

The (In)Essentiality of Male Bodies

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Abstract: This article argues that male bodies are theorized predominantly within a radical discursive constructionist viewpoint, given both the primacy of gender and queer paradigms with a discernible omission of feminist sexual difference perspectives. Furthermore, I raise several concerns in relation to the knowledge production process and the status of the academic subfield under discussion. I conclude by showing that a certain “gap” within the conceptual relationship between male bodies and masculinities is left unscrutinised.

Keywords: male bodies, masculinities, materiality, discourse, feminism.

1. Introduction

This article represents a reworked version of the last section from the first chapter in my book *Male bodies and sexual difference: A proposal for a feminist corporeo-ethics*, published in 2018 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. In that first chapter I developed a line of argumentation concerning the way male bodies are theorized in studies about men and masculinities. After a brief outline of the development of its main theoretical frameworks and concepts (such as “masculinity,” “hegemonic masculinity,” and “embodiment of masculinity”), I examined the nature of the role of male bodies on which the theorizing of men and masculinities is based in some of the most representative works in the area. I also focused on the relationship between these studies and feminist theory, arguing that the dominant perspective of male bodies in relation to masculinity/masculinities is inherited from the feminist debates on the conceptual relationship between bodies and language/discourses. In the following excerpt, I argue that, as a result, male bodies are theorized predominantly within a radical discursive constructionist viewpoint, given both the primacy of gender and queer paradigms with a discernible omission of feminist sexual difference perspectives. Furthermore, I raise several concerns in relation to the



knowledge production process and the status of the academic subfield under discussion. I conclude by showing that a certain “gap” within the conceptual relationship between male bodies and masculinities is left unscrutinised.

2. Male materiality within the discursivist logic of masculinity

It seems to be the case that scholars working on masculinities and their relation to male bodies by using predominantly a discursivist account of bodies and materiality, Judith Butler’s (1990) perspective being the one most often invoked, took for granted Butler’s project. Her task was that of disrupting the once secured terrain of feminism/s by deconstructing the sex/gender distinction and by demonstrating that to invoke matter (sex, body; in our case, the male body or male bodies) is to appeal to “a history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures which should surely be an *object* of feminist inquiry, but which would be quite problematic as a *ground* of feminist theory” (Butler 1993: 49; italics in original). However, in this case, the need to account for a certain male materiality within discursivist logic of masculinity seems to raise a paradox.

While recognizing some of their roots in the feminist, gay and left-wing movements and rejecting the anti-feminist positions within men’s movements, the engagements of scholars on masculinities with feminist theories are nevertheless very poor as compared to the use of perspectives, mostly of Marxian and neo-Marxist influence, developed by them.² Kathy Davis made the same point almost two decades ago when showing that “although acknowledging the influence of feminism as a political movement on the emergence of the body as a topic, many ‘new’ male theorists of the body seem generally reluctant to draw on feminist scholarship of the body” (quoted in Witz 2000: 3). Terrance MacMullan also urged male scholars “to adopt a feminist gaze” since for him feminism has become an “advocate on behalf of all people suffering socially imposed domination due to categories of class, race, caste, sexuality, ability, age and gender” (2002: 3). Then again, when there is indeed an engagement with feminist theories of gender and body, Butler’s philosophical work is the most cited especially for its usefulness in explaining the social construction of both masculinities and men’s bodies.

² See T. Digby (1998), B. Pease (2000), V. Seidler (1991), R. Connell (1995).

Secondly, although they support feminist critiques of the sex/gender distinction, i.e. both a) the rupture of the logical sequence between a so-called maleness and masculinities, and b) the coincident construction of sex (male) and gender (masculinity), it seems that there is always a need to appeal to some “grounding” male bodies. This raises questions especially in the context of masculinity’s disconnection from men’s bodies. Without male bodies, masculinity would lose this way too much of its referentiality. For that reason, it is my contention that the analyses on men and masculinities are caught up between the sex/gender distinction, when it comes to understanding male bodies, and simultaneous discursive production of gender and sex when it comes to analyzing masculinities. Though connected somehow (whereby masculinity derives its discursive content from men’s bodies), male bodies and masculinities are still disconnected (the maleness of men’s bodies is cut off from masculinity’s discursiveness). There is, therefore, a gap, which is left unscrutinised. And it is through this very gap, this sliding of male bodies through the sex/gender distinction and the discursive production of masculinities, that men’s bodies are simultaneously assumed and devoid of meaning at the same time; both essential to masculinity’s referentiality and inessential to masculinity’s discursiveness. Furthermore, this sliding is possible precisely because of maleness’ lack of analytical content, that is, a lack of specification in terms of sexual difference: maleness means whatever speaks of men and their practices and the maleness of men’s bodies is, therefore, merely nominal. But there is one more thing; masculinity itself seems to be devoid of content, given that it always speaks of whatever men, and implicitly male bodies, might mean or do. Therefore, the double equation/equivocation: masculinities = men = male bodies. This shows that, although there is an intended arbitrariness between masculinities and male bodies in the desire to cut off masculinities from men, it appears that this relationship is not arbitrary at all. It is in this very sense that the sexual difference of men’s bodily specificity, so crucial, remains unacknowledged.

In other words, the need to support the construction and variability of masculine subjectivities with the help of male bodies shows, ironically of course, what should have always been acknowledged, that bodies do matter more than is provided for in a Butlerian framework, and, consequently, male bodies, in particular, matter a lot when it comes to masculinities. Accordingly, “the battle” is not solely at the level of masculinities, but rather more at that of male bodies or both. That is perhaps why, despite his understanding of masculinity’s relational character to femininity, R. W. Connell uses the plural “masculinities” (as if “multiplicity” applied to

“masculinity” would challenge the logic) to include even those minoritarian or subordinated groups of men (“masculinities” that are rather “femininities” as compared to “hegemonic masculinity”). To name them differently (or as “feminine”?) would stand for the negation, in a way, of the very “reality” of their male bodies, even if that “maleness” is taken as being part of a binary system of signification, i.e. discursive production of sex. Implicitly, gender is connected pretty well to sex and the prerogative of being “masculine” is secured even for the most disadvantaged of “men’s family,” and, apparently, the academic subfield itself. Consequently, given the importance of male bodies, why is it that sexual difference is absent in these studies?

Moreover, this question is also generated by the ambiguity of the status and the nature of the materiality of men’s bodies, which is somehow presumed in the understanding of masculinities, in order to secure a certain link between bodies and their related subjectivities. On the one hand, there *are* bodies whose material presence always comes back into the question of their constitution (I would call it the metaphysical status of the materiality of male bodies). On the other hand, there is a specificity which “forces” these bodies to (re)present themselves as different than other (i.e. as male), even if conceived of as being constituted within the same type of social and political processes and structures (I would call it the ontological status of the materiality of *male* bodies). The problem here is that both the metaphysical and the ontological statuses of the materiality of men’s bodies collapse in its epistemic conditions, in the sense that there is a conflation between the being of men’s bodies and the mode in which these bodies are known. The ambiguity in understanding the relation between male bodies and masculinities resides precisely in the ambiguous relation of the body to the “real,” in the very fact that the so-called *reality* of the *maleness* of men’s bodies, therefore sexual difference, is subsumed to language and discursive constitution. A certain “real”, the male materiality, let’s say an ontological dimension, is therefore collapsed into the social, or the ontic, if one takes on this distinction.

Consequently, it can also be argued then that, first, scholars working on men and masculinities substituted the primacy of the “real” with that of the discursive, or, as Barad put it, matters of signification have overtaken matters of fact (2003: 801). Secondly, at the same time, when accounting for the nature of the materiality of men’s bodies, i.e. their maleness, this is not understood as a relation to female bodies, as it is the case of the conceptual relationship between masculinities and femininities. This means that sexual difference - the differences between bodies

- understood here in quite material terms, remains unaccounted for in its materiality, precisely because this difference is conceptualized within/through the linguistic/discursive framework of gender.

This aspect echoes powerfully Moira Gatens' argument against the sex/gender distinction, which I consider quite relevant for the discussion even thirty years after its publication in 1983. Gatens states that, during the 1970s and into the early 1980s, "gender," favoured against the category "sex," for its danger of biological reductionism, became a central explanatory and organizing category for diverse groups such as "Marxists, (usually male) homosexual groups and feminists of equality," all three of them with the effect of producing a "neutralization of sexual difference and sexual politics" (1996: 4). Against this neutralization process, whereby, "re-education is the catchcry of radical social transformation," Gatens sets on challenging both the assumption that the body and the psyche are passive *tabulae rasae*, passive entities (a rationalist view according to her), and the "alleged *neutrality* of the body, the postulated *arbitrary* connection between femininity and the female body, masculinity and the male body" (*ibidem*: 4; italics in original). Referring to the works of Greer, Millet, Oakley, Chodorow, Dinnerstein and Barret, who took up the notion of gender from the analysis of Robert J. Stoller's work on transsexualism, Gatens questions two assumptions central to the "degendering" programme or re-education for social change. In relation to the neutrality of the body she is more than explicit: "there is no neutral body, there are at least two kinds of bodies: the male body and the female body" (*ibidem*: 8). Given that socialization theorists understand sex/gender distinction as a body/mind (consciousness) distinction, her argument is that if social processes and behaviours are located in the subject, rather than "in consciousness" or "in the body," then "the subject is always a sexed body" (*ibidem*: 9). From here it follows then that, by accepting the notion of sexually specific subjects, one cannot hold anymore onto the claim that patriarchy valorises the masculine gender over the feminine gender. The difference in the social values and significance between the male body and the female body effects, therefore, a difference between male and female consciousness. In other words, since masculine male bodies are valued over masculine female bodies then, for sure, the problem rests at the level of male body rather than masculine gender.³ And, for that reason, her straightforward

³ Later in her article, after examining the asymmetrical cases of male transsexual and female transsexual, Gatens argues: "It is not masculinity *per se* that is valorized in our culture but the *masculine male*" (1996: 15; italics in original).

conclusion: “Gender is not the issue; sexual difference is” (*ibidem*: 9). There is, consequently, a non-symmetrical relationship between what is acted out by a male body and what a female body acts out, that is, there is a qualitative difference between, for example, “the kind of femininity ‘lived’ by women and that ‘lived’ by men”.

“The ‘feminine male’ may have experiences that are socially coded as ‘feminine’ but these experiences must be qualitatively different from female experience of the feminine. His experiences are parasitically dependent on the female body, more particularly on the maternal body, by a process of identification.” (ibidem: 10; italics in original)⁴

This then also dispels the claim that feminists of sexual difference are essentialist or ahistorical, in the sense that the body taken as object of study by theorist of sexual difference is not just a physical or anatomical one. This body is also an animate, lived and situated body, an imaginary body, that is, the “site of the historical and cultural specificity of masculinity and femininity” (*ibidem*: 12). Acknowledging the interconnections between networks of signification and cultural ways of being a man or a woman, it means, “there is a contingent, though not arbitrary, relation between the male body and masculinity and the female body and femininity” (*ibidem*: 13). For Gatens, then, the relation between the body and gender is not arbitrary, as the relation between a symptom and its etiology is not arbitrary: “to treat gender, the ‘symptom’, as the problem is to misread its genesis” (*ibidem*: 13). In other words, femininity and masculinity are not, therefore, arbitrary impositions/inscriptions on an indifferent consciousness or a neutral body.

Gatens’ argument against the sex/gender distinction is relevant insofar it unmasks both the presupposition behind such a distinction and the effect of marginalizing sexual difference and of not acknowledging the fundamental relationship of sexual difference to (feminist) theory as such. The so-called arbitrariness of gender in relation to sex presumes the conception of a passive, neutral body and, at the same time, that of a symmetrical construction of gender as representation or system of significations (images). This reinforces, in short, the hierarchical and oppositional dichotomy between a brute material reality and its ideal representation (and, by extrapolation, thought itself). Therefore, as Colebrook (2000: 83; italics in original) argues, “any ‘bracketing’ of sex or insistence on sex as an effect of *representation* also partakes in a representational refusal to

⁴ In the second phrase, Gatens refers to the “male trans”, which is taken as a case “that most clearly demonstrates the asymmetry between masculinity/ femininity and male/female” (*ibidem*: 14).

question, or think of a way of questioning *what is* that gender re-presents.” For that reason, the question is not about how the sexes are differentiated, but rather about the specific ways in which the real of the sexes becomes meaningful. The question is then about another ontology according to which the body is thought neither as a pre-representational materiality nor as a formative essence. Moreover, for Colebrook, this type of question echoes Irigaray’s political project of rethinking sexual difference in relation to thought and theory as such:

“If it is the very character of corporeality to become through images, and if this becoming is always a relation to others, then theory will have to acknowledge its own status as an event of becoming and as a production of images. This means that feminist theory will no longer be the cause of theory (in general) for feminist politics and identity. Sexual difference is not a question within theory. For it is only because there is sexual difference, the becoming or imagining of specific bodies, that theory as such is possible.” (ibidem: 90)

Then, turning back to the case of men’s bodies and masculinities and its theorizing, the fact that sexual difference is presupposed but unacknowledged in the exploration of the relation between male bodies and masculinities (masculine subjectivity) also speaks to the marginalized status of sexual difference philosophy in the area of the critical studies of men and masculinities. Men’s theorizing about men and men’s bodies is, consequently, not cut off from the issue of sexual difference, since sexual difference might be the very condition of such theorizing. It wouldn’t be too farfetched to argue then that sexual difference could be the limit of the relationship between the critical studies on men and masculinities and feminist thought and its political project. In other words, if thought as such and, by implication, theorizing men and masculinities, might be conditioned by the sexual difference that is meant to explain, the engagement with feminist theories of sexual difference could be seen, then, as an indicator of the pro-feminist thought and agendas. And it is precisely this limit that I wanted to question in the course of the first chapter of my book, a limit that the scholars on men and masculinities do not theorize. In short, this seems to be quite ironic: sexually differentiated academic zones but no use of theories of sexual difference.

3. New directions

These aspects lead me to consider that any study on men and masculinities becomes problematic if it doesn’t have an explicit strong connection to the multitude of rich feminist theories and goals, as one of the aims is to develop new perspectives in order to influence and

change men, and doing so, ultimately improving women's lives. This work should function as a feminist boomerang: studying men should turn back as a benefit for women and not as just another academic space for men. "We" are not and "we" were never in a symmetrical position so as to claim "independence" of any sort! Studies of men and masculinities should always have an explicit feminist framework and focus or, as Calvin Thomas argues, "masculinity studies can be not the betrayal or appropriation of feminism but rather one of its valuable and necessary consequences" (2002: 62).⁵

An analogy based on Sara Ahmed's argument developed in her on-line paper "Declarations of Whiteness: The non-Performativity of Anti-Racism" (2004) might shed more light on this matter. I see this analogy more as explanatory and less an argumentative one, functioning on three interconnected dimensions: the *fields of study*, in this case the critical studies of men and masculinity and the critical studies of whiteness, the *objects of study*, meaning masculinity (gender) and whiteness (race) and the corresponding *effects* of the relations between the fields and the objects of study (or the risks of the constitution of such fields). This analogy should work as an understanding of the inner workings between a field of study and its object of study without any equivalence between the terms (fields, objects, effects) of the analogy, meaning that the difference in the nature of some of the categories employed in the analogy, i.e. gender and race, as supraordinate categories of masculinity and whiteness, is recognizable.

Analysing the self-reflexive turn in whiteness studies and how this field constitutes itself through various "anti-racist" modes of declaration, Ahmed argues, first of all, that the representation of whiteness as invisible, "as the unseen or the un-marked, as a non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance" (2004: para. 1), presents several risks. One of them is that of transforming whiteness into "an essential something" when not making what can already be seen, visible in different ways.

"If whiteness becomes a field of study, then there is clearly a risk that whiteness itself will be transformed into an object. Or, if whiteness assumes integrity as an object of study, as being 'something' that we can track or follow across time and space, then whiteness would become a fetish, cut off from histories of production and circulation." (Ahmed 2004: para. 3)

⁵ I am concerned here also about the specific knowledge production and not necessarily about the contextual ways the subfield got institutionalized, though they are strongly interconnected. It is known, especially at the expense of young scholars, how knowledge is produced, reproduced and fiercely guarded within specific academic spaces, where "to fit in," often means actually "to do and to be the same".

Another risk is that of reproducing whiteness as the focus of the intellectual endeavors, “however haunted by absence, lack or emptiness” (*ibidem*: para. 4). In addition, whiteness studies might become “a discourse of love which would sustain the narcissism that elevates whiteness into a social and bodily ideal” and a field constructing itself on pure self-reflection. The emergence of this field might also represent the emergence of a new form of whiteness, an anxious one, which would entail that “this white subject would come into existence in its very anxiety about the effects it has on others, or even in fear that is taking something away from other” (*ibidem*: para. 7). Furthermore, this anxiety is signaled by the very use of the notion “critical” in front of “whiteness studies”:

“But I think the ‘critical’ often functions as a place where we deposit our anxieties. We might assume that if we are doing critical whiteness studies, rather than whiteness studies, that we can protect ourselves from doing – or even being seen to do – the wrong kind of whiteness studies. But the word ‘critical’ does not mean the elimination of risk, and nor should it become just a description of what we are doing over here, as opposed to them, over there.” (ibidem: para. 8)

Analogously, in the field of the critical studies of men and masculinities, there was a pervasive assumption that “men”/“masculinity” were the invisible norm, hence the urgency to make men visible as a social category or naming men as men through various discursive practices.⁶ How should this making-visible of men qua men function in a different way in order not to re-centre or narcissistically reproduce the focus of men/masculinity in the academic space? The presence of the word “critical” in critical studies on men and masculinities thus takes on a new importance. The question is how can a “critical” intervention assure us that these studies don’t play the same old game?

“If ‘whiteness studies’ turns towards white privilege, as that which enables and endures declarations of whiteness, then this does not simply involve turning towards the white subject, which would amount to the narcissism of a perpetual return. Rather, whiteness studies should involve at least a double turn: to turn towards whiteness is to turn towards and away from those bodies who have been afforded agency and mobility by such privilege. In other words, the task for white subjects would be to stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards others. This ‘double turn’ is not sufficient, but it clears some ground, upon which the work of exposing racism might provide the conditions for another kind of work. We don’t

⁶ For more on discursive strategies in theorizing men and men’s theorizing see Jeff Hearn (1998).

know, as yet, what such conditions might be, or whether we are even up to the task of recognizing them.” (ibidem: para. 59; italics mine)

It is this “double turn” that might assure the critical nature of the studies on men and masculinities, a turn towards men and masculinities by showing their positionings in the histories of violence in various forms against women and other men. This is, undoubtedly, one of the major intended aims in the critical studies of men and masculinities. But what is missing is the “(...) *turn away from themselves, and towards others,*” that is a way of engaging with the “others” that would acknowledge how that turn was possible in the first place, i.e. the feminist critique of patriarchal power relations and sexual difference.

My critique is not a new one. Rosi Braidotti raised the same issue in the early 1990s and remains prescient, precisely because of the growing number of male scholars in gender studies/women studies and the institutionalization of studies on men and masculinities. In her *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), the section “Envy; or, with Your Brains and My Looks” (pp. 136-145) interrogates the position of men in feminism (or what she calls *Pheminism*) and questions the presupposed new symmetry between the sexes which resulted in the new focus on men and men’s studies, and the neglect of the fundamental issue of “the historical experience of oppression on the basis of sex”:

“It must be very uncomfortable to be a male, white, middle-class, and heterosexual intellectual at a time in history when so many minorities and oppressed groups are speaking up for themselves; a time when the hegemony of the white knowing subject is crumbling. Lacking the historical experience of oppression on the basis of sex, they paradoxically lack a minus. Lacking the lack, they cannot participate in the great ferment of ideas that is shaking up Western culture: it must be very painful indeed to have no option other than being the empirical referent of the historical oppressor of women, and being asked to account for his atrocities.” (Braidotti 1994: 139)

But this is not all. This concerns not only the physical presence of men in a very specific academic area, but also the very way of doing research and theorizing their own presence. I argue, then, that the blindness/neglect/ absence of sexual difference feminist theory in the works on men and masculinities is not accidental and for Braidotti this neglect is more than sexism.

“What the heterosexual men are lacking intellectually - the peculiar blindness to sexual difference for which the term sexism is an inadequate assessment - is a reflection of their position in history.” (ibidem: 138-139; italics in original)

4. Conclusion

As a way of concluding, in this section, I took an almost analogous step (in terms of the internal conditioning and not between the terms of an analogy) to what Judith Butler did in *Gender Trouble* for feminism, but obviously with a counter-twist, other reasons and aims: “I was writing in the tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs” (Butler 1999: vii). Butler looked at some of the fundamental notions and concepts in feminist theory and questioned them in relation to their foundational nature for the political projects/agendas. As herself clarifies in the preface to *Gender Trouble*’s second edition, she sought “to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory” (1990: vii) by showing that any restricted meaning of gender has its own exclusionary norms and that there is a strong heterosexism at the core of sexual difference fundamentalism. Linking sexuality and gender, she moved on developing her own theory of the performativity of gender, whereby the materiality of the bodies is always already subsumed to the constitutive power of gender discursive forces. In the context of my book, given the intermingled history of the development of the studies on men and masculinities with feminist movements and thought, I questioned the conceptual grounds of the subfield (even if not a unified one) and its major presupposition as far as male bodies are concerned, the twist aiming at finally reaching the question of what it would mean to think of men’s bodies through sexual difference as theorized, for example, by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray. I also showed an internal contradiction in understanding male bodies through the paradigms employed by scholars analysing men and masculinities and the implicit ambiguity of the status of men’s bodily materiality in relation to masculine subjective formation within power relations. The predominance of the discursive constitution of maleness and male materiality is not accidental and is concurrent with the omission of the sexual difference paradigm, gesture which, in stronger political terms, could be translated as an explicit marginalization, one identifiable even in the struggles and transformations in feminist theory. Furthermore, this marginalization is strongly linked, if not effected, by the very neutralization of (male) bodily materiality, in terms of lack of sexual difference specifications, in the discursive presuppositions of the analyses on men and masculinities.

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