Queer Representations of Gay Males and Masculinities in the Media

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Abstract:

Ways of being that transcend what has been defined or expected have been called queer and, in the past 10 years, media has offered some representations of queer gay males and masculinity. For males struggling with identity and for professionals who work with them, careful consideration of queerness may be important in opening more accepting spaces. Here, various recent media representations of gay males are examined in an effort to provoke readers to reflect on their own positions about queer sexual and gender identities and possibilities for more fluid constructions of identities.

Article:

> No one in the world would believe you're straight. You're as gay as a clutchpurse on Tony night. You fell outta the gay tree, hitting every gay branch on the way down. And ya landed on a gay guy. AND ya did 'em. No, no, honey, your gayness can be seen from space.
>
> Karen—from *Will and Grace* (*2008*)
>
> Wanted: No fats, no fems, bodybuilder type into muscle worship and man/man sex. Me—str8 acting, 5'11", 190, into wrestling and contact sports.
>
> Anonymous—posted on *Gay.com*

Media is a central location for not only reflecting social and cultural phenomena but also for defining who and how we can *be*. Media representations of identities are dominantly constructed through a heteronormative lens, with traditional gender roles defining how one can or should be masculine or feminine. Indeed, media has also defined sexual identities, with heteronormative identities dominating the media landscape. If you are struggling with identifying as other than

"straight," television and other media sources offer a smorgasbord of so-called alternate lifestyle identities where one can absorb behaviors, values, and attitudes that should be associated with particular identities. Often, such alternative identities are fraught with their own rules and boundaries and, for those whose lives don't conform to such constraints, anxiety and depression often manifest, often creating significant clinical concerns. As identities become more fluid opportunities to feel displaced, confused, shameful, and anxious abound. Questions about how to fit into particular groups begin to be more difficult to address personally and clinically as identity categories are blurred. Here, the impact of particular media representations of gay males is considered from a queer perspective; queer being defined as different or out of what has traditionally or ordinarily been expected.

Inherent in the quotes above are clear messages about how one is read and how one desires to be read with regard to same-sex sexuality and, consequently, gender identity. Despite attempts to act straight, Karen is reading her subject as "gay," implying that his "sissiness" has marred his attempts to be perceived otherwise. The person who is soliciting a partner on *Gay.com* clearly indicates that he is not interested in anyone who is less than a "real" man, defined as one who can wrestle, play sports, and enjoy muscular body structure. Males who adopt or exhibit traditional feminine attributes such as soft voices, emotionality, limp wrists, swaying hips, or any number of so-called "sissy" behaviors were and are contextualized as "queer" and/or "gay" by mainstream America. After the so-called gay liberation movement began in earnest in the 1970s, many white males who identified as gay adopted the "clone" persona which emphasized hyper-masculinity through its focus on bodybuilding and propensity for its followers to dress in flannel, leather, denim, and work-boots (Connell *1995*). Still, the public continued to stereotype men who appeared feminine as "gay," relying on the "sissy" stereotype to represent gayness. The AIDS crisis, which began in the 1980s and extended well into the 1990s particularly enhanced the fear of males who identified as gay held by the general public; after all, gay men were the supposed locus of one of the most frightening pandemics in modern times. While the AIDS crisis claimed many lives, it served as a catalyst to open conversations about sexuality and gender that had heretofore been difficult if not impossible and, consequently, the turn of the millennium ushered in a newfound examination of what had been defined as "gay," and perhaps not so positively, this queered space began to make "gay" a commodity. Interestingly, it would only be 10 years after the height of the AIDS crisis in America that the number one television sit-com would highlight the lives of two "gay" men and two "straight" women (all white and "upper-middle-class") in a manner that captured many of the stereotypes historically associated with gays and the women who adore them.

Will and Grace (*1998*–2006) brought "gay" into the American household like no other media event had ever done; after all, Ellen DeGeneres had come out on television only a year or so before *Will and Grace* aired and her show was cancelled. Certainly, *Will and Grace* was not the first location for "gay" in the media, but it was a landmark in that it rose to popularity and remained embedded in mainstream American households throughout the transition of the

millennium and, while the show entertained millions, it also taught many people what "gay" involved, including beliefs about "gay" as a location for loneliness, superficiality, disappointment, missed opportunities, struggle, shame, and despair. Will, representing a white gay man who could pass as straight, provided contrast to Jack who personified the flamboyant "sissy" that often predominates mainstream images of gay males. Grace, the white straight woman who struggles with heterosexual relationships, finds solace and comfort in her life with Will and somewhat tragically, the viewer sees that if only Will could be "normal," he and Grace would make the perfect heteronormative couple. Karen embodies the quintessential "fag-hag" and her antics with Jack make us all laugh despite the short-comings of their lives, which lack long-term intimate relationships and/or partnerships with people that are not merely passing through despite both of them having access to wealth, which has historically been a ticket for attracting "good" relationships in America. Will and Jack were never "real" men and this was reiterated by their inabilities to embody traditional masculinities along with their failure to be in dominant positions, even with women. Jack, embodied as a male who adopted traditional feminine characteristics, became a caricature representing America's image of the gay man; an image that plays well as entertainment but often produces much anxiety for the male who is negotiating queer identity spaces (Kendall and Martino *2006*). The tension between Will and Jack provides an example of the tension that seems to occur internally for people, particularly males, who are struggling with gender identity locations with Will representing the attempt to be the desired "masculine/normal" and Jack representing the feared "feminine/abnormal." Neither Will nor Jack are fully masculine as measured against the dominant construction of what masculine is and, as Butler (*1993*) has indicated, a lackluster performance of masculine can leave in its wake "…a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation…" (p. 16), that ultimately results in marginalization and what Kendall and Martino (*2006*) have deemed "outcasts." When a male cannot or will not perform what has come to be known in American culture as traditionally masculine, he discovers himself in a queer space that heightens the complex blend of gender and sexuality and that exists in the margins of mainstream American society, where, as Karen says, "No one in the world would believe you are straight…." Thus, a struggle with identity ensues that often involves negotiating shame and humiliation as one compares one's self to what is represented as "normal," "natural" and expected within cultural spaces, even when so-called normal may be read queerly.

Ushered in by *Will and Grace* and made more prominent by *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (*2003*–2007), the so-called metrosexual has been a recent media representation of queered white traditional masculinity. In fact in *Queer Eye*, quite literally, "queers" descend on a "regular," "normal," and usually white middle-class straight man and, after much pomp and circumstance, the man emerges as a polished, sexy, stylish representation of manhood that is sure to win the heart (and body) of his girlfriend or partner now that he has been queered. Again, a tension in the show occurs between the "straight" man who, despite his queerness, remains heterosexual, thus "manly" while the "queers" remain feminized versions of manhood that are never "real" men and certainly flirt with but never cross sexual boundaries with the straight men

they are queering. Therefore, a lesson about the feminine is clear, men can be queered but they cannot be feminine lest they cross a boundary that clearly marks the difference between masculine and feminine; a boundary contextualized within heteronormative sexuality that, as Rich (*1980*) has indicated must be maintained in order to assure the dominance of males over females and, as MacKinnon (*1989*) notes, heterosexuality reinforces the construction of males as dominant and superior, which perpetuates a long history of patriarchy. This notion that "…male equals top, equals power" (Kendall and Martino *2006*, p. 14) is portrayed in the queer world in another media sensation that began in England and progressed to America; *Queer as Folk* (*2000–2005*).

Following the lives of five gay men (all white) in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, the American version of *Queer as Folk* offers its viewers a dramatic smorgasbord of situations that tell the story of "queer" life in the city, with each character constructed around stereotypes that are prominent with gay males. In every case, the men struggle with manliness and its performance in the so-called gay world in which they live. Brian represents the emotionally troubled dominant male who has his way physically and emotionally with anyone he wants; his sexual desires being portrayed as same-sex, yet we see that women and men alike are attracted to his rather dark independence and, acting in a very traditionally masculine manner, he dominates his partners with no concern other than fulfilling his own sexual needs. As is the case with other media representations of masculinity, Brian's subtle sensitivity is what ultimately draws people to him; thus, his partners are willing to become subordinate in order to be in relationship with him. His embodiment of white masculinity, queered as it may be given his same-sex practices, remains rooted in hierarchical power structures that privilege the dominance ascribed to males despite the costs to those with presumably less power. Of course, the costs to him and those his character represents are far-reaching with regard to his sense of isolation and inability to truly become vulnerable to others (a taboo in traditional masculinity). Certainly, Brian as a queer white male is an example of the result of the "regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality" (Butler *1993*, p. 12) as demonstrated through his reiteration of specific norms associated with how men act within a heteronormative, patriarchal construction of identity and as Foucault (*1977*) would point out, Brian panopticonally regulates his manliness within the context of hierarchal power relations. In contrast to the other characters, Brian is the closest thing to being a "real man" and the price he would pay by adopting more traditionally defined feminine characteristics would involve relinquishing his power to have what and who he wants when and where he wants them/it—the presumptive and "natural" goal for all "real men," even those who are queer (Stolenberg *2000*; Connell *1995*; Alvear *2003*; Bergling *2001*). While focused on males, *Queer as Folk* also included two white female characters that are portrayed as lesbian. Interestingly, they are the only couple in the story-line that have a long term relationship, albeit a representation of heteronormative practices with one of the women being the breadwinner and the other being a stay-at-home mom to a child that was conceived using donated sperm from Brian—the queer who acts like a "real man." Presumably, Brian's sperm is desirable in this queered scenario of parenting because he represents what a "good" father should be—handsome, physically

"perfect," successful, independent, and self-sufficient. The message to the viewer reflects what Murphy (*2001*) has called male as machine with Brian being desirable due to his mechanized approach to life and love, including the perfection of his sperm as producer of another human.

Presumably, one of Brian's most desirable attributes, particularly for his male sexual partners and lesbian women who want him to father their child, is his penis and, as Murphy (*2001*) suggests, the penis is the site of masculinity. Men are contextualized as mechanical and, for males, sexual experiences are reduced to the mechanics of sex, which focus on manipulation of the penis with ejaculation being the culmination of what is deemed sexual (Lambert *2006*). If a male assumes a more traditionally defined feminine sexual role, the focus shifts away from the penis and he is presumed to be subordinate, vulnerable, and ready to be sexually dominated by a male who acts like a "real" man. Thus, male same-sex sexual practices are often performed within a heteronormative frame, which as Bersani (*1995*) and Martino (*2006*) argue create an environment of assimilation to heteronormative practices, reflected in the current push toward gay marriage as "legitimizing" so-called homosexual relationships that are presumably constructed within the heterosexual model of monogamy, "partnerships," and legal/spiritual binding.

Thus, the so-called gay community is being called to action in the struggle for equality, with equality representing a replication of so-called straightness. Current mainstream media reflects what have become "normal" gay couples who, presumably, are just like any ordinary couple as they compete in reality shows or redecorate their houses on the design channels. Media spaces for gay males who engage in sexualities that queer the boundaries of monogamy and binarial constructions of relationships are limited or non-existent except for commodified spaces in the world of pornography or independent films. If a male character is portrayed as queering sexual spaces in mainstream media, he usually meets an end that is tragic, unfulfilled, and/or filled with unhappiness. The recent Home Box Office (HBO) series *Six Feet Under* (*2001*–2005) provided an example of the contrast between the "happy," committed gay couple and those transient characters who lurk in the margins as they explore sexual spaces that blur heteronormative constructs.

In *Six Feet Under*, David and Keith represent what Bersani (*1995*) has called the "heterosexualizing of homosexuality" (p. 132) in their portrayal of two men who, after a turmoilous beginning to their relationship, remain in a committed, heteronormative coupling that eventually includes the adoption of two children who, incidentally, were unloved and unwanted by their heterosexual parents. In order to queer the relationship as much as possible, racial elements are introduced presumably to demonstrate how race matters less in the so-called gay community as we see these two men loving each other beyond boundaries of color. Yet, Keith (African-American) is embodied as ultra-masculine, with bulging muscles, a quick temper, the ability to take charge, a job as a police officer and, presumably, genitals that further demonstrate just how much of a man he is (all traits that are often stereotypcially construed as characteristics of "normal" African-American men). David (Caucasian), on the other hand, is embodied as more

traditionally feminine as he scurries about his work as a funeral director, takes care of the household duties, becomes overly emotional, and passionately succumbs to the sexual advances of his partner. Given the context of heteronormativity, David and Keith's relationship, which is presented as queer sexually and racially, becomes a representation of what is considered a traditional expectation in American culture with regard to what Butler (*1993*) calls the, "…forcible and reiterative practice of [hetero] sexual regimes…" (p. 15); thus, what is supposed to be read as queer does not seem queer at all. Queer is actually located in the spaces outside the heteronormative margins and, in *Six Feet Under*, the transient characters that represent this space are personified as unstable and, sometimes, disturbed. At the least, they are unhappy and, as we see with one of Claire's boyfriends, Russell, and Brenda's brother Billy, queers can become violent. For the male who cannot or will not adopt a performance of gender that personifies traditional masculine characteristics and roles, a clash with dominant gender norms ensues and often, the results of conscious or unconscious attempts to deify regulatory systems and structures results in grim ends. An example is the recent case of Larry King, sensationalized in the media, who was a 15 year old student in a California middle school that was shot in the head by a classmate who could not seem to tolerate King's insistence that he act and dress "like a girl."

Classmates and staff at the school seemed to tolerate Larry's "gayness" but as he began to queer gender roles by dressing in clothing associated with more traditional expressions of femininity, e.g. dresses and high-heels, peers and school leaders became more concerned about him, "…pushing the boundaries so far that he put himself and others in danger". (Setoodeh *2008*, p. 5). Indeed, Larry's refusal to conform to "acceptable" gender expression seems to have led to his death, though it is important to note that his killer seems to have been involved in a complex relationship with Larry at some level. This case, like other hate crimes, is an example of how deadly transgressive acts can be, particularly when a male adopts gender expression that is associated with traditional feminine traits. As Bergling (*2001*) points out, our fear of the feminine as a society traps us in a space that, as Butler (*1993*) would say, regulates and subjugates us to the performance of gender within boundaries that do not celebrate queer despite the appearance of queer in the media. Those males who venture into or create sexual and gender spaces that are considered queer do so at the risk of experiencing degradation, shame, and/or violence. This fear and the consequences that follow it are portrayed in another recent media event that sparked much discussion and discourse in America and around the world, the queering of the epitome of maleness and masculinity—the American cowboy.

Brokeback Mountain (*2005*) tells the story of two American cowboys who meet "on the job" as sheep herders and subsequently, engage in sexual activity and, presumably, fall in love. The characters are portrayed as complete personifications of white, rural, "manliness" and there is no indication that either of them is "feminine" except for the presumption that Jack acts sexually as subordinate to Ennis. Both dress in traditional cowboy attire, both ride horses, rope, shoot guns, drink, and cuss like cowboys. Both are self-sufficient and can live "off the land" if necessary. They both marry women and have children as any "normal" man would do; however, they find

themselves caught up in what is portrayed as a tragic love affair, which ends with the death of Jack—who is the more "romantic" of the two. Both men personify what Dyer (*2002*) refers to as the "built body" (p. 263) referring to the association of muscles and brawn with the white male whose masculinity is celebrated through a well-developed muscular physique and, as a "real" man, is read as embodying manhood. Jack and Ennis are, as Seidman (*2002*) asserts, "normal" despite the queer circumstance of their relationship and this makes them desirable to each other and, presumably, to the audience. Had Jack suddenly ripped off his cowboy hat and jeans to reveal long flowing hair and fish-net stockings, the empathy many movie-goers expressed for the heartbreak of his relationship with Ennis would have evaporated. People are able to identify with Jack and Ennis because they are simply "normal" guys who are victims of a closed-minded society that instills fear in all of us regarding who and how we can love. Their queerness did not include the blurring of gender boundaries, even though their intimate moments reflect a heteronormative construction. Sexually, Jack as a "bottom" to Ennis' "top" maintains a clear expression of masculinity and manliness and there are no hints that Jack likes to sit around after sex in feathers or sequins sipping on martinis. In fact, after their first sexual encounter, they both make it clear to each other that, "… [they] ain't queer." and that what they are doing sexually, is "…nobody's business but ours." (*Brokeback Mountain 2005*). Indeed, their queerness is expressed only through engagement in same-sex sexual acts and through Jack's fantasies about life together with Ennis as a couple—contextualized in a heteronormative construct. Jack and Ennis personify what Bell (*2006*) contextualizes as "Kinsey's cowboys" (p. 167), referring to Alfred Kinsey's famous report on male sexuality that identified homosexual activity among boys and men in rural Western America with the assertion being that males engaged in same-sex activities in the absence of females; thus, maintaining their identity as straight and masculine while experiencing sex with another presumably straight male. Viewers of *Brokeback Mountain* are challenged to consider the possibility that Jack and especially Ennis exist in some queer space between so-called straight and so-called gay; a space that is complicated by their apparent love for each other, which is not an attribute of Kinsey's cowboys. Never-the-less, Jack and Ennis are not "sissy" and they certainly have no aims to identify with traditional feminine traits, though we learn that Jack's secret "feminine" desires for men are discovered and lead to his demise, at least in Ennis' mind, at the hands of some "real" men who bludgeon him to death with a tire iron. Again, the message is one of tragedy when men adopt "feminine" characteristics, such as desires for other men. Thus, a viewer of the film who may be struggling with sexual identity learns not only that society, particularly rural social spaces, is unwelcoming toward same-sex sexual desires; but, a lesson about men falling in love is also clear—it is not acceptable in the mainstream world and will end badly. Most certainly, audiences identified with the tragedy of the story recounted in *Brokeback Mountain* as evidenced by what the *Advocate* (*2006*) calls the "Brokeback Phenomenon" (cover) referring to the sold-out screenings across the rural Midwest and Western United States. After all, the film was the first to portray an epic Hollywood style love story between two men, and, perhaps more profoundly, it utilized the American ideal of white manhood as a space for considering queer possibilities related to same-

sex sexualities. In the so-called gay community, *Brokeback Mountain* was hailed as opening dialogue with heretofore off-limits straight groups and as a location for personifying the ultimate fantasy of two "real" men having passionate sex and falling in love. A current television show has taken this notion of same-sex sex and love between two apparent "real" men out of the secrecy of rural spaces and placed it squarely in the middle of an urban, working class, dysfunctional family system.

Shameless (*2011*–2013), produced for the Showtime cable television network by John Wells, Paul Abbott, and Andrew Stearn, is set in south-side Chicago in a poverty stricken neighborhood portrayed with the norm in family systems being queered to include alcoholism, drug use, gang activity, selling illicit substances to children, adolescents, and adults, anti-intellectualism, and parenting that would make Dr. Spock (a parenting expert from the 1970s) simply shake his head in disbelief. Based on a British television show of the same name, the American version has been controversial but well received critically and publicly (Wallach *2013*; Smolinski *2013*). While many aspects of the show reflect queer representations of being, perhaps one of the most compelling portrayals lies in the characters of Ian (Cameron Monaghan) and Mickey (Noel Fisher), both of whom are late adolescent street-smart, white males that seem to fit the stereotype of urban "youth gone wrong" except for the fact that they are sex partners and seemingly falling in love with each other. Ian, who appears to be quietly sensitive, has found purpose in joining the ROTC and aspires to go to West Point; yet, socio-environmental factors seem to prevent him from doing anything more than what it takes to survive in his neighborhood. Mickey, being the son of a violent father and the sibling of two brothers and a sister who have presumably raised themselves, has become a leader in the local street gang culture and has been in and out of juvenile detention so much that when he is absent everyone supposes he is back in lock-up. Both Ian and Mickey are anything but traditionally "feminine" and in fact they are hyper-masculine, even in their sexual exploits. As Mickey offers himself sexually to Ian as a "bottom" the viewer is challenged to evaluate heteronormative constructions of sex roles by watching a seemingly dominant, violent, controlling young man become submissive. Ian, the more sensitive of the two, dominates Mickey sexually, which queers the notion that sensitivity should be associated with being sexually submissive. As Moss (*2013*) points out in his blog about the relationship between Mickey and Ian there are four compelling areas that are important in considering the queerness of it:

1. They [Mickey and Ian] are very 'Brokeback' [due to Mickey being 'in the closet' and resistant to his feelings of love for Ian]
2. Their long winding road to couplehood makes that of Enis DelMar and Jack Twist (*Brokeback Mountain*) seem almost straight (so to speak) [Ian and Mickey's relationship is fraught with violence, denial, passion, and emotionally labiality].
3. They [Mickey and Ian] are far from gay stereotypes [both being 'lower class, blue collar' and having no trace of traditional femininity or 'metrosexualism'].

4. *The privates of their sex life is not what you would expect [Ian as dominant despite his apparent sensitivity and Mickey as subordinate despite his tough-guy image]. (para. 6–10).*

Indeed, Mickey and Ian have seemingly broken new and queer ground in terms of how males may be "gay" in the media. One must question if they are "gay" at all, which compels us to carefully and critically examine the hegemony of "gayness" as an identity. Season three of *Shameless*, which ended in March 2013, has Mickey married to a prostitute that he was forced to have sex with by his father because he caught Ian and Mickey engaged in sex. The woman is now pregnant by Mickey and Ian, heartbroken because of Mickey's circumstance, joins the army in order to leave his troubled life behind. The viewer is left to wonder what will happen to the couple, if they are a couple at all. Perhaps Ian and Mickey represent new, queer ways of being male, masculine, same-sex attracted, and in love. Yet, is sex between two traditionally defined masculine men really something new? The idea and image of "manly" men engaged in sex seems to have historically only been available in a less mainstream media location, the world of same-sex pornography, which has been and continues to be a prominent media location for images of white male queerness and the avoidance of "feminized" men at all costs.

Certainly, when one engages with images of male same-sex pornography, one is bombarded with a buffet of bodies engaged in a plethora of sexual acts that, by-in-large replicate the heteronormative dominant/subordinate binary. In most cases, the images are commanded by males who embody either the dominate masculine "ideal" with ripped, muscular bodies or, in some cases, the "feminized" man who is thin, young, hairless, subordinate, and ready to serve the "real" man. The message is clear, "gay" sex mimics "straight" sex with the subordinate partner being sexually satisfied by the power and control that is exerted through the actions of the dominate partner. The glorification of the idealized masculine is rampant as website after website proclaims the exhibition of sex acts that personify the hegemony of heterosexuality. Males who identify as or who are identified as "feminine" learn quickly that their role in sex is to please themselves through pleasing their partner. Same-sex sado-masochistic (S & M) pornographic spaces embody the heteronormative binary in the extreme with dominance and subordination being highlighted as the central focus of sexual pleasure as hyper-masculine males beat, rape, and humiliate their subordinate "effeminate" partners through engaging with bondage, urination, fisting, piercing, bootlicking, whipping, branding, burning, and torture of the genitals with clamps, wax, etc., with the receptor of such acts moaning in pleasure and begging for more. Given such images of sexual activity, it is no wonder that Kendall (*2006*) argues that male same-sex pornography as a media source promotes "…violence, and aggressive, nonegalitarian behavior… [and] hypermasculinity found at the expense of someone else's liberty and self-worth." (p. 106). Indeed, for a person who is negotiating identity, the images found in so-called gay pornography clearly construct what the adoption of "effeminate" characteristics means, at least sexually. Additionally, gay pornography as pedagogy brings to its pupils clear messages about masculinity and femininity that is deeply rooted in the hegemony of heterosexism and

patriarchy, with one of its lessons being crystal clear; "real" men have great bodies, big muscles, large dicks, and virility, while "non-real" men are simply there to receive the favors of the person they are serving. As one is constructing identity, there is little incentive in the space occupied by gay pornography to queer the patriarchal order of manliness even in the so-called queer community; yet, some current popular pornographic sites seem to be exploring sex between "real" men as twenty-something males whose bodies emulate the masculine "ideal" engage in passionate sex where they share dominant and subordinate roles, e.g., SeanCody.com and Collegedudes.com. On these websites, the viewer is challenged to disrupt the traditional heterosexual binary as "boys next door" throw around a football before engaging in oral and anal sex, with both being passive and active as they take turns giving and receiving. You will find no subordinate, feminized, "twinks" here. Likewise pornographic websites that cater to the "bear" culture offer images of hyper-masculine, burley, hairy men engaged in sex that is presumably far from heteronormative, though dominant and subordinate roles are often evident (McCarthy *2011*). As the Internet has developed so to have opportunities to view sex and to be sexual and currently the Internet provides the central media location for imaging sexuality and sexual acts.

The sexual marketplace that exists on the internet enhances the objectification of others for the sake of sexual pleasure and Ross (*2005*) refers to Bauman (*2003*) who suggests that objectifying and consuming others for the sake of personal pleasure impacts the moral economy while enhancing the fiscal economy related to the sex industry. No doubt, the internet is a location for the exploration of multiple sexual fantasies and sexualities and it serves as a public space to document sexual practices as it concurrently influences them. What is important to recognize is that the internet can provide a private, disembodied opportunity for anyone with access to it to experience an endless array of sexual acts as one engages in self-satisfying sexual activity either alone or with a partner or partners.

Ross (*2005*) suggests that the internet allows for a, "…surrogate body to experiment and to be experimented upon [sexually]." (p. 344). It is within this personal engagement with internet beings and images that one begins to open opportunities to "queer" sexuality as one bends and, sometimes, breaks the rules that are prescribed by one's chosen sexual identity. For instance, the internet offers a person who identifies as a "gay male" opportunities to vicariously experience many sexual acts or engage in virtual paraphillic activities that may fulfill personal desire but may not be congruent with what is expected of "gay males." Likewise, a person who identifies as "heterosexual" may engage with internet pornography in a manner that deviates from what is expected when one claims that identity. Ross et al. (*2005*) discovered that 11 % of their sample of 244 men who engaged in sexual activity on the internet identified as heterosexual, yet they also admitted to engaging in cyber-sexual relationships with other men—an interesting discovery given the strict rules of male–male contact in face-to-face encounters. What is important to recognize is that the queer spaces that exist in cyber-space must be carefully examined for their

connection to the heteronormative, patriarchal structures that serve to oppress the so-called feminine and those people who embody it.

As Sears (*1997*) notes, "During the past 25 years researchers, educators, and activists have made substantive progress [with regard to reducing homophobia and heterosexism]." (p. 29). Indeed, as we move into the new millennium, there is much hope with regard to the disruption of what has been defined as natural and normal by dominant social groups; yet, we continue to see that media reflects what is lived, and what we see in the media continues to show us that the ideal of what is masculine and what is feminine is still couched heavily in heteronormative constructions of gender. Most certainly, queered versions of gender have emerged, particularly with regard to white males, but if one examines these images/performances carefully, one identifies the residue of traditional gender roles. The consequence of adopting gender characteristics that truly blur traditional gender boundaries seems to place people in the margins even within marginalized groups, e.g. the "sissy" gay guy or the "butch" lesbian. In some ways, it seems that those who have been marginalized by the dominant groups are co-opting characteristics that may earn them "acceptance" within those dominant spaces (see Sears *1997*; Kendall and Martino *2006*; Foucault *1978*); yet, what is being traded for such recognition? In the past few years young people have constructed interesting identity spaces with such labels as "Emo," "Goth," "Pansexual," and "Hipster" where there is some propensity to engage in sexual acts or sexual identities that confront the status quo; however, these young people are on the fringes and are often targeted by media and their peers as "disturbed" or "delinquent." For the male who is engaged in the complex task of negotiating identity, there is no space that supports adopting traditional feminine gender attributes and he does so at the risk of experiencing humiliation by his family and peers, degradation, deflated self-esteem, and internalized shame related to his "femininity." Thus, a burden is placed on those of us who serve others.

We must, as Sears (*1997*) indicate, carefully examine methods and strategies for deconstructing and examining homophobia and heterosexism as we imagine new possibilities for the existence of gendered spaces that do not conform to heternormative, patriarchal structures. As we work with people who are struggling with anxiety and depression related to identity, we must call into question the injustice that is propagated by what we have come to believe is "normal" and "natural" as we offer opportunities to create therapeutic, healing spaces that go beyond acceptance and tolerance of differences into spaces that celebrate and support pluralistic constructions of what we name sexual and gender identities. Perhaps then we or those we serve will not have to be quite so concerned about our "gayness" or anything else that is claimed to be seen from outer space or here on Earth.

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