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## Feminist Reclamations of Normative Masculinity: On Democratic Manhood, Feminist Masculinity, and Allyship Practices

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## **Feminist Reclamations of Normative Masculinity: On Democratic Manhood, Feminist Masculinity, and Allyship Practices<sup>1</sup>**

Ben Almassi

### **Abstract**

'Feminist masculinity' might seem like a contradiction in terms. One might have assumed that we can embrace feminism or embrace masculinity, but not both. If traditional masculinity is contrary to feminist values, a pressing query for feminist men is whether repudiation of traditional masculinity should move one to reject normative masculinity entirely, or to reframe and reclaim it instead. bell hooks and Michael Kimmel each counsel against discarding manhood and masculinity. hooks envisions feminist masculinity as an alternative to patriarchal dominance, with masculinity to be reconstituted in terms of love, integrity, and mutuality; Kimmel advocates moving from immature and traditional masculinities toward justice and democratic manhood, with a new model of masculinity that identifies real men with adulthood and doing the right thing. Neither proposal provides a viable stance for feminist men without collapsing into androgyny or risking erasure of some men's and women's identities and experiences. Building on Alcoff's work on anti-racist whiteness, I suggest that feminist allyship practices ground a normative model of masculinity compatible with, and informed by, feminist values. We may understand allyship masculinities as open-ended feminist approaches to manhood: masculinities predicated on recognizing and responding to, rather than ignoring or accepting, the privileges and expectations distinctive of men under patriarchy.

**Keywords:** masculinity, allyship, men in feminism

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## 1. Introduction

“Feminist masculinity” might seem like a contradiction in terms. One might have assumed that we can either embrace feminism or masculinity, but not both. This apparent tension is particularly pressing for what Connell (2005, 70) identifies as “normative definitions” of masculinity: that is, masculinity understood as “what men ought to be.” The ways such expectations are manifested in hegemonic forms of masculinity<sup>2</sup> contradict feminist values and goals of sexual equality, freedom from domination, and dismantling oppressive social structures. It is a live question for many feminist women and men whether resistance to hegemonic masculinity should move us to reject normative masculinity completely, or instead to reframe and reclaim some other approach to normative masculinity.

The first option aligns with what we might call an ideal of androgyny. A general repudiation of manhood, of being men, has been championed by both radical<sup>3</sup> and liberal<sup>4</sup> profeminist scholars and activists. Here masculinity might be retained as a critical descriptive tool to uncover or challenge existing gender expectations and practices, but a normative analysis of men or how men *as men* ought to be is cast aside. Achieving androgyny need not make all people anatomically identical, of course, nor render everyone socially or psychologically the same; the aspiration is that biological sex differences become no more socially significant than height or eye color. Social roles, divisions of labor, and other behaviors would no longer be indexed to presumed anatomical sex, and femininity and masculinity would lose their meanings as oppositional social categories. There might still be female and male people, as there are blue- and brown-eyed people, but they would not be expected to do certain work, act certain ways, exhibit certain traits, or meet other norms *because* they are female or male. For those suspicious of traditional gender practices and acutely aware of how hegemonic masculinity oppresses women and harms both women and men, androgyny can be an appealing aspirational ideal.

Resistance to an ideal of androgyny can come from those who value masculinity as it has been traditionally exalted and organized and who regard feminist critique of it as directly, deeply harming men. Clatterbaugh (1997) distinguishes between conservative and mythopoetic perspectives on masculinity, each of which present anti-feminist visions of normative masculinity, of how men as men ought to be. Conservatives wish for men to hold power as they are allegedly properly entitled as heads of households, industry, and government; they urge men

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<sup>2</sup> For more on hegemonic masculinity, see Connell (2005) and Connell & Messerschmidt (2005).

<sup>3</sup> For radical profeminism, see Stoltenberg (1975, 1989, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> For liberal profeminism, see Sterba (1998).

to embody and embrace those masculine traits attendant to their rightful social roles.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, mythopoetic models of masculinity such as Bly's *Iron John* (1990) level criticism against both traditional gender expectations of men and feminist analyses of men and masculinity. A wild-man masculinity found in loving brotherhood with other men is here championed as a healthy and decidedly masculine alternative, where men are truly free to be neither unemotional providers nor androgynous feminist toadies, but *men*.<sup>6</sup> Yet as hooks (2004b) argues, this remains a kind of domination masculinity, with a normative vision of men as kinder, gentler, more emotionally open patriarchs.

Not all resistance to rejecting masculinity for an ideal of androgyny comes from those antagonistic to feminism, however. In particular, hooks (2004a; 2004b) and Kimmel (1996; 2008) each warn against discarding manhood and masculinity too quickly and each propose alternative normative accounts of masculinity offered as compatible with feminist ideals. In *Manhood in America* (1996), Kimmel defends "democratic manhood" as contrasted with traditional masculinity and androgyny; in *Guyland* (2008), he counsels moving from an immature and unjust masculinity to the deeper masculinity of *just guys*. In *We Real Cool* (2004a) and in *The Will to Change* (2004b), hooks counsels feminist masculinity as a constructive alternative to patriarchal masculinity. There is much to admire in both hooks's and Kimmel's attempted reclamations of normative masculinity; many of the things they identify as constitutive of a better kind of masculinity are indeed virtuous human qualities. But do these efforts to find a normative feminist masculinity, against hegemonic masculinity on one side and androgyny on the other, actually work? My concern is that neither hooks nor Kimmel provides a viable guide for feminist men without either collapsing into androgyny or risking erasure of some men's and women's experiences and identities. Neither shows what makes empathy, courage, justice, and love constitutive of masculinity, without assuming that masculinity is simply whatever male people do. On their own, I argue, neither account provides a viable model of normative feminist masculinity reclaimed.

I do think we can make sense of normative feminist masculinity, however, such that men as men have distinctive, constructive contributions to make to feminist work; I suggest looking to *feminist allyship* as a place to ground and give meaning to a normative model of masculinity distinct from both androgyny and hegemonic masculinity. In feminist allyship we might find an open-ended model of *ways of being men*, of masculinities predicated on recognizing and responding to

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<sup>5</sup> For conservative accounts of masculinity, see Farrell (1986, 1991) and Haddad (1991).

<sup>6</sup> For more on mythopoetic perspectives on masculinity, see Bly (1991) and Keen (1992).

rather than ignoring or accepting those privileges and expectations distinctive of men under patriarchy. Much like an ideal of androgyny, this approach seeks to upend masculinity as a received social category; but it also emphasizes men's specific yet non-essentialist contributions to feminist work. Here I am especially indebted to Alcoff's (1998; 2006) work on white anti-racism as a fruitful comparison for making sense of the possibility of normative feminist masculinity.

## 2. Priorities for a Model of Feminist Masculinity

What we look for in a worthwhile model of masculinity is in large part a function of our model's intended uses. In what follows, my critical analysis is informed by the following theoretical priorities:

*Normativity.* The model should enable cogent critique of patriarchal norms of masculinity as well as underwrite alternate norms of masculinity compatible with feminist values and commitments. Normative masculinity is understood here as a set of expectations of how men as men ought to be, where such expectations may be imposed by ourselves, our communities, or wider social structures. In focusing on normative masculinity here, I do not mean to neglect descriptive ethnographic studies of men and masculinities, but only to take up a different project. I would echo Connell's observation (2000, 14) that although descriptive research methods have yielded impressive results for masculinity studies in the past thirty years, these productive approaches do not exhaust the scope of worthwhile study. I also affirm May's (1998, 149) exhortation for philosophical writing on masculinity "to provide not only critical arguments but a new vision of what men can become." hooks and Kimmel are notable for their efforts to articulate *better* and explicitly profeminist visions of masculinity.

*Differentiation.* Unlike an ideal of androgyny, which aims to evacuate fully the category of masculinity, a normative model of feminist masculinity must identify features that effectively differentiate expressed masculinity from non-masculinity. Such features need not be understood as essential properties nor strictly necessary conditions but cannot be at once constitutive of masculinity and indistinguishably applicable to those who are not masculine. As all human beings are born and will die, *a fortiori* those who embody masculinity are born and will die; but to say that mortality is constitutive of masculinity would fail to identify anything particularly distinctive about it.

*Multiplicity, intersectionality, and non-androcentricity.* The model should allow multiple instantiations of feminist masculinity given variations among men across races, classes, sexual orientations, and other such categories. A model of normative feminist masculinity should not assume, for example, that only those men capable of or interested in meeting middle-class or heteronormative social expectations can be real or good men. Further, the model should not treat

masculinity as the default or central issue of gender from which implications for women, girls, and feminist femininity would thereby automatically and presumptively follow. An absence of masculinity need not imply a presence of femininity, nor vice versa.

### **3. Hooks: Masculinity Reclaimed**

hooks (1998) has long articulated a vision of feminist change in which men play productive roles as “comrades in struggle.” This vision is grounded in an emphasis on two claims sometimes seen as incompatible: that patriarchy oppresses women, and that it harms both women and men. hooks insists that “the primary genocidal threat, the force that endangers black male life, is patriarchal masculinity” (2004a, xiv). Men benefit by challenging presumptive gender roles, she argues, and a truly visionary feminism must make room for love of men and boys. Yet the challenge to presumptive masculine gender roles that hooks defends cannot merely reshuffle traditional masculinity, but must face and critique patriarchy directly. This is her objection to mythopoetic movements: that they “did not consistently demand that men challenge patriarchy or envision liberating models of masculinity” (2004b, 113).

If mythopoetic models of masculinity fall short, so too do proposals to abandon masculinity altogether for an ideal of androgyny. Of those who “suggest that we need to do away with the term [masculinity], that we need ‘an end to manhood,’” hooks (2004b, 115) says, “such a stance furthers the notion that there is something inherently evil, bad, or unworthy about maleness.” This notion would be contrary to feminist love of men and boys, she insists, and contrary to her feminist vision to reclaim masculinity. We begin to see this positive vision of masculinity in the following contrast between domination and partnership:

To offer men a different way of being, we must first replace the dominator model with a partnership model that sees interbeing and interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings. In the partnership model selfhood, whether one is female or male, is always at the core of one’s identity. Patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from having been born male. . . . In a partnership model male identity like its female counterpart would be centered around the notion of an essential goodness that is inherently relationally oriented. (hooks 2004b, 117)

hooks further articulates her vision of feminist masculinity as non-dominating and loving masculinity with particular emphasis on the value of interdependency:

Feminist masculinity presupposes that it is enough for males to be to have value, that they do not have to “do,” to “perform,” to be affirmed and loved. Rather than defining strength as “power over,” feminist masculinity defines strength as one’s capacity to be responsible for self and others. This strength is a trait males and females need to possess. . . . “Feminist masculinity would have as its chief constituents integrity, self-love, emotional awareness, assertiveness, and relational skill, including the capacity to be empathic, autonomous, and connected.” The core of feminist masculinity is a commitment to gender equality and mutuality as crucial for interbeing and partnership in the creating and sustaining of life. (2004b, 117-118)

What emerges in these passages is an alternative to masculinity as domination, one that resists a move to androgyny and does so on explicitly feminist grounds. Whereas patriarchy insists that “real men must prove their manhood by idealizing aloneness and disconnection,” feminist masculinity as hooks (2004b, 121) sees it urges men to see themselves differently, such “that they become *more real* through the act of connecting with others, through building community.” So understood, men successfully embody feminist masculinity by embracing reciprocity, mutuality, and genuine interdependence.

#### 4. Kimmel: Real Men and Just Guys

Kimmel has long contributed to the sociology of men, masculinity, and gender through his scholarly and popular books, edited collections, presentations, talks, and his work with the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). He identifies himself and his work as avowedly feminist, and regularly affirms the importance of feminist recognition of men’s privilege and women’s oppression.

Kimmel recognizes that the idea that men as beneficiaries of patriarchy are thus fundamentally incompatible with feminism is a real and serious challenge. “To be a man means to be an oppressor. Thus *we*—men who could support feminism—cannot be said to exist if the polar dichotomy by which they see the world is to remain in place” (Kimmel 1998, 61). The concern is not that men are essentially anti-feminist, but that because widespread privilege is “indelibly inscribed onto men, and men embody it whether they choose to or not, then the only possibility for men to be redeemed is for them to renounce masculinity itself. One simply cannot be a man and support feminism” (1998, 62). Here Kimmel explains though does not endorse a position incompatible with feminist masculinity, one allowing only for an ideal of androgyny or strict feminist political delineation between men and women. Yet Kimmel himself is optimistic that men *can* fruitfully engage the privilege problem. “*Profeminism*, a position that acknowledges men’s experience without privileging it,

possesses the tools,” he says (1998, 64), “to both adequately analyze men’s aggregate power, and also describe the ways in which individual men are both privileged by that social level of power and feel powerless in the face of it.”

Throughout his work, Kimmel strives to understand masculinity as constantly changing, and to understand manhood as socially constructed, while challenging the assumption that manhood and masculinity must be inimical to feminist values. Rebuking “the implicit equation of manhood with oppression and inequality—as if real men support injustice” (1998, 67), Kimmel holds that *really real* men support justice. This identification of real, good manhood with ethics and justice carries through to *Guyland*, his popular critical appraisal of American manhood today for mostly white, straight, middle- and upper-class men in the years before, after, and at four-year universities. “Guyland” as Kimmel understands it is a relatively recent socio-historical development: a sort of arrested development between adolescence and adulthood, and an extremely gendered period of life. In *Guyland*, masculinity is constantly policed by other men and tightly prescribed as *not-feminine* and *not-gay*. Women are affected as well insofar as their own sexualities and relationships with the guys of *Guyland* are tightly prescribed and limited accordingly.

The main question for Kimmel is not how to avoid *Guyland*, which is a stage of development, but rather how to make the constructive transition from *Guyland* to adulthood in *better ways* (2008, 288). Here adulthood is understood in traditional demographic terms: completing education, holding a job, getting married, having kids, moving out of one’s parents’ house (Kimmel 2010, 122). In envisioning the possibility of a healthy, successful transition from *Guyland* masculinity, Kimmel (2008, 267) contrasts “just” guys with *just* guys: that is, “guys who are capable of acting ethically, of doing the right thing, of standing up to the centripetal pull of *Guyland*. Guys can become everyday heroes. They can actually become men.” So understood, manhood becomes associated with achieving adulthood and doing the right thing.

In the discussion that concludes *Guyland*, Kimmel articulates “a new model” of masculinity in the following terms:

[B]eing a real man is not going along with what you know in your heart to be cruel, inhumane, stupid, humiliating, and dangerous. Being a real man means doing the right thing, standing up to immorality and injustice when you see it, and expressing compassion, not contempt, for those who are less fortunate. In other words, it’s about being courageous. (2008, 287)

Notice how the normative approach to masculinity is retained: virtues of courage and compassion are gendered with normative force for a “real” man. Here Kimmel echoes and builds on the “new definition of masculinity for a new century”



that he sketched in the epilogue to *Manhood in America*. In this earlier text, he argues for a “democratic manhood” distinct from both traditional masculinity and androgyny, the latter of which he describes as “blurring of masculinity and femininity into a *mélange* of some vaguely defined human qualities” (1996, 334). Democratic manhood, by contrast, is to be composed of old and new “masculine virtues” such as compassion, nurturing, egalitarianism, inclusion, dependability, strength, self-reliance, purpose, and an abiding commitment to justice and ethical action (1996, 333-335).

Where mythopoetic men’s movements insist that initiation into wild-manhood can only be led by other men, Kimmel (2008, 272) is happy to recognize the roles women play in guiding guys to manhood/adulthood. Yet fathers do have a special duty to resist their *own* temptation to guy-regression. “When fathers resist the urge to identify with Guyland,” Kimmel (2008, 277) argues, “they can model empathic manhood and enrich their sons’ lives with a concrete example of what honor and integrity look like . . . [and] can show their sons that there are real alternatives to Guyland in which responsibility and accountability and self-respect are qualities that should be strived for.”

## 5. Reflection and Critique

hooks and Kimmel both demonstrate careful and perceptive attention to men’s relationships to feminism; both identify and defend sensible, worthwhile qualities for men as constructive alternatives to patriarchal domination. It is unclear to me, however, how these proposed alternatives are properly represented as constitutive of masculinity. Let us agree that courage, compassion, empathy, self-love, an opposition to injustice, and a commitment to gender equality are valuable human qualities, and ones certainly important in the pursuit of feminist change. Let us appreciate also that many of these qualities are lacking in many men, in some part because hegemonic masculinity frames them as incompatible with real or laudable manhood. Why should we understand men who embody and exhibit such qualities as thereby embodying a kind of *masculinity*, however, rather than as embodying and exhibiting gender non-specific human virtues?

The answer is surely not that only male people can or even should embody these qualities. For her part, hooks explicitly sees the partnership model as something in which women and men both can and should participate, such that “male identity, like its female counterpart, would be centered around the notion of an essential goodness that is inherently relationally oriented” (2004b, 117). While she argues that feminist masculinity “defines strength as one’s capacity to be responsible for self and others,” hooks also understands this kind of strength-as-responsibility as “a trait males and females need to possess” (2004b, 117). Feminist masculinity is built around a deep commitment to gender equality and mutuality,

and yet hooks recognizes this commitment as important for feminist women, too. So how do men become “more real” by participating in community-building and interconnection, on this view of feminist manhood, when this sort of work and interconnection are also constitutive of feminist womanhood? To the extent that these qualities and pursuits are identified and advanced as worthwhile for women and men, how do they give meaning to a kind of masculinity rather than to a kind of androgyny?

Let us recall Sterba’s (1998, 292) description of feminist androgyny as “a broader-based ideal for both women and men that combines virtues and desirable traits traditionally associated with women with virtues and desirable traits traditionally associated with men.” The feminist reclamation of masculinity hooks advocates does this: it rejects traditionally masculine traits of domination and disconnection and embraces traits of empathy, mutuality, and self-love. hooks recognizes these traits as necessary for female and male people, which makes her cautioning against calls for an end to manhood and her characterization of the embodiment of such traits as a kind of masculinity very puzzling. Here I share Fagan’s (2013, 37) appreciation for hooks but also her conclusion that hooks’s account of masculinity “seemed to be simply a description of a healthy person not a healthy man; nothing in it felt specific to manhood or masculinity.”

The puzzle is no easier for Kimmel’s vision of just guys, democratic manhood, and a new model of masculinity in which acting ethically, doing the right thing, and standing up to injustice are presented as ways that guys become better men. So being a “real man” is about courage (2008, 287), yet Kimmel surely will agree that women can be courageous and stand up to injustice too, and it’s not as though through their courage, these women thereby embody masculinity. Such virtues are not *distinctive* of masculinity and manhood as Kimmel recommends them, even as they are presented as *constitutive* of masculinity and manhood as he articulates them. One might argue that an identification of escaping Guyland with achieving adulthood understood on traditional markers of success (degree, job, spouse, kids, home) *is* distinctive of manhood specifically, with Kimmel’s discussion of fathers modeling manhood as accountability and responsibility. To whatever extent this is true, however, we regress to some version of traditional patriarchal masculinity instead of distinctively feminist masculinity. We are left with a far from liberating model, one that associates adulthood with masculinity and denies real or better manhood to those men blocked by homophobia, classism, racism, and forms of systematic oppression from attaining adulthood so defined, not to mention those men who may be uninterested in these markers of maturity.

One might try to frame the various admirable qualities Kimmel and hooks see as constituting feminist masculinity rather than androgyny or hegemonic masculinity by stipulating that these qualities are constitutive of masculinity just in

cases when they are expressed in a male body. In this way, one might try to identify courage and empathy as part of a normative model of feminist masculinity, while recognizing that women too can be courageous or empathic, and yet resist the implication that being courageous or empathic would thus makes them masculine. To put the idea somewhat formally, the trait or quality *x* is constitutive of normative masculinity, even though *x* is not unique to those who are masculine, because *x* is stipulated as constitutive of normative masculinity just in cases when *x* is associated with or expressed in a male body.

I worry, however, that this revised model of reclaimed masculinity has problems on conceptual and feminist grounds. Beyond bald stipulation, it does not seem to show any meaningful difference between this kind of masculinity and an ideal of androgyny. Both would allow that everyone can be wise, courageous, caring, and so on, but the revised model of masculinity rather superfluously insists that these things are masculine when attendant to male biology. We might further worry that this revised model will prove discordant with some women's and men's identities and experiences. It would seem to presume that one's gender can simply be read off one's biological sex, and yet not all men self-identify as biologically male, as not all women self-identify as biologically female. The revised model would seem to deny feminist masculinity of trans men who have yet to or choose not to pursue anatomical change, despite their deeply considered gender identities as men, and no matter how wise, courageous, responsible, or empathic they might be. Given these implications, the revised model would seem to fail to meet even the most minimal requirements of trans-positive feminist theory,<sup>7</sup> and so in my view it is not a promising addendum to either hooks's or Kimmel's attempted reclamations of masculinity.

## 6. Alcoff: The Whiteness Problem

In trying to make sense of feminist masculinity, we might look to Alcoff's work on white anti-racism for useful comparison. In particular, we might consider how Alcoff addresses what she calls "the question of white identity":

[A]ntiracist struggles require whites' acknowledgement that they are *white*: that is, that their experience, perceptions, and economic position have been profoundly affected by being constituted as white. . . . But what is it to acknowledge one's whiteness? Is it to acknowledge that one is inherently tied to structures of domination and oppression, that one is irrevocably on the wrong side? In other words, can the acknowledgement of whiteness

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<sup>7</sup> See Hale (1998) and Heyes (2003).

produce only self-criticisms, even shame and self-loathing? Is it possible to feel okay about being white? (2006, 207)

While avowed white supremacists might feel okay about being white, what about white people committed to anti-racism? Alcoff argues that each of us needs some felt connection with a larger community, some history beyond ourselves to avoid falling into nihilism and to stay invested in the value of social progress. While it can be understandable that anti-racist whites might wish to disavow their unjust social privileges, Alcoff (2006, 213) rejects repudiation of white identity as itself seriously problematic: “whites cannot completely disavow whiteness or distance themselves from their white identity. One’s appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways.” Thinking that one has successfully disavowed whiteness when one has not is not merely mistaken: it might also encourage shirking one’s responsibility to contribute meaningfully to dismantling white supremacy. Those who disavow their whiteness, Alcoff warns, “might consider a declaration that they are ‘not white’ as a sufficient solution to racism without the trouble of organizing or collective action. This position would then end up uncomfortably close to a color-blindness attitude that pretends ignorance about one’s own white identity and refuses responsibility” (2006, 215).

This conundrum is what Alcoff (2006, 221) identifies as the *whiteness problem*: namely, “why maintain white identity at all, given that any group identity will be based on exclusion and an implicit superiority, and given that whiteness itself has been historically constituted as supremacist since its inception?” One promising way to address this problem is to remember, regarding whiteness and the value of identifying with histories and communities, that the histories of white supremacy and communities of white people who accept their race privilege unreflectively are not the *only* relevant histories and communities. While anti-racist whites must acknowledge and own their relationship to white racist histories and communities, Alcoff (2006, 223) also urges whites committed to anti-racism to keep “a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community.”

Alcoff describes this sort of white identity as a kind of “double consciousness,” different from the double consciousness identified by Du Bois, although inspired by him. In this case, she says, consciousness involves anti-racist whites acknowledging how white identity figures centrally into racial inequality and exploitation *while also* remembering contributions made by anti-racists whites to dismantling white supremacy. Alcoff aims neither to let white people disassociate themselves from bad white histories and communities nor to allow white people to wallow in guilt-ridden stasis, as though an unavoidable white identity robs one of all capacity for anti-racist work. Histories of white anti-racism also can be histories with

which white people positively identify, not instead of but alongside histories of white privilege, ignorance, and exploitation. Identification with white anti-racism does not come automatically, to be sure. It must be earned, which gives further impetus to white people genuinely committed to anti-racism to actually and persistently *do* something.

### 7. Allyship and Masculinity

There is much to Alcoff's analysis of white anti-racism that is worthwhile in its own right, but for present purposes, I want to emphasize two features that extend fruitfully to the question of feminist masculinity. The first point is her insistence that socially privileged identity and group membership are not easily disavowed: not only will disavowal be quite difficult for the person himself, given a lifetime of privilege, but the world may well continue to confer privilege in many subtle, pervasive ways, one's disavowals notwithstanding. The second, complementary point is that allyship against privilege and oppression can be partially constitutive of anti-racist whiteness, through contributions to justice and recognition of how such contributions fit within anti-racist white histories and communities. This latter point dovetails with Brod's (1998, 210) critique of Stoltenberg on the ideal of androgyny: "what is lacking is precisely the standpoint *from which* to practice a transformative politics that being profeminist *as men* provides. One is left with only an ungendered individual moral identity, rather than a gendered collective political identity that I believe is essential for sustained, effective political action." Newton (2002, 183) similarly emphasizes the importance of "the pleasures of collectivity" that are available to men and which can help sustain their progressive political activities.

In this spirit, the approach to normative feminist masculinities I advocate here emphasizes masculinity in political, gendered, and feminist terms. Specifically, I submit that allyship offers a viable and open-ended normative model for feminist masculinities distinct from an ideal of androgyny (though quite friendly to it) and grounded in feminist values. To begin, let us characterize an *ally* generally as one who supports or assists another in a shared project or end.<sup>8</sup> For present purposes I emphasize three features of allyship particularly relevant for normative feminist masculinity. The first point is that a good ally neither dominates nor takes over a shared project; as hooks (2004b, 117) reminds us, the goal is one of cooperation rather than of domination. This leads to our second point: the project is shared, meaning that an ally values the project as her/his own end while also appreciating that others value it as theirs. The third point is that an ally is, in some significant

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of allyship, see Bishop (2002), Connell (2005), and Casey (2010).

sense, in coalition with another, such that an alliance is a relationship involving two or more allied parties who are non-identical in some relevant way, “rather than mobilization of one group around its common interest” (Connell 2005, 238). While no two parties are ever perfectly identical, the point is that the differences between or among allies are themselves relevant to their participation, relevant to their contributions to be made to the shared project, and therefore relevant to their relationship being one of allies working in coalition.

To make sense of men’s feminist allyship in particular, let us reflect on feminism broadly construed. Sherwin (1989, 70) aptly identifies several commitments held in common by a wide variety of feminist theories: “a recognition that women are in a subordinate position in society, that oppression is a form of injustice and hence intolerable, that there are further forms of oppression in addition to gender oppression (and that there are women victimized by each of these forms of oppression), that it is possible to change society in ways that could eliminate oppression, and that it is a goal of feminism to pursue the changes necessary to accomplish this.” One might add further commitments, to be sure, commitments central to and distinctive of particular feminisms. But starting here, we can say that a *feminist* at least shares these recognitions and contributes to pursuing these changes. Applying our general characterization of allyship, we can say also that a *feminist ally* comes to these feminist recognitions and pursues changes alongside varied others; an ally sees these ideas and work as important on her/his own analysis, while appreciating that others have their own analyses, perspectives, and experiences as well. A good feminist ally provides complementary contributions without subsuming, assimilating, erasing, or preventing others’ recognitions and contributions. Finally, a man as *feminist masculine ally* recognizes how various norms of masculinity and femininity undergird social oppression; recognizes how men uphold oppressive systems and how men can contribute to dismantling them; and achieves his recognition and makes his contributions to undoing oppression in ways that are sometimes similar to and sometimes rather different from his allies, these differences owing accordingly to what differentiates his positionality from his allies in this work.

We are reminded that being a man under patriarchy is at least in part about how one is interpreted, by others and oneself, as occupying a social position of male privilege.<sup>9</sup> Manhood is fungible, and gender fluidity is possible. Yet like Alcoff’s observation on anti-racist whiteness, the attempt to disavow one’s manhood as a repudiation of patriarchy may not succeed, as when the world “will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways” (Alcoff 2006, 213). This is not to deny the ability of trans women and men to affirm their respective identities as

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<sup>9</sup> See Haslanger (2000, 2012).

women and men against presumptive social categorization. Those who would like to distance themselves from masculinity so as to deny their gender privilege are in a rather different position, in which a repudiation of manhood assuages guilt and shame and encourages the tempting conclusion that, in so doing, this is enough to wash one's hands of what Connell (2005, 79) calls the "patriarchal dividend." But what men *can* do instead is exercise significant control over *how* we respond to privilege and patriarchy in ways consistent with and grounded in feminist values. Masculinities, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 836) argue, are "configurations of practice." We might consider men's feminist allyship practices as constitutive of normative feminist masculinities, such that the norms of feminist allyship give meaning to better ways of being men, ways that are constructive, distinctive, and intersectional. So understood, feminist masculinity involves something akin to the awareness Alcoff describes—in this case, involving feminist men acknowledging how men benefit from and are complicit in gender oppression, while celebrating the contributions to undoing oppression that men make and have made.<sup>10</sup> I make no claim of masculine double consciousness, however, as I would not mean to suggest something comparable to what Du Bois (2007) describes as the pervasive lived experience of oppressed peoples.

Allyship has a social-epistemological dimension. Consider, for example, May's (1998, 135)<sup>11</sup> description of a progressive male standpoint grounded in a critical reflection upon one's own experiences as a man alongside a mindful attention to women's experiences as they testify to them. Achieving and maintaining such a standpoint takes work, dedication, self-scrutiny, and sincere willingness to listen humbly. Drawing on both men's and women's experiences of a gendered world, one does so from the position of a committed ally standing in different relation to women's experiences than they stand themselves. Here May's own work may be understood reflexively, as he strives to meet his own standards in drawing upon Bar On (1993), Harding (1993), and other feminist women theorists while also testifying to his own particular perspective and gendered experiences.

While each instance of allyship masculinity will not necessarily apply uniformly to all men, examples might help to illustrate the model. Consider the case of men who are part of a community in which sexual harassment and discrimination are endemic problems, yet who sincerely believe that they have not seen these things themselves. (Meanwhile other men in this community do recognize that they have witnessed sexual harassment and discrimination; perhaps some have been targets themselves.) On first analysis, these men might treat their absence of personal observation as some counterevidence against the pervasiveness of sexism

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<sup>10</sup> See also Nall (2010).

<sup>11</sup> See also Pease (2000).

in their community, and they might even say as much in community forums. In this case, the norms of allyship masculinity would ask these men to seriously consider how their gendered social positions as men might be relevant to their not-witnessing sexism even if it actually exists in their community. “Is my not-witnessing better understood as counterevidence, or as a sort of gendered ignorance?” these men might ask themselves. Allyship masculinity also would mean considering the significance of one’s testimony of not-witnessing sexism in its social-epistemic context, particularly in response to other community members’ testimonies of their firsthand experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination. “What is the point of my not-witnessing testimony?” these men might ask themselves. “Is it making a constructive contribution to our collective understanding, or obscuring the issue?” Different men might well answer these questions differently, given the specific details of their lives and the specific cases at hand. To be sure, testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), testimonial smothering (Dotson, 2011), and other forms of epistemic violence are not unique to men nor limited to gender oppression. My claim here is not that virtuous listening is uniquely constitutive of allyship masculinity. But to the extent that existing patriarchal systems differently inform our experiences along gender lines, an allyship model of normative masculinity will ask men to consider how our distinctively gendered experiences *as* men make an epistemic difference, for better and for worse, and to take these considerations into account in our beliefs and actions.

There is work toward gender equality and undoing oppression to which women and men can contribute in similar ways, just as there are truths about the world women and men recognize in similar ways. Yet the reason we might conceive of men’s feminist allyship practices *as* masculinities is the fact that men stand in distinctively gendered relations to the insights and social projects of feminism. When it comes to contributing to collective projects toward dismantling gender oppression, men’s social positions may find them better situated to make some contributions than others, and sometimes find them better situated than women may be to make particular sorts of contributions. Sterba (1998, 298) argues that “there are still many contexts in which men are good for feminism, that is, many contexts in which men can make useful contributions to the cause of feminism.” For example, he encourages feminist men to argue for gender equality in spaces where women are underrepresented and to use their male privileges to advocate for gender equality in conversations with those who extend greater credibility to men than women. Ravarino (2013, 160) likewise reminds us that, “as men, we have unique access to other men. This same-sex dynamic means that men can be effective social justice allies in addressing sensitive topics.”

In addition to issues of credibility, men sometimes might be more willing and able to appraise their privileges and their complicity in patriarchal systems honestly



alongside other, similarly implicated men. This is not to say that men working with men or other such distinctively gendered contributions to dismantling oppression are somehow more important than other feminist contributions—far from it. But through these examples, we begin to see how men’s committed, reflective pursuit of feminist allyship can itself give meaning to particular masculinities.

I have raised questions for Kimmel’s “new model” of masculinity as proposed in *Manhood in America* and *Guyland*. But elsewhere he locates a distinctive role for men, in his description of a Gentlemen’s Auxiliary of Feminism as “an honorable position, one that acknowledges that this is a revolution of which we are part, but not the central part, not its most significant part” (1998, 67). “It will be the task of a Gentleman’s Auxiliary to make feminism comprehensible to men, not as a loss of power . . . but as a challenge to that false sense of entitlement to that power in the first place.” *Guyland* too contains examples of how men can make distinctive contributions to undoing oppression. Kimmel shares the story of one fraternity member moved to scrutinize his complicity in the “walk of shame,” in which the fraternity members gathered to heckle sorority women going home on weekend mornings after hooking up with the guys. Inspired by Kimmel’s visit, this man sought out like-minded fraternity members opposed to the heckling, and after discussion among themselves, they took their opposition to their fraternity, made their case, and effected small but meaningful local social change. In this man’s efforts, Kimmel (2008, 281) sees a genuine attempt to get beyond the limits of his experiences and better identify and stand against injustice as others experience it. I think Kimmel is right on here, and the example does fit his model of masculinity through justice. But let us notice also that this fraternity member did not oppose injustice in a generic way, but from his specific social situation within this highly gendered institution. His experience of the walk of shame was different than that of the sorority women who endured it, and his position as a fraternity member allowed him to pursue a particular avenue for change unavailable to these women and to other outsiders.

In allyship masculinities, I think we can find some resolution to the paradox of profeminist pride in manhood, aptly described by Schmitt (2001, 399), that “since we are not profeminists with unspecified gender but specifically profeminist *men*, we struggle in fact against ourselves, against what most persons in our society expect us to be, and against what we were raised to be.” Schmitt realizes that self-hatred, while tempting, cannot enable long-term contributions to feminist progress, yet a call for pride in manhood “carries with it overtones of the old patriarchy with its distinctions between the natures of men and women” (2001, 399).<sup>12</sup> But if we acknowledge how men’s and women’s positions in patriarchal systems serve to constrain and enable our respective relationships and our contributions to social

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<sup>12</sup> See also Kahane (1998).

justice differently, then the pride available to men as feminist allies is not pride in some essentially male nature, rather, pride in doing the work that one can as a feminist man.

### 8. Concluding Remarks

We might look to men's feminist allyship practices as a decidedly non-essentialist approach to normative masculinity not only compatible with feminist values but grounded in them. Allyship masculinities share with androgyny a healthy amount of skepticism toward traditional gender norms and oppressive power structures. The behaviors and activities that are identified and advocated here as normatively masculine do not concern dress, bodily comportment, or many other traditionally gendered things. Instead, this reclamation of normative feminist masculinity is akin to Alcoff's advice for anti-racist whites to do the work necessary to become contributing parts of anti-racist white communities and histories. So understood, the norms of allyship masculinities involve contributing meaningfully to feminist work while mindful of how our gendered privileges, expectations, ignorance, and knowledge as men situate our relationships and our constructive contributions to this work in coalition with our differently situated allies.

One might wonder whether a model of normative feminist femininities is meant to follow from this model of normative feminist masculinities. But I would resist drawing conclusions from the present discussion for what feminist femininities would or should look like, or even whether this is a fruitful way to approach such things. The question of feminist reclamation of normative femininity is not one I would try to answer, and I do not mean to treat masculinity as any sort of default case with straightforward isomorphic implications for other gender categories.

In looking to feminist allyship practices as a way to give meaning to normative feminist masculinities, I do not mean to present allyship as simple or uncontested. While some theorists and activists see allyship and allies as playing valuable roles in social justice movements,<sup>13</sup> others are more critical,<sup>14</sup> particularly of the actions and the pronouncements of men and white, upper-class, cisgender, and straight people who see and describe themselves as "allies." Such self-ascriptions draw criticism and warranted suspicion because they evidence misplaced emphasis on self-glorification and public performance rather than the actual work of undoing oppressive structures. Critics and proponents agree that "ally" is understood best as a kind of anti-oppressive activity, not as a badge of honor. For

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<sup>13</sup> For more positive accounts of allies and allyship, see Bishop (2002) and Ravarino (2013).

<sup>14</sup> For more critical accounts of of allies and allyship, see McKenzie (2014) and McKinnon (2014).

this reason, I have sought to focus on feminist allyship practices rather than self-ascriptions. Perhaps stressing allyship practices as underwriting normative masculinities can help mitigate the self-congratulatory excesses of allies and allyship culture: it is not enough for men to see or to describe themselves as feminist allies in order to meet feminist masculinity norms, any more than it would be enough to see or to describe oneself as trustworthy or generous in order to meet the norms of trust or generosity. So understood, the extent to which we are succeeding in living up to feminist masculinity norms will be evidenced by what we have done and what we are doing, not by what we want to call ourselves.

I have raised concerns about the alternate models of masculinities put forward by hooks and Kimmel on the grounds that the things they identify as constitutive of masculinity are embodied and expressed equally well by women and men. It is reasonable, then, to ask whether men's feminist allyship as a model for normative masculinities invites similar critique: does my own approach attribute something to men that is not distinctive of them? Norlock (2012) notes that women too act in contribution to feminist work, mindful of how their sexually marked privileges as feminine affect how they understand this work; men and women both can accrue gender privileges if and when they meet socially expected racist, heterosexist, and classist norms. If gender privilege is not so distinctive of what it means to be a man, a feminist allyship model might seem to have problems similar to those that I raised for hooks and Kimmel.

I take this as a welcome challenge for allyship masculinities built around the recognition that, as men, our relationships to patriarchy are distinctively different than women's, and so our contributions to feminist work are sometimes distinctively different than our allies. It is true that sexuality, race, and other social categories undeniably affect how men are accorded gender privilege; it is also probably right to say, at least in some sense, that women are rewarded if and when they conform to patriarchal expectations. Yet the ways in which men as men and women as women are accorded gender privileges are nonetheless distinctively different, such that the norms of men's feminist allyship practices require us to be mindful of these differences in our gender privileges as we reflect, listen, speak, and act accordingly. Of course, the ways different men are accorded gender privilege also can be different. Intersectional analyses of oppression emphasize that all women do not experience patriarchy in the same way,<sup>15</sup> and the corresponding point is true of how different men experience patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> We might consider McIntosh's (1988) familiar image of a knapsack filled with various privileges: the collection of privileges large and small that each man carries with him is undeniable

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<sup>15</sup> See especially Crenshaw (1989) and Spelman (1988).

<sup>16</sup> See Awkward (1995), Connell (2000, 2005), and Kimmel & Messner (2010).

though often taken for granted by the beneficiary himself. While the contents of different men's knapsacks can be similar, not all men across social categories are accorded the same set of gendered privileges manifested in the same way.

The upshot of this critical reflection is the reminder that, as men might work and aspire to be good feminist allies to women, so too might different groups of men work and aspire to be good allies to each other, just as different groups of women work and aspire to be good allies to each other as well. The coalition among allies is diverse indeed. What does an intersectional analysis mean for a feminist model of normative masculinities? It complicates the model in welcome and constructive ways. Men may work to be better feminist allies to women by recognizing the diversity among women's various identities and experiences, remembering that allyship with women necessarily bridges multiple dimensions of social power and difference. Men likewise may work to be better allies to other men by recognizing the diversity among our identities and experiences, and appreciating how allyship among men requires bridging differences too. So when I am doing my part as best as I am able, my embodiment of feminist allyship masculinity overlaps with and differs from feminist allyship masculinity as embodied by many other particular men doing their best. For this reason, we would do well to speak of a normative feminist model of masculinities, pluralized, recognizing the panoply of gender-based privileges and expectations that are accorded to men, pluralized, living in patriarchal systems. Among the distinctive tasks for those men aspiring to meet the norms of feminist allyship masculinities are to reflect on the particular ways that these gendered privileges and expectations are extended to us as men and to develop our understanding of and tender our particular contributions to feminist work accordingly.

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