social process, or elaborated set of rhetorical and performative practices, for distinguishing proper masculine gender from “deviant” expressions. This includes the social rejection of perceived femininity and same-sex desire (such as the invention of the figure of the “fag,” a mobile rhetorical placeholder for so-called failed forms of masculinity), or through intense forms of introjection and disavowal (such as some straight men’s pursuit of violent, degrading same-sex eroticism paradoxically marked as “not gay” due to its lack of emotional intimacy). Simultaneously, queer of color scholars like José Esteban Muñoz (1999), Martin F. Manalansan (2003), Darieck Scott (2010), and Nguyễn Tân Hoàng (2014) have documented the diversity of racialized forms of gay male femininity, “feminization,” and gender nonconformity, from the cross-dressing performances of gay Filipino “divas” to Asian American and Black gay men’s reclamation of the sexual position of the penetrated “bottom” as a site of erotic power. These thinkers critique hegemonic forms of white gay male desire that erotically fetishize racialized men while devaluing racial and gender diversity within gay male community; and they develop concepts like “bottomhood,” “disidentification,” and “extravagant abjection” to describe the ingenious social and cultural strategies by which racialized queer subjects negotiate, and even wring pleasure out of, their knotty relationships to a dominant white patriarchal and homophobic US culture. Finally, Black male feminists like Mark Anthony Neal (2013) and Marlon B. Ross (2022) have reconstructed cultural and intellectual histories of nonnormative Black male masculinities that cannot easily be fitted into the categories of gay and straight. These include the Black “sissy,” a highly educated and thus “effeminate” expression of Black masculinity born of the arrival of some Black men into middle-class status following Emancipation, and the range of Black men who nimbly combine aspects of normative male masculinity with feminine attributes (such as their pursuit of expressive arts or the performance of sartorial fabulosity), thereby inhabiting what Neal calls “illegible black masculinities.”

All three of these approaches stress the fundamental diversity of masculinities (in the plural), commit to a critique of hegemonic masculinities that uphold heteropatriarchy and racism, and identify the logics that underly different performances of masculinity in distinct social and cultural contexts. Yet by placing focus on violent, racist, and heterosexist expressions of masculinity on the one hand, and illuminating multiply marginalized, queer, or “abject” masculinities on the other, this body of thought leaves neglected the life experiences, investments, and potential political commitments of straight cis men (from all races) who are nonviolent, and actually or *potentially* anti-sexist in their daily lives. Moreover, with the exception of Scott and Hoàng’s provocative reclamation of gay male desire for sexual abjection, this work has not been as good at explaining how male masculinity, despite its association with a vast range of political and interpersonal horrors, on the whole remains an abiding object of erotic and social desire for many of us who claim feminist politics. In the drop-dead elegant deconstruction of toxic masculinity and the inspiring celebration of racialized queer male subjects and their lifeworlds, I read both a triumphant feminist rebuke of hegemonic masculinity, but also a melancholic resignation about the possibility that male masculinity, and those who inhabit it, could possibly be genuine allies to the queer feminist cause. Following Neal’s moving impulse to make “illegible black masculinities” recognizable as part and parcel of the broader diversity of gendered existence, I seek to make male masculinity in its most prosaic, nontoxic forms legible again to feminist theory as a necessary comrade to cross-gender coalition. To this end, I ask: How can we better account for and amplify unexpected, quotidian expressions of male queer feminist consciousness in all its varieties (perhaps especially when that consciousness is not primarily enacted through a man’s obviously divergent gender expression or sexual orientation)? Across the arc of this essay, I offer two answers to this query.

First, feminists must acknowledge and explain our enduring erotic, social, and affective desires for male masculinity, while crafting feminist theory attuned to the lived reality of our manifold associations and affinities with men. We feminists, women, and queer people of all stripes often want many things from men. And men just as frequently want many things from us. Our shared longings—for intimacy, sex, love, recognition, adventure, experimentation, accountability, ego support, and ego dissolution—are elaborated in complex scenes of agonistic exchange where we tailor various existing gender scripts to our unique circumstances, while inevitably altering them by virtue of our infinitely variable lived interactions. This fact demands

a more supple attention to the ways that relationships across genders always constitute intricate psychological (as much as material) *arrangements*, or mutually constituted social and affective dynamics—some highly dysfunctional, others deeply satisfying—that require both individual and collective reorganization to be transformed (Dinnerstein [1976] 1999). Our goal should be to reinvent our relational scripts by literally inhabiting them differently, not simply exposing their ideological operation or endlessly cataloguing the list of privileges presumably afforded to one agent or group within that dynamic (men). If cis straight men might have any potential investment in queer feminism, it is in the co-creation of more life-affirming gender and sexual arrangements.

I look at the question of sexual arrangement through the insights of what I call *male affirmative feminist theory* written by people of all genders and sexualities, including cis straight men. I use this phrase to describe any form of feminist thought, writing, or political practice that (a) considers male perspectives on gender dynamics as critical to feminist knowledges and includes men as legitimate subjects of gender and sexual freedom; (b) apprehends the unequal power arrangements between men and women in a patriarchal society, but also takes seriously the ways men are distorted and injured by the very patriarchal privilege they wield; and (c) suspends, queries, or holds more lightly to the top-down structural critique of male power for the purpose of better understanding the mutual desire and attachment that flows between different gendered subjects. Male affirmative feminist theorizing acknowledges feminists as having split subjectivities, at once deeply critical of arbitrary gender hierarchies, while also often socially and erotically attached to male masculinity, in both its most virulent *and* humane forms. Rather than naturalizing the desire for male masculinity as God-given (à la the Christian right) or attempting to politically abolish it through ideological critique (ala the radical feminist deconstruction of patriarchal mystification), male affirmative feminist theory attempts to live and thrive within our split subjectivity, thereby developing healthier, more life-affirming approaches to our contradictory attachments to gender writ large. Moreover, this kind of feminist theorizing is *male affirmative* not in the sense of legitimizing toxic masculinity but because it argues for the importance of male positive self-perception as a building block toward men's potential investment in feminism, rather than masculinity's annihilation as a precondition of political transformation. Below, I clarify that much male affirmative feminism, especially that written by cis straight men, is also often *queer* (or queerly inflected), in that it considers the realm of sexuality and desire,

namely its expansion into new territories of possibility beyond normative heterosexuality, as a key entry point into cis men's investment in feminist values. Instead of a fully formed position of structural power, a predetermined social role, or merely a set of interlocking privileged identities, male affirmative feminist theory reconceives masculinity writ large as a "constantly morphing," multidimensional composite of worldly variables that may sometimes congeal into the force we call patriarchy, though not always, or always in the same way (Saldanha 2006: 19). In this frame, even distinctly *male* masculinities—understood simply as the gendered self-perceptions or identities of male-bodied people who do not conceive themselves as necessarily gender or sexually divergent—become perpetually emergent, and thus open to transformation, rather than determined in advance either by patriarchal ideology or feminist critique.

Second, with a view of maleness as a form of becoming, and hence, contingent and mutable, we must invest in the *re-symbolization* and *multiplication* of male masculinity rather than its eradication. This would not involve a simple proliferation of prepackaged male "types" or identities, as Pascoe warns us against, but an encouragement for male-bodied people to expand their performative repertoire in relation to one another and to people of other genders and sexualities (7–8). From the perspective of sociology, R. W. Connell ([1995] 2005) argues that a de-gendering of patriarchal society would necessitate a wide-scale "re-embodiment for men," which would involve "a search for different ways of using, feeling, and showing male bodies . . . to develop capacities . . . other than those developed in war, sport or industrial labor [including the ability to] experience other pleasures" (233). From the perspective of feminist and queer cultural studies, however, such re-embodiment must go hand in hand with creative practices of projecting the male body into new contexts for socially, erotically, and affectively inter-relating with others, which might facilitate material transformations in male masculinity's behavioral and emotional vocabulary. On this last score, cultural production remains one of our most indispensable tools for documenting the heterogenous masculinities we already encounter in our day-to-day experiences, as well as imaginatively figuring, and thus allowing us to directly see or vicariously experience, the aspirational possibilities for male masculinities yet to come.

I begin by distilling four lessons we can learn from male affirmative feminist theory. Among the most profound insights of this work is an insistence on a feminist *re*commitment to anti-essentialist thinking, not only

refusing monolithic conceptions of women or female gender, but also of men, male gender, behavior, and being. In line with this view, it is the queerest aspects of feminist thought that have frequently inspired straight men to engage with its central insights, including the freedom to transgress gender conventions, the ability to express sexuality with greater emotional and erotic range, and the desire to be free of heteronormative policing, especially the threat of homosexual stigma. Rather than cynically treat these desires as indicating an imperious male patriarchal instinct to appropriate the hard-won freedoms of women and queer people, I join Marquis Bey (2017) in thinking of this set of queer feminist impulses as part of a widely shared male wish to be “fugitive from” toxic forms of masculinity, without eradicating one’s own male gender.

To dramatize these insights, in the second half of the essay I conduct a close reading of Mike Mills’s 2010 Academy Award–winning film *Beginners*, which narrates the unwitting evolution of a “lovable” but romantically bumbling straight man, Oliver, into a proto-queer feminist, following the revelation that his septuagenarian father Hal is gay. When Oliver learns his mother and father had made a pact to marry despite Hal’s sexuality decades before, he brims with newfound empathy for both parents, as a straight woman and gay man forced by a heteropatriarchal society to choose the security of home and family above their personal desires. Through a series of dazzling montage sequences that render Oliver’s interior life on-screen, the film graphically depicts one straight man’s evolving attempt to integrate and make meaning of his queer parents’ complex lives in relation to his own masculinity and heterosexual longings. *Beginners* offers a visual theory of male masculinity as a perpetually changing, combinatory formation that “builds upon a gradual, fragmented, and shifting sense of corporeal difference” (between men and women, children and parents, gay and straight people, even humans and dogs) thus rendering gender and sexuality “a lot less binary” (Saldanha 2006: 21). I conclude by returning to the concept of “beginning,” asking what feminist and left social justice projects might gain by splitting their gaze between a focus on failed relations across gendered difference—grounded in the seemingly endless betrayal of women and queers by straight cis men—and a productive openness to the *inauguration* of unexpected relationships between all gendered subjects. Ultimately, contemporary feminisms of all varieties must conceive more expansive ideas of who men are and can be (in relation to women, one another, and queer people of all stripes) for the full force of feminism’s transformative potential to be actualized.

Lessons from Male Affirmative Feminism(s)

At this point, however, some readers may be asking, who does this gay *man* think he is to tell feminist theory it needs to confront maleness? This essay is driven by three motives—personal, pedagogical, and political. Personally, as a single, Lebanese-American, gay male feminist pushing forty, I still desire erotic and emotional communion with men. Though so many gay men I encounter also seem to be seeking *something*, outside of extraordinary male friendships, the landscape of my romantic longings often looks like a desert of listless text exchanges, missed connections, and rolling dunes of indifference. Feminist and queer theory, the twin fields of knowledge I have built a career around, have had little helpful to say about this conundrum besides reminding me that male socialization is barbaric; that I am a victim of gender normativity; that gay male community is rigidly organized by hierarchies of masculine privilege; and that gay identity is grounded in a self-destructive erotic attachment to the sources of its subjection. Such claims have certainly affirmed my self-righteous rage at men, but it never did anything to help my sex life. I feel increasingly trapped by my own cruel optimism about the possibility that gay male affectional life can be genuinely fulfilling, on the one hand, and feminist and queer theory's even crueler *cynicism* about this potential on the other. So, motive one: how might a male affirmative feminist theory provide me more practical tools for negotiating my paradoxical, but real, desires so I can genuinely enjoy them without being swallowed up by my fantasies? That is, how can one live with one's cruel optimism in a better, more humane way?

Second, pedagogically I am alarmed that my most politically progressive students have become comfortable throwing out the phrase “cis straight white male” in everyday conversation as if it were a universally recognized epithet that appropriately describes a horde of “bad actors,” *those people* we know are obviously the direct representatives of all things privileged and oppressive. Students frequently bandy this slogan about without self-consciousness, despite the fact that many of them sexually desire, are romantically involved with, or count cis-straight-white-males among their friends, peers, lovers, even family. My students conveniently forget that the formulation has no less than four axes of identity—referring (at least) to sexuality, gender expression, and race—each of which is riven by contradiction and multiplicity. Consequently, this seemingly impenetrable edifice of vested patriarchal interest could easily fall in and out of systems of domination, live in an ambivalent relationship to each of these seemingly self-evident catego-

ries, or count many other identities (like working class or disabled, not to mention qualities of personality, artistic or intellectual talent, or spiritual belief) as equally significant to their selfhood. So, motive two: figuring out how we might overcome the left progressive tendency to combat systematic oppression by using patriarchy's own bankrupt tools of flattening and homogenizing against its presumed emissaries.

Finally, politically, I am disheartened that the vibrant radical imagination of 1970s feminism, which was committed to expanding the possibilities of what women and gender outlaws could be or become, has been eclipsed by a popular feminism driven to the projects of publicly articulating women's trauma through MeToo and Title IX. The politicization of women's wounded identity has a long and storied history in feminist theorizing, galvanizing monumental and necessary transformations in law, social norms, and institutional practices. But to quote Donna Haraway ([1985] 2004), "we have *all* been injured, profoundly" by heteropatriarchy, not just or only women or queer people (38). Male pro-feminist Harry Brod urges us to consider that "it is the ability to take in and honor the pain men suffer that provides the surest foundation for the ability to oppose the pain men inflict" (1998: 205). The feminist ability to conceive men as multiplex beings capable of harming and being harmed—by systemic oppression as much as by women, other men, and gender nonconforming people—while still arguing for an account of women's and gender outlaws' infinite complexity *and* unjust subordination—can transcend the very reductive logic of patriarchy, which sees men and women as universally fixed types. I would love to see feminism revived not only as a sustained attack on heteropatriarchy, but as an imaginative worldmaking practice continually inventing a different, more joyful, *yes even more erotically exciting and generally less miserable* way of living together (Zerilli 2005). So, motive number three: How might we consider the genuine diversity and plurality inherent to men as part and parcel of the diversity of all genders? What would it mean to look at a man and see a kaleidoscope, rather than a monolith? Let us begin to try by exploring some under-sung past theorists of male masculinity.

By now we are well versed in the monumental fact that 1970s women's and gay liberation movements produced a searing structural analysis of the system of heteropatriarchy, understood as the arbitrary production of sex-class distinction within the heterosexual nuclear family (Firestone [1971] 2003; Radicalesbians [1970, 1972] 1992; Rich 1980). In this same period, gay male liberationists borrowed feminist analytical tools to develop a complex account of what would later be called "hegemonic masculinity" (Wittman

[1972] 1992; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1987). This view recognized that male masculinity was structured by an internal hierarchy as starkly rendered as any between women and men, which upheld a widely accepted ideal of dominant or “normal” masculinity—associated with intense emotional repression, muscularity and athleticism, physical and sexual aggressiveness, acquisitiveness, and competition—even as most men failed to live up to this rigid archetype. These movements inspired diverse solutions to the problem of male masculinity’s complicity with patriarchy. Lesbian separatists argued for complete divestment from patriarchal society, behavioral norms, and “thought patterns,” and sometimes fantasized about male genocide (Solano [1968] 2000; Gutter Dyke Collective 1973; Hoagland and Penelope 1988; Shugar 1995). The Black lesbian feminists of the Combahee River Collective urged political coalition with men in order to address the interlocking nature of racial and gender oppression among racially subordinated groups (Combahee River Collective [1981] 2015). Some gay liberationists like “The Effeminitists” called for cisgender men to radically annihilate their masculinity by actively refusing to perform traditional “male” qualities (Dansky, Knoebel, and Pitchford [1973] 1997). Queer countercultural groups like the glam drag troupe The Cockettes threw traditional notions of binary gender into anarchy by combining fluid gender performances with psychedelic drug use (Weissman 2002). Both gay and straight male liberationists adapted the practice of feminist consciousness-raising to encourage men to confront their attachment to dysfunctional social roles (A Gay Male Group [1972] 1992; Fasteau 1974). And radical feminists often pretended that their own erotic attachments to men didn’t exist, or arbitrarily exceptionalized their male partners as male feminist outliers impervious to critique (Morgan 1970).

Despite the variety of approaches to maleness, as the 1970s came to a close, the general consensus reigned that men could never be trustworthy or loyal allies to the project of dismantling their own power and privilege. If at the beginning of the decade Robin Morgan (1970) could righteously proclaim, “I haven’t the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest power” (xl), by decade’s end, Marxist-feminist Heidi Hartmann (1979) would concur when she cautioned, “Women should not trust men to ‘liberate’ them ‘after the revolution,’ . . . [because] their immediate self interest lies in our continued oppression” (24). Yet scholar activists like Gloria Anzaldúa ([1981] 2015) would push back against this identitarian logic, admitting in an essay for the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, “I do not exclude whites from the list of people I love, two of them hap-

pen to be gay males. For the politically correct stance we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits” (206). Similarly, Dinnerstein would take radical feminists to task for their blatant disinterest in understanding the psychic underpinnings of men’s and women’s shared “neurotic” sexual dynamics. Despite these latter pleas for a feminist politics attentive to the multiple cross-gender bonds that defined many women’s lives, by the mid-1980s onward, as feminism became institutionalized in women’s studies programs, the practical question of how men might take up feminist ideas, make common cause with women and gender outlaws, or expand the forms of feminist practice were abandoned and replaced with a mind-numbing epistemological debate about whether or not men could even be feminists if their existential being was an extension of patriarchy (Jardin and Smith 1987; Kauffman 1989; Boone and Cadden 1990). Amid this impasse, male affirmative feminists of all genders and sexualities continued to contribute to feminist theorizing, composing a diverse and inspiring archive of “feminism from its outside” (Halley 2006).¹

The most recurrent theme in male affirmative feminist theory is the necessity of developing an androgynous view of gender, which involves understanding men and women as fundamentally sharing the same emotional and intellectual *capacities*, even if emanating from different kinds of bodies, while demanding the dissolution of culturally proscribed gender roles. As early as 1964, feminist sociologist Alice Rossi argued that the society-wide adoption of an androgynous view of gender would be a necessary precondition for making men and women equal participants in US civic life: “An androgynous conception of sex role means that each sex will cultivate some of the characteristics usually associated with the other in traditional sex role definitions. . . . [R]ather than a one-sided plea for women to adapt to a masculine stance in the world, this definition of sex equality stresses the enlargement of the common ground on which men and women base their lives together by changing the social definitions of approved characteristic and behavior for both sexes” (26–27). For male liberationists like Marc Feigen Fasteau (1974), androgyny was an aspirational ideal that would allow men access to a rich, interior emotional life previously denied them, and provide the opportunity for both men and women to become full social beings unrestrained by the demands of dimorphic gender scripts; this shift, he suggested, would infuse every aspect of social and affectional existence (from friendship, to sex, to child-rearing) with greater egalitarianism and spontaneity as polarized sex roles are reinvented or discarded. Androgyny then, has historically been a bedrock component of arguments for the ultimate *de-gendering* of human

qualities. As feminist philosopher Patrick D. Hopkins (1998) explains, in this view, a human trait like “aggression” is neither understood as distinctly masculine or feminine, nor categorially “owned” by men or women, but rather a highly variable quality that people of all genders are capable of enacting, in both beneficent and destructive ways (46).

As these examples attest, androgyny is a deeply humanist value, which expands the feminist demand that women should have access to a broader share of worldly existence to everyone, including men. Queer anthropologist Gayle Rubin ([1975, 1991] 2012) articulates this inclusive vision of feminism as a cross-gender coalitional project to be free from “obligatory sexualities and sex roles” when she claims, “We are not only oppressed as women; we are oppressed by having to *be* women—or men as the case may be. . . . [the feminist movement] must dream of . . . an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love” (61). Despite its utopian aspirations, the value of androgyny has recurrently come under attack as a male liberal sleight of hand intended to overlook men’s significant structural power in relation to women (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1987). Yet its most progressive edge involves an acknowledgment of fundamental *similarities* between men and women that patriarchal logics frequently mask, which includes the mutual desire to express one’s gender or sexuality more freely, but perhaps more radically to altogether reject the centrality of gender and sexuality to one’s self-definition. Remarkably then, the contemporary project of imagining and cultivating nonbinary forms of gender expression finds one of its origins in distinctly *straight male* feminist arguments for an androgynous world.

Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangement and Human Malaise* (1976) presents us with one of the most ethical versions of androgynous thinking in all of feminist theory. Dinnerstein was interested in understanding the psychological underpinnings of modern “sexual arrangements,” the complex emotional dynamics between men and women that drive them to consent to antagonistic interpersonal relationships, which form the basis for larger patriarchal norms. Dinnerstein argued that the systemic devaluation of women under patriarchy was a highly evolved *symptom* of a more fundamentally untenable psychological reality at the core of human development: the general rule of female headed child-rearing. For Dinnerstein, the fact that nearly all persons regardless of gender are raised by a single primary female parent means that young humans develop a distorted and internally contradictory relationship of intense attachment to *and* revulsion for, a god-like female figure who facilitates the conditions of their existence

while becoming associated with every inhibition to their individuation, growth, and freedom (36–37). If men and women shared child-rearing coequally, she proposed, young humans of all genders would be forced to stop identifying a single category of people (women) as the universal scapegoat for their “*resentment of the human condition*.” Dinnerstein simultaneously argues from an androgynous perspective (accounting for men and women’s shared socialization in relation to primary female parental figures) as well as for a fully androgynous understanding of gender (through parenthood), where, without ever diminishing the especial toll this arrangement places on women, she bracingly argues “that the pressures [our sexual arrangement] imposes on men are at least as mutilating, distorting, and debasing as those it imposes on [women]” (234). At its most visionary then, an androgynous view of gender acknowledges the shared phenomenological and psychic conditions of men and women, thus providing a foundational argument for their mutual investment in destroying gender hierarchy. Its intended outcome is to cultivate in all humans their full repertoire of capacities toward collective flourishing, and away from deleterious behaviors, which may be inflected, but not wholly determined by, gendered performance.

Male affirmative feminist theory also offers one of the most convincing rebuttals to feminist essentialism in all of critical thought. Of course, second wave feminism was a full-throated assault on the rigid patriarchal view of women’s so-called natural inferiority to men. Yet in working to dismantle this *negative* essentialist framing of women, feminists frequently imagined women as essentially sharing their own network of *positive* traits (like nurturance, generosity, and egalitarianism), while flipping the patriarchal script to produce an aggressively monolithic conception of man and male nature (as narcissistic, violent, and emotionally bereft) (Johnston 1973; Gutter Dyke Collective 1973; Cook-Daniels [1982] 2016; West 1999). In his essay “How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me,” Hopkins (1998) confronts this paradox by comparing how conservative US evangelical views of the natural superiority (and unquestioned spiritual authority) of the male gender role ironically coincide with radical feminist assumptions about male bodies as innate vessels of patriarchal power. Hopkins explains how as a child raised in a highly gendered Christian school, whenever he questioned the church’s rigid attachment to dimorphic gender scripts, he was derided as being either a feminist or gay (37). Years later, when he expressed his anti-sexist commitments as the only male feminist in a graduate seminar on lesbian feminism, he was perceived as an interloper in all-women spaces: “this cultural feminist ideology vilified masculinity (which was a nebulous collection of traits involving

rationality, objectivity, and a propensity to dominate others) ardently . . . [attempting to eliminate] the essentialist taint of . . . male-centeredness wherever it might be found” (39). Thus, Hopkins concludes, “Cultural feminism seemed do by fiat what Christian Family Living tried to do with education—stop me from being a feminist and make a man out of me” (41).

Building on Hopkins’s insights, male pro-feminist thinkers like legal theorist Duncan Kennedy (1992), film scholar Scott MacDonald (1991), and philosophers Harry Brod and Tom Digby (1998) have offered anti-essentialist accounts of male masculinity that dismantle feminist orthodoxies about perceived male patriarchal nature on multiple fronts. In his groundbreaking essay “Sexual Abuse, Sexy Dressing, and the Eroticization of Domination,” Kennedy (1992) asks what widespread social transformation would be required for men to perceive their own interests as aligned with the general reduction in sexual abuse and violation of women. Kennedy reminds us that while men benefit hugely from women’s subordination, they also suffer profoundly when it comes to having noncoercive, erotically exciting, mutually beneficial relationships with women: “[The] reality of male abuse of women . . . discourages the activities of fantasy, play, invention, and experiment through which we have whatever hope we have of evolving or transcending our current modes of male and female sexuality. For this reason, men have at least a potential erotic interest in fighting against it” (1312). Here, Kennedy asks us to expand our feminist imaginative horizon, so we might conceive both men and women as sexually interested parties who, despite the ubiquity of patriarchal constraints, still desire one another, and might in fact have greater access to the full range of their fantasy life if structural forms of violence toward women were significantly reduced.

Similarly, in his autobiographical essay “Confessions of a Feminist Porn Watcher,” MacDonald (1991) offers a nuanced portrait of the straight male porn viewer as a figure riven by ambivalence, rather than a confident wielder of sexual power over women as many essentialist feminist critiques claim. First, he reminds us that in a homophobic society, pornography is one of the only places that men are permitted to see visual images of other naked men’s bodies in any sustained way (36). Second, he points out that the culture’s general sexist expectation that women must be beautiful, and hence sexually available to men, finds a parallel formulation in the assumption that men are naturally ugly and revolting (41). Consequently, “from a male point of view, the desire [in watching pornography] is not to see women harmed, but to momentarily identify with men who—despite their personal unattractiveness by conventional cultural definitions . . . are adored by the women they encoun-

ter sexually. . . . [Pornography allows] men to periodically deal with the cultural context which mitigates against their full acceptance of themselves as sexual beings” (41). MacDonald never overlooks the potential conjoining of male pornographic fantasy with the material realities of rape and sexual assault; rather he loosens the presumed one-to-one fit between these realities, showing us how the realm of sexual *fantasy* captures a wide range of male vulnerabilities as much, if not more so, than their power and control. Ultimately, each of these thinkers commits to the feminist critique of patriarchal violence and misogyny, yet each also begins from the assumption that men are highly variegated social beings with multiplex interior lives and diversified motives. Each takes seriously men’s stake in both the maintenance of patriarchy *and* its potential critique and dismantling. And all presume that men and women participate in a complex dynamic, rather than existing in an intractable polarity where each occupies an essential role whose privileges and disadvantages can be intellectually charted in advance. Precisely because it arrives from the perspective of feminism’s perceived enemies, then, the anti-essentialism of male affirmative feminist theory offers one of the most powerful demands for feminist self-reflection and self-criticism.

Male affirmative feminist theorizing also assumes that men, like any other group with shared experiences, have a unique perspective that might provide valuable insights to the feminist project of better understanding the manifold dimensions of gender. For instance, in his essay “A Black Man’s Place in Black Feminist Criticism,” literary scholar Michael Awkward (1998) underscores that Black men have a distinct outlook on gender relations, which is crucial for the future success of anti-sexist coalitional work and the continued growth of Black feminist literary and cultural study:

From my perspective, what is potentially most valuable about the development of a black male feminism is not its capacity to reproduce black feminism as it . . . is being practiced by black females who focus primarily on “the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience.” Rather, its potential value lies in the possibility that, in being antipatriarchal, as self-inquiring about their relationship(s) to feminism . . . black men can expand feminist inquiry’s range and utilization . . . as *comrades*. (158)

By valuing his own “perspective,” Awkward literally takes up the Black feminist project of self-valuation famously articulated in the Combahee River Collective, neither lionizing nor denigrating Black male subjectivity but seeing it as one valuable dimension of gendered experience that can positively expand Black feminism’s conceptual reach. This productive “outsider” critique of

Black feminist theory encourages the field to live up to its own ideals more fully, which includes taking seriously the unexpected uses of Black feminism by people who are not Black women, but are interested in their collective freedom.

Finally, male affirmative feminist theorizing emphasizes that while the feminist dismantling of male privilege represents a significant loss of power for men, it might also provide avenues for other kinds of gains, including the expansion of men's erotic lives, more fulfilling relationships with women and one another, and the freedom from coercive sexual and gender regulations. While some might immediately criticize this claim as a sentimental liberal pandering, male feminist theorizing compellingly argues that no radical movement can wage a successful campaign of dismantling an oppressive regime without gaining the consent of some of its antagonists to collectively forge a better world. One site for inspiring men to fight patriarchy is the freedom from the threat of homophobic policing, which would allow men to explore the full range of their affectional interests with partners of all genders, including intimacy with other men. Michael Warner's (1999) bracing description of "straight culture" as a heteronormative ideological system of practice that requires perpetual "terror to induce compliance," including threats of social shunning and physical violence for being perceived of as "queer," would suggest that a straight male feminism shares significant interests with a queer feminist politics, particularly in their mutual investment in throwing off the yoke of toxic masculinity (37–38). After all, many cis male feminist writers point out that the bundle of social privileges that come with being phenotypically male are offset by the experience of hegemonic masculinity as a living hell, "damage[ing] to our psyches" (Brod 1998: 199), transforming men into a category of "sub-humanity" (Dinnerstein [1976] 1999: 15), and turning affectively rich persons into "male machines" (Fasteau 1974). This is born out by the fact that cis men comprise the highest rate of reported "deaths of despair" (the combined fatalities of suicide, opioid overdoses, and alcohol related liver failure), and remain the dominant demographic of school shooters and sexual offenders, all forms of violent dysfunction deeply rooted in male anomie, sexual frustration, and self-hatred projected both inward at a devalued self, and outward at a despised world (Case and Deaton 2020). Against this nightmare, male affirmative feminist theorizing reminds us again and again that a queer feminist politics has much to offer men, including the possibility of "fighting [a sexual arrangement] that seems about to destroy everything earthly that you love . . . not with blind force . . . but with passionate curiosity" and we might

add, *pleasure* (Dinnerstein [1976] 1999: viii). How then might we begin to imaginatively conceive a male masculinity positively inflected by feminist and queer identities, experiences, and worldviews and oriented toward collective flourishing rather than mutually assured destruction? I now turn to one striking cultural example of straight men doing queer feminism with precisely this intention.

Feminism Is for *Beginners*

In the MeToo era, Mike Mills's tender love story *Beginners* is an outlier. The film narrates the blossoming of a heterosexual romance between two thirty-something creatives—a melancholic but “lovable” graphic designer, Oliver, and a luminous French actress, Anna—from a straight male point of view. Yet the film is decidedly *not* about sexual trauma or violence. It depicts men and women engaged in a mutually pleasurable, if emotionally challenging, negotiation of desire. And it reveals the male gaze as an internally divided perspective fundamentally shaped by the lives, desires, and experiences of women and queer people. Shuttling rapidly and playfully back and forth across time, the film nests Oliver's developing romance with Anna within two broader frames of reference: his whimsical childhood relationship with his mother, Georgia, and the four short years he spent befriending his father Hal after Hal comes out as gay at age seventy-five. In Oliver's childhood, Hal had been an absent phantom, remembered only as the faceless man who anemically pecks Georgia on the cheek goodbye each morning before heading to work. Decades later, in the wake of her death, Hal becomes a vibrant, emotive figure of male queerness, pursuing a nonmonogamous intergenerational relationship, developing a multiracial gay male friendship circle, and actively participating in the LGBTQ political life of Los Angeles. Bewildered but inspired by his father's late-in-life transformation, Oliver barely has time to synthesize this new side before Hal dies. Oliver meets Anna two months after his father's passing, and their relationship is shot through with Oliver's bifurcated memories of his mother's fanciful eccentricity and deep unhappiness alongside his father's emotional distance and later exuberance. The son of split subjects, Oliver is himself deeply torn between a desire to believe that “magic” can happen between people, and that “things will never work out.” To capture this internal crisis, in between dramatic scenes, the film inserts a series of rapid-fire visual montages, which vividly depict the cognitive process by which a straight white man re-narrates his family history as a distinctly feminist and queer one against his traditionally held view of heterosexual

sadness and anomie. The film then synthesizes the lessons of male affirmative feminist theorizing through the aesthetic experience of visually encountering one man's multiplicitous subjectivity. This project is accomplished through three key formal features.

First, the most visually striking element of the movie is its strategic use of kaleidoscopic montage sequences, in which Oliver interjects his voice into the frame to describe and display relevant bits and pieces of his past that shape his present identity. As a Los Angeles-based graphic designer, Oliver seems to see the world as a vast assemblage of creative materials always thinking of ways to rearrange the pieces so as to curate a story that would knit together the disparate parts of his fractured selfhood. In the first sequence, Oliver links his own identity as a straight man living in Southern California at the turn of the millennium to his parents' marital history at midcentury:

This is 2003. This is what the sun looks like, and the stars, nature. This is the president. And this is the sun in 1955, and the stars, and nature . . . and movies, and the president. [This is] what it looked like when people kissed. . . . When they were happy. . . . [and] sad. . . . My parents got married in 1955. . . . They had a child, and they stayed married for 44 years. . . . Until she died in their bed, after four months of cancer and eating French toast for every meal . . . and skipping back and forth through time inside her head. Six months later, my father told me he was gay. He had just turned 75.

As Oliver speaks, each of his sentences is visually punctuated by corresponding images: telescopic snapshots of the night sky in 2003 and 1955; *Life Magazine* layouts of "happy" white Americans; black-and-white photographs of his family home; the visual confusion in his mother's mind when she was ill; and finally Oliver's father coming out to him while seated on their family couch. The sequence sets up his mother's illness and his father's gayness as disorganizing events that literally reorient his once seamless vision of the American good life toward the loneliness and dissatisfaction that was left unspoken, unpictured, or unimagined between the cracks (or edits) of his past. Though this initial loss of innocence is figured as a kind of psychic trauma, it ultimately grants Oliver access to the lifeworld of others, which facilitates his development of a distinctly queer and feminist consciousness.

As each of the five montages unfold, they successively become more intricate, braiding together Oliver's increasing awareness of gay history ("The first Gay Pride flag was made in 1978 by a man named Gilbert Baker"); his father's traumatic encounters with a homophobic psychiatric establishment ("The doctor told him that homosexuality was a mental illness, but it could be

cured”); his mother’s experience of stigmatization as a Jewish-American; and Anna’s own personal history of familial trauma and a peripatetic existence as a traveling actor (“[This is what it looks like] when she tells me there’s always a new empty room waiting for her”). As Oliver amasses these stories, they become occasions for making associational leaps between various experiences of marginalization. In one scene, he organically links Anna’s childhood experience of being denigrated for her Jewishness to his mother’s experience of anti-Semitism during WWII: “This is what it looks like when Anna tells me about being Jewish in 2003. And when I tell her my mother was Jewish. . . . My mother didn’t know she was Jewish until she was 13. . . . It was 1938. . . . This was Man of the year [ADOLF HITLER ON TIME MAGAZINE COVER]. . . . This is the swim team that asked [my mother] to leave once they discovered that she was Jewish [GEORGIA’S SWIM TEAM PHOTO].” Later, Oliver compares the freedom he and Anna have to express their love in 2003 to his father’s fear of being jailed for cruising public restrooms in the 1950s (“We didn’t have to hide to have sex”). On one hand, in each subsequent montage, Oliver increasingly acknowledges that his distinct, evolving identity as a heterosexual male is inevitably a product of elaborate histories of sexist, racist, and homophobic exclusion (having been raised by parents who experienced these forms of oppression). On the other, as Oliver psychologically incorporates the personal histories, creative products, and emotional landscapes of his mother, father, and lover into his imaginative flights, his straight male-ness becomes an expanding gordian knot of interwoven ideologies, affective histories, broken memories, and explosive moments of insight forged *in relation* to others. By visually tracing the manifold idiosyncratic origins of Oliver’s emergent feminist and queer sensibility, *Beginners* presents assemblage thinking, understood as the graphic artist’s eye for juxtaposition, as a creative method for complexly describing organic feminisms born out of men’s lived social relations with women and queer people.

Second, the film explicitly queers the male gaze by literally bisecting Oliver’s point of view with images or memories of gay love, intimacy, and eros. A foundational visual motif in the movie is the recurring image of Oliver looking directly at his father as Hal kisses or cuddles with his boyfriend Andy, an eccentric Croatian physical trainer who loves “older men.” Similarly, in numerous instances when Oliver looks at Anna, a memory of his father or mother explodes into the scene, visually interrupting or standing in the line of his heterosexual desire. Oliver first meets Anna at a Halloween party two months after Hal’s death. He attends dressed up as Sigmund Freud (with a requisite white beard and pipe) while Anna appears costumed as the

dissident radical Julius Rosenberg with a short black wig. Seeing Oliver seated glumly next to a couch, Anna plops down and playfully psychoanalyzes him. Unable to speak due to a bout of laryngitis, she writes on a pad of paper: “Why are you at a party if you’re sad?” Taken aback by her piercing insight, Oliver replies: “I was doing such a good job of hiding it. How could you tell?” Anna responds by drawing two eyes above her question, while pointing two fingers back and forth from her line of sight to his. After this intimate exchange, Oliver leaves to get them drinks. Walking back, he looks wistfully at Anna from the kitchen doorway. Just as his (and our) gaze alights on her, however, Oliver is suddenly overtaken by a powerful memory of his father. In a moving flashback, we witness Hal wake Oliver from his sleep with a late-night phone call, in which he gleefully tells Oliver about his first visit to a gay bar. As Hal relates this story, Oliver imagines his father navigating the crowd, buying drinks, laughing with friends, experiencing moments of loneliness or rejection, but also joyfully taking in the convivial atmosphere. Finally he asks, “So did you meet anyone?” Hal replies subdued, “Young gay men don’t go for older men. You have it easy.” With these final words, Oliver’s gaze returns to Anna, his father’s words now carrying a far greater weight than before (see Figure 1).

In this breathtaking scene, Oliver’s seemingly omniscient straight male look is cut through two ways: first, literally and figuratively seen by the object of his desire, a woman (dressed as a man no less) who reverses the classic fetishizing male gaze by reading back vulnerability in its stare, but then viewing his own developing experience of heterosexual potentiality through the prism of Hal’s burgeoning gay desires. Here, Oliver is both remembering one of his first encounters with queer longing (captured in Hal’s excitement over the possibilities of a new gay social scene) and empathizing with its thwarted energy in a homophobic and ageist culture. Through this “double consciousness,” something about Oliver’s worldview expands as he comes to realize that his father’s gay desire is no different in intensity from his own straight one; rather, it is simply that Oliver’s yearnings for a woman like Anna are granted free reign in a hegemonically straight society. In other instances, when Oliver contemplates Anna’s features as she prepares her makeup, he recalls his mother doing the same in front of her vanity when he was a child. Just as he had empathized with Hal, here too he rereads his mother’s careful beauty regimen as a fruitless effort to maintain her underappreciated looks for affection that was never forthcoming within her passionless marriage.



Figure 1. Top to bottom: Anna returns the classical male cinematic gaze by literally and figuratively “seeing” through Oliver’s grief; Oliver stares at Anna from across the costume party only to be caught by a memory of his father’s first time at a gay bar. *Beginners*, dir. Mike Mills (Universal Studios, 2010)

Over and over, then, when Oliver gazes at Anna he *re*-encounters his parents' distinct vulnerabilities and burning desires with greater clarity and compassion, at once acknowledging his privilege but also registering their distinctly feminine and queer imprint on his worldview. In these moments, the camera frequently puts us in Oliver's point of view—looking at or mentally picturing Anna laughing and crying, Hal and Andy kissing, Georgia listening forlornly to the blues—but then reverses the shot to reveal Oliver's face as he is visibly moved by each scene, variously brought to tears of joy, frustration, or sadness (see Figure 2). In *Beginners*, Mills intentionally undercuts the seeming singularity and violating potential of the classic cinematic male look, both by turning the camera upon it, and revealing this same gaze to be deeply affected by what its “eyes” light upon. Actor Ewan McGregor's heartrending performance as Oliver viscerally captures this sense of perpetual emotional impact, as he frequently appears on screen flush in the face and eyes wet with incipient tears. Oliver, then, is always on the cusp of being broken open by the swell of feelings that his network of queer and feminist relations incites within him; consequently, McGregor's material enactment of this sense of male emotional contingency literalizes a “different [way] of using, feeling, and showing male bodies,” including the “experience of [non-violent] pleasures” (Connell 233). The film does not need Oliver himself to have same-sex desire for his gaze to be fundamentally feminist and queer; rather it suggests that one thing straight men do when they look at women and queers is identify with them, another is admire, another is desire, another is empathize. This queering of the male gaze reminds us that men, no less than any other gendered subject, introject competing, multiple identifications in their production of selfhood.

Third, the formal features of associational montage and a queered male gaze are expressive of the film's overall tone, which is simply *whimsical*. Whimsy is a quality or feeling state associated with childlike wonder and enchantment, the unraveling of certain norms or rules of conduct, and openness to imagination and play. Because of its ephemerality, in a patriarchal society, whimsy is a decidedly feminine-coded affect often denigrated as frivolous or superficial. Upending this logic, *Beginners* consistently treats straight male masculinity whimsically, thereby making it open for reinvention but also stressing its already contingent, socially constructed, and sometimes just plain silly aspects. This is playfully captured in Oliver's self-deprecating statement to his friend Eliot just days after meeting Anna: “It's embarrassing. I'm thirty-eight and falling for a girl again. . . . It's like I lost



Figure 2. Top to bottom: Hal cuddles with his younger boyfriend, Andy, while playfully waving to Oliver; Oliver reacts with joy and affirmation to this scene of same-sex affection; the camera captures Oliver on the verge of tears as he faces the reality of his father's mortality. *Beginners*, dir. Mike Mills (Universal Studios, 2010)

the instructions or I . . . never had them.” Here, Oliver reminds us that the gendered scripts we assume are so readily available as ironclad commandments and imprisoning identities never arrive to us immaculately, if they ever arrive at all. The whimsical nature of maleness recurs throughout the movie in numerous moments where hegemonic masculinity is presented as a fundamentally warped, unrealistic, or coercive “set of instructions,” which the narrative systematically undermines through irony and irreverence. One site for this work is Oliver’s relationship to his father’s dog, Arthur, an aging Jack Russell terrier with whom he engages in a series of hilarious existential “conversations.” When Oliver first takes Arthur to a dog park to play “with his own kind,” he tells the dog: “You’re a Jack Russell, that’s a breed. Your personality was created by this guy John Russell, a hunting enthusiast, in the 1800s. . . . You think you’re just you, and you want to chase the foxes, but other people planted that in you years ago. Now, somewhat arbitrarily, you are considered very cute.” Immediately after this scene, the film cuts to Oliver in his drafting studio drawing an image of a T-shirt with the following words inscribed on it: “My personality was created by someone else and all I got was this stupid T-shirt.” In each of these instances, straight male masculinity is comically represented, first as a failed set of “instructions,” then a scientifically invented “breed,” then a socially constructed “personality.” Each version of masculinity fails to add up to a coherent self, and each represents an abortive project that neither Oliver nor any other male character in the film ever live up to. Like the spontaneous, ludic flights of whimsy, masculinity in *Beginners* is always idiosyncratically divergent, proliferating various queer or proto-queer expressions, from Hal, the ebullient gay art historian, to Andy, the oddball daddy chaser, from Eliot the good-natured hipster best friend, to Juan, the nurturing male hospice nurse. Rather than representing fixed male types or identities, these various men—straight, gay, queer—literally inhabit or embody male masculinity in unexpected and enchanting ways: showing unrestrained physical affection and tenderness toward other men; crafting beautiful graphic artworks; nurturing household pets, plants, and furniture, with equal gentleness; and participating in forms of nonviolent, collective play with communities of fellow men.

This is perhaps no better captured than in British actor Christopher Plummer’s tour de force (and Academy-Award winning) performance as Hal. In this utterly charming character, a classically straight male actor inhabits the most intricate and quotidian mannerisms, affectations, witticisms, and flirtatious innuendos of a gay septuagenarian, *without* stereotyping those who make up this real-world demographic. Thus Plummer, like



Figure 3. Hal and Oliver hold hands at the edge of Hal's hospice bed, thus enacting alternative ways of inhabiting male masculinity. *Beginners*, dir. Mike Mills (Universal Studios, 2010)

McGregor, literalizes both a straight man professionally *acting as* gay, but also *enacting* or modeling for viewers a network of presumably “queer” gestures on screen (like kissing another man, or holding his son's hand, or dancing at a gay bar) that could potentially be taken up by any man, gay, straight, bisexual, or otherwise, as a meaningful expression of non-toxic male masculinity. At one point, Hal and Oliver tenderly hold hands while sitting on the edge of Hal's hospice bed (Figure 3). Hal admits: “You always wanted to hold my hand when you were little. I couldn't, you know. I was afraid it would look funny. I wanted to be close, you know and my father certainly was never close with me.” Through an imagined “closeness” with gay male being and belonging, facilitated by the creative work of cinematic identification, two putatively straight male actors open up the space to occupy and vivify a broader male masculine desire for closeness and intimacy *across* sexualities, generations, and genders. The film then recurrently makes the case that gender is not something to be deconstructed as a psychic fantasy, known as a material or bodily truth, or exposed as ideology, but a lived practice that can be perpetually inhabited in new ways, expanded, and whimsically reimaged so that it *do* different things in the world.

Simultaneously, whimsy functions throughout the movie as a kind of coping mechanism for the deeply painful reality of dysfunctional gender arrangements, including the presumption that love must make up for genuine loss, or that a shared home can permanently dispel loneliness. This is

best captured by Anna when, after the first time making love to Oliver, she looks out her hotel room window and points to building across the street: “People in the building like us. Half of them think things will never work out. The other half believe in magic. It’s like a war between them.” Soon after, they share a moving exchange:

ANNA: I used to love hotels. But now I’m always . . . in another hotel somewhere. . . . It makes it very easy to end up alone—to leave people.

OLIVER: You can stay in the same place and still find ways to leave people.

ANNA: You are like that? It’s what you do? [Oliver nods yes] So we are the same?

OLIVER: Yeah, I guess so. [The look to each other.]

Through an enchanted logic, the film reminds us that our obsessive attachment to gender dimorphism—reductively distinguishing people’s personalities or behaviors on the basis of sexual difference—frequently masks other, perhaps far more salient categories or variables for adjudicating both similarity and distinction between so-called men and women. This includes people who “believe in magic” (Hal and Andy) and “people who think things will never work out” (Oliver); those who tend to “leave people” (Oliver and Anna) and those who stay (Hal and Georgia); those who grew up with both parents (Oliver) and those who didn’t (Anna and Andy). Whimsy then, operates as a disorienting affective logic, which loosens the grip of sexual difference on human relationships, consequently facilitating an androgynous view of gender. In the course of the narrative both Oliver and Anna display emotional depth *and* recklessness, tenderness *and* coldness, generosity *and* selfishness. Both initiate sex and both interrupt it to address deep emotional conflicts. Both consent to, and both critically question, their reasons for falling in love. Consequently, Oliver and Anna’s discovery that they are “the same” in their tendency to “leave people,” is one outcome of their shared inhabitation of the of the full range of human vulnerability, which confirms the reality that men and women are capable of mutually loving, and mutually harming one another.

The film recognizes that achieving such an androgynous, associational, assemblage-like conception of gender comes with a significant loss: namely, the dissolution of security in performing normative gender roles, and the collapse of the aspirational stories we tell about idealized love, courtship, and fulfilling intimacy. It is fitting that Oliver meets Anna at the very

moment that the loss of his father initiates a crisis of confidence in his own naive narratives about his family history and his relational fantasy ideals. When Hal is first diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he asks Oliver to keep his prognosis a secret from his community of gay friends. Oliver interprets this request as an echo of Hal's decades-long secrecy about his sexuality, which in hindsight Oliver views as a kind of betrayal of their family, especially his mother. Having witnessed Georgia's sadness trapped in a listless marriage, Oliver now directly identifies with her as an adult worn down by Hal's self-delusions. Accordingly, when the Los Angeles-based indie band The Sads commission Oliver to draw their portraits for their upcoming album art, their name inspires him to produce an "impossibly long" flip-book narrating "The History of Sadness," a series of clumsy drawings graphically rendering the birth of heterosexual anomie: "Earth begins (sadness not yet invented) / first couple to marry for wrong reasons / invention of alcohol Ancient Egypt / first gay man diagnosed as mentally ill / first time an intense and difficult love revealed a person's shadow self to themselves." Though the band mates reject this idea, Oliver persists. Oliver's dogged commitment to selling this decidedly depressing version of The Sad's' potential CD case reflects a certain ambivalence, at once representing his increasingly feminist consciousness of the ideological ruse of heteronormativity, while also suggesting a narcissistic type of straight male melancholy. Here, Oliver is both feminist *and* straight male killjoy. *Beginners* then is an account of Oliver's reckoning with his own cruel optimism: torn between a desperate wish not to repeat the mistakes of his parents ("I just don't want to be like you and mom"), yet unable to release his fantasies of an ideal partner ("Hal: you can wait and wait for the lion or be with the giraffe; Oliver: I'd wait for the lion").

Yet Hal's sudden transformation into a loving, playful, erotically adventurous gay man in the wake of coming out disrupts Oliver's own melancholic narrative. When Oliver expresses shock that Hal would tolerate Andy's polyamorous relationships with other men, Hal retorts: "You want me to be with someone like me. I like Andy cause he's not like me . . . he's *fun*." The film then represents the clash between a normative conception of companionate love demanding a fixed, stable idea of how one is "supposed to feel" and a queer understanding of love and intimacy as fundamentally unpredictable experiences, much like the category of gender itself. To embrace that unpredictability requires a willingness to admit our lack of knowledge about the gender and sexual categories we hold so tightly to, that is, to become beginners or newcomers to what love, or desire, or intimacy is "supposed to feel" like. This Oliver can only do by releasing his claim to have ever transparently

“known” his parents, which by extension means accepting his own subjectivity as an ever-evolving assemblage, rather than a seamlessly handed-down identity that cannot be reduced to the oedipal drama, hegemonic masculinity, or the gender norms of midcentury US culture.

In one of the film’s most moving exchanges, Hal and Oliver disagree on the ubiquity of common knowledge about the gay pride flag. Oliver insists that “everybody knows” the rainbow flag means gay pride, while Hal continually rebuts: “No they don’t. . . . Don’t be ridiculous.” Suddenly Hal reroutes the question of public queer knowledge to his relationship with Oliver:

HAL: Did you know, about me? [Oliver shakes his head no]

OLIVER: No, I just thought you and mom weren’t in love.

HAL: Oh, we loved each other.

OLIVER: But you were gay that whole time.

HAL: I learned how not to be. . . . I knew I was gay, though . . . I couldn’t have survived if I didn’t know that. I just chose not to follow those instincts. . . . Look, I liked my life, the museum, our house, that’s what I wanted.

OLIVER: And mom? You wanted mom too right? [Frustrated and angry]

HAL: Yes, stop that. She proposed to me you know. I said—look I love you and we’re great buddies but you know what I am. And then she says, that doesn’t matter. I’ll fix that. . . . I thought, oh god, I’ll try anything.

Here, Oliver is shocked to discover his parents’ complexity on many scales and registers: the mutually destructive aspects of their compromised bond, the historical conditions that shaped their pact and limited their options, and their shared bending to normative gender and sexual expectations. In other words, their creation of a gendered *dynamic* that could never solely rest on any one person’s shoulders. At the same time, this discovery forces Oliver to disentangle a series of false assumptions about the nature of emotional attachment, including the idea that authentic, companionate love can only emerge out of normative, sexual arrangements organized around the “truth” of one’s sexuality that presumably produce pure and sustained joy and contentment. Instead, Hal offers a multi-dimensional, and perhaps more honest view, of love born out of highly compromised conditions, which often takes the form of deep friendship (even in the absence of sexual chemistry), shared values and aspirations, mutual experiences of oppression, even painful (if unintended) betrayal, hurt, and shame.

This realization transforms Oliver's affective orientation toward his father from resentment to curiosity. At first bewildered by the sense that he "never knew" his parents, he now becomes fascinated to perceive them from many new angles. This shift is graphically rendered in the visual movement away from Oliver's melancholic flip-book, "The History of Sadness," back toward the queer and feminist visual montages that anchor the larger narrative, where he incorporates more and more of his father's gay history. If "The History of Sadness" represents a self-pitying and solipsistic form of straight male melancholy, assemblage thinking is proper mourning, the working through of loss, and the recombination of its constituted parts, in order to invent a new relationship to oneself and the world. When the complex reality of his mother and father's arrangement becomes clear, an explosive full-screen image of the color pink appears on screen, breaking the emotional gravity of the scene with joyful queer energy. Rapidly we cycle through the colors of gay pride flag: red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise. As each flashes, we hear Oliver announce their corresponding terms: "Sex. Life. Healing. Sunlight. Nature. Spirit." The montage continues with his voice-over:

The first Gay Pride flag was made in 1978 by a man named Gilbert Baker. He gave a meaning to each color. . . . On November 27th, 1978, Harvey Milk was shot and killed. One week later, my father opened his annual Museum Christmas Exhibit. He collected stuffed animals . . . and put them on display. My father printed a quote from *The Velveteen Rabbit* . . . on the wall . . . "The stuffed rabbit asked—What is real?' And the Horse said, 'Real isn't how you're made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long time not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real. . . . Generally by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints. But these things don't matter at all because you are real and you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

Just as Hal's disclosure about their family history expands Oliver's perspective, allowing him to see Hal and Georgia from a different point of view, now armed with his newfound insight, Oliver similarly expands *our* view of gay history, returning the gay pride flag to us as a visual prism composed of enchanting hues that alter our mood and perception while reconnecting them to Gilbert Baker's life-affirming queer vision. The scene visually depicts the slow, steady, sometimes painful but also beautiful process by which a straight white man comes to perceive his gay elderly father as "real" by genuinely learning to love him, which is another word for *understanding*. And so too, even those feminist and queer viewers thoroughly convinced of their own organic knowledge of

LGBTQ cultural history now are quite literally compelled to see this iconic gay emblem anew, as though they were encountering it for the first time, through the unique graphic design sensibility of this particular cis straight man, himself a neophyte student of the queer past.

As this shift occurs, the film's core question comes to the fore: What does it mean to really know someone, to understand them, to commune with them across differences of gender, sexuality, personality, and worldview? Moreover, how do you come to know someone you desire? As Oliver and Anna first achingly drift apart, then gingerly reknit the fabric of their relationship, it is fitting he finally shares with her Hal's personals ad for *The Advocate*. Anna marvels at the erotic boldness and emotional authenticity of Hal's photo. She reads part of the ad aloud: "I'm looking for sex with the hope it turns into friendship or a relationship. But I don't insist on monogamy. I'm an old senior guy, 78, but I'm attractive and horny. I'm an art historian, now retired. . . . I have a nice house with food, drinks, friends and me. If you are willing to try an older guy, let's meet and see what happens." In the moving image of Hal emotionally exposed—vulnerable, authentic, erotic—Anna finally inhabits Oliver's queered gaze, seeing their relationship in and through Hal's gay desire (see Figure 4). This is an image of a man who was once one thing (seemingly straight, monogamous, professional, buttoned up) and then became another (publicly gay, nonmonogamous, experimental, ebullient). *Or perhaps Hal was simply always many things*: the absent father, the talented museum curator, the playful gay man, the loyal but emotionally distant husband, the older boyfriend, and more. Thus, in the wake of Oliver and Anna's brief separation, Hal returns as a figure of the newly thinkable for two putatively straight people whose attachment to gendered scripts have utterly failed them. Hal's advertisement represents the new script he invented for himself when the horizon of possibility for becoming something else, something queer and alive, finally arrived. "He never gave up," Anna says hopefully. Sitting side by side on Oliver's bed, the two look at one another with nervous anticipation. "What happens now?" Oliver asks. "I don't know," Anna replies. Oliver delivers the film's last line: "How does that work?" They look at each other and smile.

Beginners then, ends with playful uncertainty, leaving us with a picture of men and women looking toward one another to decide how to move forward into an uncharted future. Perhaps one of the most unexpected and moving elements of the story is that it presents a straight man who comes to see traditional male-female sexual arrangements as intolerable, as much if not more so, than any woman or gender outlaw. The film suggests that when

from an affective vulnerability, which includes the willingness to admit that we simply do not know what shape or form our genders, our sexualities, our arrangements might take because they are always emergent, rather than fixed in advance. The crisis of knowing that sits at the core of *Beginners*, the question of how we come to know who people are and the manifold ways they continue to slip from our grasp, is ultimately an allegory for the crisis at the core of all feminist theorizing (and perhaps all social justice-oriented theories of power): namely, that an ideological critique of men, male being or nature, does not ultimately grant us transparent access to who men are individually or collectively. And so too with “white people,” “straight people,” “cisgender people,” “white feminists,” or any other broadly defined group of perceived oppressors that our most cherished theories convince us we have all figured out. Our crystalline analyses of these various groups’ complicity in producing and maintaining elaborate systems of top-down power tell us much about the mechanisms by which domination is enacted and achieved, but so very little about the complex lives, motives, interests, investments of the actual flesh-and-blood humans that compose them beyond their presumed bid for godlike power.

Could a more humane feminist theory admit to the wish to learn more about men, our desire for them, and our shared potential for liberation and communion, rather than presume to know men in and through our exquisite critique of them? As Linda Zerilli (2005) has compellingly argued, to do so requires that we revivify feminism not as an ironclad theory of patriarchal oppression, but as an imaginative worldmaking project committed to the perpetual process of *beginning* anew, including forming novel and unexpected associations across gendered difference. This necessarily demands a feminist practice in which we recurrently admit to being novices in our attempts to understand the sources of our subjection, or even one another. The consequences of failing to learn this lesson are vast, if not nigh catastrophic: expanding forms of right-wing psychopathy combine with a form of recalcitrant left moralism unwilling to imagine or entertain any bond with one’s perceived enemies. I remain completely uncertain about the potential for men’s wide-scale, collaborative participation in the dismantling of the very dysfunctional systems we all seem to be suicidally clinging to. Yet I have also seen deep humanity, loving kindness, generosity, self-reflexivity, and awareness in men of all stripes; I love many of them; I erotically desire more than a few; and I want to commune freely with others. I want a feminism that can account for these truths, and so much more. What I have offered, then, is not a reparative reading of male masculinity, but a *pragmatic* one, attentive to those lived reali-

ties about our relationships with men that our awe-inspiring critiques of heteropatriarchy sometimes miss. Can we reclaim the passionate curiosity that Dinnerstein argued was necessary for our earthly survival? To do so would demand that we extend the kind of play, inventiveness, irreverence, and uncertainty of our everyday attachments across gender to our feminist politics. What kind of feminism might be willing to respond to those perennial questions “What is a man?” “What is a woman?” “What is gender?” “What does freedom look like” and answer, “I don’t know. How does that work?”

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Richard Hutson, my first, most cherished, and enduring model of a straight male feminist. Thank you for sharing with me your unrestrained love of the world.

- 1 An abbreviated genealogy of male affirmative theorizing since the 1970s might include the anthologies: Snodgrass 1977; Kauffman 1987; Boone and Cadden 1990; Kimmel 1990; and Digby 1998; feminist writing about male interpersonal and social dynamics, such as Fasteau 1974; Dinnerstein 1975; Segal 1990; Kennedy 1992; Connell 2005 [1995]; Ehrenreich 1983; Faludi 2000; hooks 2004; and Digby 2014; and male feminist cultural criticism like Ikard 2007; Neal 2013; Poulson-Bryant 2011; and Ross 2022. Digby’s *Men Doing Feminism* remains the most nuanced, multi-dimensional and frankly hopeful anthology of cis and trans male writers thinking through the practical role that men can play in the advancement of feminist political transformation. To date, Digby, Kimmel, Neal, and Michael Awkward are among the most sustained cisgender male scholars who write about the value of male feminist or pro-feminist perspectives. Cynthia Barounis’s recent monograph *Vulnerable Constitutions* offers a theoretically innovative account of US-American male masculinity as heavily shaped by queer and disabled embodiment.

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1981) 2015. “La Prieta.” In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 22–29. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Awkward, Michael. 1998. “A Black Man’s Place in Black Feminist Criticism.” In Digby 1998: 147–67. New York: Routledge.
- Barounis, Cynthia. 2019. *Vulnerable Constitutions: Queerness, Disability, and the Remaking of American Manhood*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Boone, Joseph A., and Michael Cadden, eds. 1990. *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Brod, Harry. 1998. “To Be a Man, or Not to Be a Man—That Is the Feminist Question.” In Digby 1998: 197–212.
- Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell [R. W. Connell], and John Lee. 1987. “Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity.” In Kaufman 1987: 139–92.
- Case, Anne, and Angus Deaton. 2020. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Combahee River Collective. (1981) 2015. "A Black Feminist Statement." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 210–18. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1995) 2005. *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cook-Daniels, Carol. (1982) 2016. In *a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dansky, Steven, John Knoebel, and Kenneth Pitchford. (1973) 1997. "The Effemist Manifesto." In *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook in Gay and Lesbian Politics*, edited by Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, 435–48. New York: Routledge.
- Digby, Tom, ed. 1998. *Men Doing Feminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Digby, Tom, ed. 2014. *Love and War: How Militarism Shapes Sexuality and Romance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dinnerstein, Dorothy. (1976) 1999. *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangement and Human Malaise*. New York: Other Press.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. 1983. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. New York: Anchor.
- Faludi, Susan. 2000. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: William Morrow.
- Fasteau, Feigen Mark. 1974. *The Male Machine*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Firestone, Shulamith. (1971) 2003. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- A Gay Male Group. (1972) 1992. "Notes on Gay Male Consciousness Raising." In *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young, 293–300. New York: NYU Press.
- Gutter Dyke Collective. 1973. *Dykes and Gorgons* 1, no. 1 (May–June).
- Halley, Janet. 2006. *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. (1985) 2004. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." [1985]. In *The Haraway Reader*, 7–46. New York: Routledge.
- Hartmann, Heidi. 1979. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a more Progressive Union." *Capital and Class* 3, no. 2: 1–33.
- Hoagland, Sarah Lucia, and Julia Penelope, eds. 1988. *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*. London: Onlywomen.
- Hoàng, Nguyễn Tân. 2014. *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- hooks, bell. 2004. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Hopkins, Patrick D. 1998. "How Feminism Made a Man Out of Me: The Proper Subject of Feminism and the Problem of Men." In *Digby 1998*: 33–56. New York: Routledge.
- Ikard, David. 2007. *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Jardin, Alice, and Paul Smith, eds. 1987. *Men in Feminism*. New York: Methuen.
- Johnston, Jill. 1973. *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kauffman, Linda, S. ed. 1989. *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kaufman, Michael. 1987. *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kennedy, Duncan. 1992. "Sexual Abuse, Sexy Dressing, and the Eroticization of Domination." *New England Law Review* 26: 1310–89.
- Kimmel, Michael ed. 1990. *Men Confront Pornography*. New York: Plume.
- MacDonald, Scott. 1990. "Confessions of a Feminist Porn Watcher." In Kimmel 1990: 34–42. New York: Plume.
- Manalansan, Martin F. 2003. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Morgan, Robin. 1970. "Introduction: The Women's Revolution." In *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, xv–xlvi. New York: Vintage.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Neal, Mark Anthony. 2013. *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Panfil, Vanessa R. 2017. *The Gang's All Queer: The Lives of Gay Gang Members*. New York: New York University Press.
- Pascoe, C. J. 2007. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Poulson-Bryant, Scott. 2011. *Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of Black Men in America*. New York: Crown.
- Radicalesbians. (1970, 1972) 1992. "The Woman-Identified-Woman." In *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young, 172–76. New York: NYU Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4: 631–60.
- Ross, Marlon B. 2022. *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rossi, Alice. (1964) 1988. "Equality between the Sexes: An Immodest Proposal." *Daedalus* 117, no. 3: 25–71.
- Rubin, Gayle. (1975, 1991) 2012. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, 33–65. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Saldanha, Arun. 2006. "Reontologizing Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, no. 1: 9–24.
- Scott, Dariack. 2010. *Extravagant Abjection: Black, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: New York University Press.
- Segal, Lynne. 1990. *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities Changing Men*. New York: Rutgers University Press.
- Shugar, Dana. 1995. *Separatism and Women's Community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Snodgrass, Jon. 1977. *A Book of Readings for Men Against Sexism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Solanos, Valerie. (1968) 2000. *S.C.U.M. Manifesto (Society for Cutting Up Men)*. In *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, edited by Barbara Crow, 201–22. New York: NYU Press.
- Ward, Jane. 2015. *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*. New York: New York University Press.
- Warner, Michael. 1999. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weissman, David, director. 2002. *The Cockettes*. Strand Releasing.
- West, Robin. 1999. *Caring for Justice*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wittman, Carl. 1992 [1972]. "A Gay Manifesto." In *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young, 330–41. New York: NYU Press.
- Zerilli, Linda. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.