Wusses and willies: masculinity and contemporary sexual politics

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THE SEARCH FOR MASCULINITY

For quite a time now we have been regaled in the popular media with stories of yet another "scientific" report on the "causes" of homosexuality, for example in the Sydney Morning Herald, that it might be linked to hormonal alterations in the interstitial nucleus of the anterior hypothalamus (Dayton 1995). The report of this hypothesis—for that's what it is, only a hypothesis—also went on to indicate that experiments had shown that testosterone, described as the "male" sex hormone, can feminise or masculinise rats! Yes, I, too, was unsure of the connection. This never-ending search for the causes of homosexuality is, according to the scientists who pursue it, not trying to find a cure for homosexuality. Yet the Sydney Morning Herald in this report went on to say: "The findings raise the possibility that in the distant future sexual orientation may be open to medical manipulation." The often-voiced fear of gay men and lesbians that this scientific agenda is eugenicist seems justified.

What is astonishing about such research is that it has learned nothing from the last thirty years of research and writing in anthropology, sociology, politics, feminism and sexuality studies about the instability of the very categories that offer the seemingly certain starting points for such research. Nearly twenty years ago Jeffrey Weeks (1977, 1981, 1985) and Michel Foucault (1978, 1985, 1986) exposed the Western binary category of sexuality, i.e. homosexuality/heterosexuality, as a construction, an invention. Gilbert Herdt (1981) published his sensational revelations of the Sambia's compulsory male adolescent homoeroticism in Papua New Guinea seventeen years ago, blowing out of the water any simplistic conceptualisation of human sexuality as being fixed in this binary and certainly pointing out the cultural relativity of such categories. This so-called scientific presumption of human sexuality as fixed in two biologically encoded categories even ignores the path-breaking revelations of Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues fifty years ago, which revealed the extent and the immense variability of same-sex experience among white North American men (Kinsey et al. 1948).
It is not just the specious categories that purport to describe human sexuality which are in play in this hypothalamus hypothesis. Masculinity and femininity enter the game, via the rats, to nail the argument in both biologically determined sex and then in gender—the “male” hormone produces “masculinised” behaviour. These terms are taken for granted, even though the biological sex binary opposition “male/female” has been regarded as problematic by medical science for years, and the simple separation of human behaviour and traits into “masculine” or “feminine” characteristics has been discredited by physical and social science for a long time now.

This is to deny neither difference nor commonality; rather, it is to demand that the relative and social or cultural nature of these terms be problematised in such scientific research and not taken as given. This conflation of sexuality with sex and gender is at the core of much of this so-called science, and it reveals the palpable tension in those categories that such research tries so hard to soothe. It is precisely the uncertainty in these categories that drives such scientific attempts to clean them up. It is the very indefiniteness of male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, that propels the effort to secure them.

Nowhere is this insecurity more obvious than in contemporary masculinity. However we choose to define it, masculinity is in crisis. It may never have been out of crisis, so it may be appropriate to take on board Connell’s use of the notion of crisis tendencies (1983). Connell argues that the construct, masculinity, itself has built-in structural tensions, so that it constantly faces in its production an ever-threatening destabilisation.

This crisis can be noted in advertisements in the mass daily papers offering sexual health services to men in the form of impotence clinics, penis extension operations, “Viagra” ordering sites on the Net, counselling services, warrior workshops, group encounters for getting in touch with yourself, increased interest in body-building and fitness activity, and the burgeoning men’s cosmetics industry, to name just a few indicators. This crisis is also revealed in the growing evidence on, and concern about, male violence toward other men and women, about male sexual violence against women, but also male sexual violence against other men in war, prisons and the great Australian pastime of poofter-bashing. Make no mistake—poofter-bashing is sexual violence. The crisis is further revealed in the growing reports of suicide among male youth and in the male mortality and morbidity figures now being re-examined in the growing debate on men’s health.

And, clearly, others are also spooked. There is a more generalised and inchoate concern expressed, most often by women, about marked uncertainty in contemporary heterosexuality. Every so often I am asked the following questions by some of Australia’s most prominent women journalists writing in the sexual relations area: why are men turning gay or at least retreating from women; why are young men clearly confused about their male sex role and their sexuality; what is going on with men and their obvious worries
about their bodies; what is happening to men's sexuality if there are all these growing workshops, clinics and services to fix up their sexual problems? These concerns are exemplified by Bettina Arndt, noted Australian sexuality commentator, in a lengthy piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled “The sexual illiterates: courtship, love and lust in the age of sexual harassment.” Arndt (1995, 6A), argues that many men actually do not know how to relate to women: “I can’t read signals,” says one, “I never have,” and concludes with the following, referring to a senior military man regarded as a bit of a charmer, but never a hard-core harasser of women:

The military officer tells me he’s given up acknowledging the presence of women as he walks around his huge organisation. Young men he’ll single out, honour with a word of praise, an intimate chat. But the women he avoids. “I can’t afford to be friendly to women,” he says. What they have lost is a valuable friend. Nothing more threatening than that.

This concern about contemporary heterosexuality might perhaps better be termed a concern about *heteronormativity*. Heteronormativity is that particularly validated version of heterosexual relations: consensual, adult, married, monogamous, reproductive and penetrative. How many people actually lived their lives that way? No one knows? Who still does? This is even less clear. No one would suggest that all heterosexual relationships be categorised as on the brink of disaster. However, it would seem that this assumed, predominant patterning of heterosexuality is less than dominant. It may even be unstable, probably impossible, or possibly never actualised anywhere but for the odd moment in history and glued into the imagination of only the nostalgic moralist Right.

**THE IMPACT OF FEMINISM**

There is a growing perception then that something is amiss in gender relations, and this is often cast as something amiss with men. This is not a new claim: both early second-wave feminism and gay liberation clearly argued that untold damage was being done to boys in the way they were reared. Whether that analysis was configured within now largely discredited sex role theory (see Connell 1983) or through analyses of gender as a system of power (e.g. Connell 1987), we have known for a long time that men are in trouble.

For some reason, in all this crisis, gay men seem to be regarded as better able either to explain these phenomena or exemplify solutions to them. The phrase often heard is: “Oh yes, but gay men are in touch with themselves,” although how this is judged is beyond me. So often gay men are lauded for a capacity to construct equal relations with women, to handle emotion, to resile from violence, to transcend possessive sexual relations, or to construct a positive masculinity. Somehow, all this has been managed even though the last eighteen years of gay men’s lives the world over has been completely dominated by the devastation of the HIV/AIDS crisis. These traits of gay men are
not some by-product of being gay, of retaining the "feminine"—an absurd idea in the light of the insecurity and fragility of such a term. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere (Dowsett 1993), these "traits" are derived from those struggles in sexual politics that find women and gay men sometimes on the same side, at other times in disagreement; and this is most obvious when it comes to having sex with men.

Arndt and colleagues have been running a line for quite some time now that lays blame for some of the confusion among men on women, on a blow-out in sexual politics produced by certain kinds of feminism. (It is worth noting that in such debates "men" actually means heterosexually active men—gay men seem to drop out of the category at times like this.) In this kind of debate, the emphasis is put on trying to understand men's experience of what has been a tumultuous period in sexual politics in the last twenty-five years. Women have moved tremendously in that time, and although the gains have been unevenly distributed among women and there is still much to do, there is little doubt that the gains made by women in many spheres of social and economic life in this country have greatly outstripped gains made by oppressed minority groups.

The pressure on men as a result of the struggle for such gains has undoubtedly been an increase in restrictions on male prerogatives and on the exercise of patriarchal privilege. Many men have not liked the cost they have had to bear for these restrictions. Some refuse to pay, others dig in, for example our political parties and the unsolved issue of equal representation of women in our parliaments. Of course, many men have not changed at all and others are too powerful to have to bother. But some sections of the male population have faced up squarely to the challenge of feminism and adjusted significantly. Not all men are unwilling to change, but the process of change is difficult even when it is willingly pursued.

It is important to distance this authentication of the difficulties men experience in adjusting to the challenge of feminism from the notion of "men's pain"—a common characterisation of such difficulties in sections of the men’s movement. For the moment, a basic materialist argument suffices: the challenge of feminism has demanded such enormous changes to the practices of daily life that this does destabilise and confuse men, for they have rarely been fully included in the processes of producing that change.

There is also a case to be mounted that part of the destabilisation of masculinity is unrelated to feminism as such and is connected more to other forms of uncertainty emerging as Australia moves toward being a post-industrial society. One such uncertainty lies in the meaning of work and, once upon a time, its guarantee of a place in society. To participate in paid work has been the lot of all men in industrial society; in this sense, a man’s place as a citizen was constituted and affirmed by paid work. This is no longer the case for all of us now (men and women), and the level of permanent unemployment produces both real experiences and also fears of loss of citizenship, of the
right to a place in society. This is just one example to suggest that in simpler times, simpler measures were used to gauge one's masculinity: a job, a wife, a family, a house, a body that functioned, and maybe certain defining skills. These measures have very different salience today. It is a more complex time and many old measures no longer suffice. Good thing too, but we should not forget that large-scale social change to produce better and fairer societies can also be difficult to live through at the individual and communal level.

The men's movement offers one real possibility for gaining access to men's experience of such changes. Although I have serious disagreements with the men's movement about some of their strategies and politics, it would be foolish not to read between their lines. There are to be found underlying commonalities between their sometimes benighted representations of men's situation and that of others who write in the masculinity area, such as Connell (1995), who offer clearer, more theorised analyses of men, social change and sexual politics.

**SEXUALITY**

Leaving that set of arguments there, I want to concentrate on one issue where pressure for social change has produced significant confusion and turmoil, and that is in the area of men's sexuality. It is important at this point to be reminded of that structural ambiguity in the human condition masked by the frail certainties of those binaries: man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual. I intend to explore that ambiguity through one of the ongoing soap opera stories pervading Australian gay community life for the last few years.

There's nothing unusual about naked male bodies in Australian culture. We have seen surf lifesavers' naked buttocks on many a greeting card for over a decade now (probably offering the world the only authentic Australian contribution to homoerotica in the bargain). It is not uncommon to be confronted by a bronzed man shopping for tea on a Sunday afternoon in a Bondi Beach or Surfers Paradise supermarket, wearing only a pair of threadbare Speedos and a pair of thongs. Aussie Rules footballers reveal not just a good deal of thighs and biceps in their weekly televised games, but offer annually calendars of their semi- or nude bodies for our kitchen or study walls. Even members of the Australian Olympic team were photographed naked in a glossy magazine as part of their preparation for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, followed not too long afterward by an edition of similarly bare snaps of our rock musicians. We are not actually a nation of prudes, on the whole, and not usually shocked rigid by either nudity or for that matter fairly explicit sexual images. However, there are times when the stakes shift.

It is early February in 1995 and in a prominent display window of a men's fashion shop on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, one of Australia's most famous professional Rugby League players had bared it all for the Gay and Lesbian
Mardi Gras. The larger-than-life, naked image captured immediate attention—it was so prominent, so provocative. Its blue-grey tones and its very size drew the gaze, and the recognition of its possible meaning drew gasps of delight. For professional footballer Ian Roberts, like Sister Mary McKillop, 1995 marked a beatification—but in his case, it was by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an order of gay male nuns.

This was not Roberts’s first strip routine. A nude photo essay had appeared in the then new, up-market gay photography and lifestyle magazine (not only) Blue (James and Freeman 1995), earlier that year and had launched Roberts into gay culture nationally as a major icon and superhunk. His prominent appearances at the Mardi Gras Gay and Lesbian Community Fair and the Gay Community Awards Night at Sydney Town Hall during the same month assured his eventual canonisation and placed the question of his sexuality—yes, a professional footballer—on the mainstream media’s agenda (Jamrozik 1995). Roberts at that time wisely refused to discuss his sexual proclivities, noting only that:

Being part of a different group, being labelled as an outsider because you live your life in a different way to the “norm,” has put me in a position to look at things laterally and to think about them objectively. (James and Freeman 1995: 56)

But for the gay community in Sydney, Roberts was offering another moment in the major re-situating of “gay” in Australian social life.

It was no secret to the gay community that Roberts is gay. He “came out” in the US press not long after and this story was picked up in the Australian sporting press almost immediately. “Roberts does hard yards with gay abandon” was the provocative leader (Fitzsimmons 1995). But as part of an unwritten rule in gay community life, one does not “out” other gay and lesbian people without good reason. What is remarkable about the excitement of the Roberts story, since told fully in an autobiography, is that it was over almost as soon as it started. By 1997, his presence in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Elle McFeast” special on the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade drew no public comment at all.

That said, the intense speculation about Roberts’s sexuality throughout 1995 had other agendas. Roberts appeared at many gay events as a prominent guest, always carefully avoiding a declaration of his sexual interests. He and other prominent professional sportsmen offered an expensive weekend-long body fitness and training workshop to gay men and lesbians, and Roberts features in a regular fitness column in the national gay magazine, Outrage. Speculation about Roberts’s sexual interests intensified in the print media, all of which was spurred along unwittingly by Rupert Murdoch and his acquisition of Roberts for Super League football.

A series of portraits of Roberts with his then lover, often nude, were a feature of the visual arts activities in a subsequent Mardi Gras. He advertised shaving cream. His body, again nude or semi-nude, appeared in various advertisements, yet always sustaining an ambiguity. A series of three advertise-
ments for jeans exemplified this ambiguity. In the first advertisement, Roberts and another man wearing only jeans offer us near-naked straining torsos as they pull at another pair of jeans in a playful tug-a-war. The second advertisement featured the two men standing again nude to the waist wearing jeans, with a young woman sitting at their feet, suggesting a possible competitor for Roberts’s attention. In the third advertisement, Roberts and the woman are completely nude standing pressed face-to-face and body-to-body. The advertisement states that if you cannot get these particular jeans, then no jeans will do. Or does it say that the woman will?

Roberts’s success in maintaining his professional football career (until recently he captained Townsville’s Super League team, the “Cowboys”) and developing a modelling and media/community personality career would appear to be progressing smoothly, and Australia’s football powers—that be accepted Roberts for what he is. The football fans were less uniformly supportive: the ambiguity of Roberts’s sexual interests in men and his aggressive front-rover masculinity would appear to sit uneasily for many, and Roberts was occasionally subjected to abuse from football spectators.

**AMBIGUITY IN MASCULINE SEXUALITY**

This kind of ambiguity concerning men has blossomed of late, and Mark Simpson in his book *Male Impersonators* (1994) explores this phenomenon in advertising particularly. It is important and useful then to situate the Ian Roberts example within a larger frame—that of the imaging and the imagining of masculinity in recent years. There has been a significant shift in the stakes for men in this imaging and imagining.

I would suggest for a start that it is no longer acceptable for men simply to desire; they now must also be desirable. The configuration of men’s sexuality that has dominated our understanding of it—that of the active phallic male—is no longer either accurate or clear. Within it, we have held for too long to the comforting notion of the bull-in-the-china-shop metaphor, for it seemed to describe—though it never explained—women’s experience of men’s heterosexual behaviour. No doubt there is validity in the description. Many women are or have been bored to death by some men’s sexual incompetence; many women have experienced brutality, or been subjected to the incomprehensible sexual ambivalences of misogyny.

Yet, this description of male sexuality fails to understand the production of that incompetence, that brutality or that ambivalence. Leo Bersani (1988), noted North American cultural theorist, argues that there is a big secret about sex, and that is that most people actually do not like it. He argues that the last twenty-five years of sexual politics has actually been, on the whole, a small-l liberal attempt to get “sexuality” to clean up its act and be nice. He calls this a “pastoral tendency” and particularly berates gay and feminist politics for its pursuit. He prefers to retrieve from psychoanalysis the view that sexual de-
sire is actually all about ambivalence, that it is laced with profound uncertainties. Sex is as much about dislike and confusion as it is about the pursuit of pleasure and relationality.

Certainly, for boys and young men in our culture, we maximise the confusion about sex by refusing them adequate sex education and any useful information about their bodies. We certainly trade on dislike of women in producing them as men: taunting them if they “throw like a girl” (see Connell 1995, chap. 2), mocking effeminacy and hints of softness or fear, calling them “sissy” or “wuss,” and demanding unreasonable risk-taking in sport. This masculinising is not simply the product of fathers; it was women who gave other women’s unenlisted sons white feathers during World War I.

This story of masculinising practices has been well known for years, and the costs to boys and society are patently clear. Less often we speak of boys’ profound ignorance of their bodies, reinforced by ludicrous notions of the hydraulic nature of men’s sex drive, which if not released will burst in some horrendous and embarrassing display. It is a laughable state of affairs in one way; but in other ways it leads to the kind of unwanted pressures many young women experience in their relations with insistent boyfriends. It can also lead to unnecessary anxieties among many a young man when he experiences his first ejaculation and thinks he has broken something (Dowsett 1996). For many young men, the very discourse of male hydraulics does speak of their actual experience of male adolescence, full as it is of unwanted and untimely erections, embarrassing wet dreams, absolutely no information about those other parts of the body that feel sexual too, the unending silence about masturbation, and an unyielding incomprehension as to why at fourteen opening a car door or smelling onions can be a turn-on.

This level of confusion must be contextualised in the isolation in which boys experience adolescence and in which young men are expected to produce themselves. It seems so hard to do and so easy to fail, for no one explains exactly what the test is or who wrote the rules. One wonders at the connection between this isolation and confusion and the significantly higher rates of suicide among young men.

MASCUINITY AS CONTINGENCY

Mark Simpson called his book Male Impersonators deliberately, registering in that title something of the chimera that is masculinity. This notion of impersonation resonates with a more profound critique of gender emanating from poststructuralist feminist theory and in “queer” theory, and the notion of gender as masquerade is the major trope (e.g. Butler 1990); yet its value as an analytical device has been applied less to men than to women. The notion of impersonation is useful, for it gestures toward an active or agentive appropriation of something firmly established rather than to fantasy. However, its queer or bent possibilities, coming most from an almost immediate align-
ment with the phrase “female impersonator,” bring with them something perverse, something superficial. In this, the notion of impersonation lifts the heavy-handedness of constructs such as sex or gender role, or socialisation. This is a lighter enactment, which moves in the direction of what Connell calls “engagement.” In these ways, we begin to see masculinity as a construction, as something in the making, neither pre-destination nor a book of rules to be learnt—something more contingent than certain. I want to explore that contingency for men a little more.

When Ian Roberts’s glorious body insinuated itself wittingly at the centre of gay men’s representations and fantasies in early 1995, it achieved a number of things. Certainly, it claimed a place as a beautiful body. In this, Roberts aligned himself with the increasingly obvious practice, dare I say cult, of the male body sweeping Western society. One can not turn around today without being confronted by nude men everywhere, advertising socks, underpants, aftershave, bed linen, soft drinks, alcohol, holidays and flavoured milk. The male gaze can no longer simply look at women; it is forced nowadays to look upon other men. As Mark Simpson argues, the male so looked upon becomes desirable, for he is often naked or nearly naked and for some reason the body employed is always beautiful. Simpson notes tricks of the advertising trade that try to heterosexualise the image—the sudden appearance of a female hand, a girl enters the last frame—but the central trope is an image that constantly reinforces identification with, and acknowledgment of, the desirability of other men. As Simpson (1994) so nicely puts it—“Narcissus goes shopping.”

This placement of the desirable male body squarely in the viewing frame for all men exemplifies and powerfully invokes what Connell (1983) registered in the phrase “hegemonic masculinity.” Hegemonic masculinity captures that most validated and vaunted maleness—the successful, athletic, intelligent, good-looking achiever that all men desire to be. The classic example for most boys is the school captain, possibly one’s father, a more successful older brother, or maybe the boy next door. It is a neat trap, for most boys are not like this at all, and in fact this kind of masculinity is very much a minority experience. After all, there are only nine places on the rowing team and eleven places on the first cricket team; most men fail it miserably and spent their lives relegated to the reserves, or maybe the school choir.

The power of hegemonic masculinity over all men is not reduced by the failure of the majority to achieve it. Quite the opposite actually. The hierarchy of masculinities that are left foundering in the wake of hegemonic masculinity slots the wimps, wusses, swats, ders, drongos, nerds, dorks, slobs and poofers into ever-marginalised places and legitimates their increasingly oppressed circumstances. The 1996 case of Sydney gay schoolboy Christopher Tsakalos dramatically reveals this. His law suit against the New South Wales Department of School Education, based on the failure in their duty of care in relation to him as a young gay person grossly mistreated at school, graphi-
cally exposed the oppressive situation of young non-hegemonic (i.e. subordinate) men. (And again, homosexuality performs as the touchstone in a profoundly more complex process.) Tsakolas won his case; but usually, the “Solo” man wins, even if he cannot swallow properly.

However, Simpson is flagging something new in his argument on impersonation: that the much-vaunted hegemonic masculinity of the image-making world is not just successful, athletic, beautiful, and powerful; it is also desirable. And being desirable implies a passivity, a passivity that threatens to de-stabilise the conventional understanding of men as active and, therefore, phallic. Ian Roberts exemplifies the leading edge of the growing confusion this desirability brings. After all, Roberts is a professional footballer, one of the best examples of hegemonic masculinity, and here he was revealing his body to the world, passively letting it be gazed upon, and declaring its desirability proudly. This was not some vapid Chippendale or a stylised Keanu Reeves, pre-packaged in a predictable and comprehensible commercial strategy. This is football, for God’s sake! Real man’s stuff.

However, Ian Roberts went further. By offering his body first to a gay magazine he created a unique moment in sexual politics. With his sexual interests (initially) undeclared, Roberts placed his body passively at the centre of the gay community’s gaze. In doing so, he publicly blessed gay men’s desire for all men’s bodies. Moreover, Roberts’s deliberate ambiguity at that time embodied the (homo)sexual possibilities in all men’s bodies. He suggested that gay bodies were not other at all; they might be right next to you in the showers after footy, or clutch at your shorts in the scrum. When he finally came out as gay, the gay community could notch up one for its side and watch the squirming in the press as sports commentators sought to accommodate a hero turning over, as it were. But more than that, Roberts exposed the dangerous proximity that gay is: gay sex can happen in/to/on any man’s body; it is not just the preserve of hairdressers.

This “proximity,” to borrow Jonathan Dollimore’s term (1991), is multiplying everywhere. A recent, controversial television advertisement for jockettes is a case in point (see Buchbinder 1997). In this advertisement, a tall and tan and lean and lovely hunk is forced to strip to his crisp, tight, white knickers by a (female) airport security guard’s trickery, in order to get through the metal detector. We were offered alternate endings to the advertisement: one ended with the guard saying to her female workmate “nice luggage,” lodging the attraction of the departing hunk, still clad only in his snow-white briefs, firmly on his fetching buttocks. This is not simply a displacement of a phallus, but a declaration that his backside is sexy and, therefore, sexual in its own right. We are on dangerous ground here. This is a manoeuvre that positions the man as desirable, as passive and, even, as possibly penetrable. A second ending, and a more ambiguous one, simply finds the female security guard, with resignation in her voice, declaring “Oh, he’s probably gay” as the buttboy saunters off, this time not only nailing his desirability to his bris-
tling buns but also to homosexuality as well.\(^2\)

Just as Ian Roberts validated gay men's right to gaze on men's bodies unashamedly, the positioning of men's bodies generally as gazed-upon and desirable has opened yet another ambivalence in masculinity. No wonder men feel confused. No wonder there is a plethora of Bruces, Kevins and Dimitris at the gyms of Australia sculpting their bodies and hoping that this will gain them the right points. Unfortunately, as many gym-bound men find out, gay men have been gym-ing it for years now and being desirable is not something that can be turned off and on to different gazes.

**THE HOMOSEXUAL CENTRE OF MASCULINITY**

There is no doubt as to the centrality of homosexuality to the understanding of masculinity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) argues that patriarchy is deeply structured by homophobia. Her term "homosociality" argues that the bonding between men so essential to patriarchy can only be sustained through a refusal of the homoerotic. In essence, the link between men under patriarchy is deeply sexual precisely because of that refusal. Lee Edelman (1995) goes further, invoking Freud, and argues that heterosexuality itself, as we know it in the last one hundred years since the term was invented, is structured by men's refusal of their anal sexual potential. This argument registers women's position under patriarchy as very precarious indeed. It is not an argument that all men are bisexual or some other such nonsense. Rather, it places homoeroticism at the centre of all human sexual potential and then asks how sexuality as a structure of power operates to secure its control over us all through that unstable and increasingly questionable heterosexual/homosexual binary opposition.

These ambiguities about men's bodies are continuing to grow apace, and there is no sign that the eroticisation of images of hegemonic masculinity will abate. Similarly, the alignment of these images of a phallic passivity with a demand that men gaze upon each other with desire, positions gay men at the heart of a new masculinity. Ian Roberts is not a wuss; he does not throw like a girl; and he has proved his masculinity for a long time now in one of its more exacting tests—professional football. He also provides a glorious example of the destabilisation underlying the contemporary masculine condition—a few years ago he would have never been considered for the hard-edged commercial world of Super League football. Roberts is definitively male, a man and masculine according to the criteria modernity sets for us. It is not just his homosexuality that unsettled this boy's own game. His coming-out simply finessed a sequence of events in which he re-positioned the very concepts male, man and masculine. In the face of this confusion, the burgeoning clinics, workshops, surgical and fitness transformations and so on begin to make sense.

Yet, it is not all a complete mess. The younger generation of men in some
sections of Australian society are fully cognisant of these pressures and changes and have responded well (again, see Connell 1995). The problem becomes how to create a politics of change among men in which those striving for change can proceed effectively. That has been a very difficult task to date. The men’s movement has never appealed to men in a way feminism has to women. Nor has it ever received the levels of institutional and governmental support that might assist it to professionalise, to recruit, and to develop something more than a voluntarist and reactive theoretical and political position to the challenges of feminism, post-modernity, gay and lesbian theory, and cultural politics.

Gay men have made significant advances in moving from the stigmatised margins of society closer to its political and cultural centre, while transforming hidden and “shameful” sexual interests into vital and proud communities recognisable worldwide, all in the era of HIV/AIDS. And, gay men have made these political, sexual and cultural gains largely outside the marriage to the state that marked liberal feminism—there are no “poofycrats” to parallel the “femocrats” (see Dowsett 1998a; 1998b). Yet gay men have found little reason for an alliance with the men’s movement, which, in spite of its openness to gay men and its defence of gay men’s issues, remains pre-occupied with the dilemmas of heterosexuality. Simon Watney (1986) once declared gender to be heterosexist; for gay men there has been little reason to see benefit in gender politics except where it relates to coalitionist politics in the lesbian and gay communities.

So there the game stands. The forces which might make headway here stand distanced from each other: feminism rarely problematises masculinity in such a way as to draw alliances with those men working in the field, that is gay men and the men’s movement, and is deeply divided on many issues of sexual politics, such as pornography. Gay men find no solace in the men’s movement for, when push comes to shove, the men’s movement refuses the very centrality of sex between men as a challenge to patriarchy through its destruction of homosociality. Meanwhile, those for whom we toil in our intellectual and political endeavours—the ordinary blokes out there—seem confused, uncertain and continue to blunder on their not-so-merry way.

NOTES

1 This section of the chapter, discussing the Ian Roberts story, is based on an earlier, shorter version published originally in an essay entitled “Sexual Conduct, Sexual Culture, Sexual Community: Gay Men’s Bodies and AIDS” (Dowsett 1997).

2 As Buchbinder (1997) notes, a later third version of this advertisement was watered down to “One day I’m gonna get lucky.”
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