WHY STUDY “MASCULINITY,” ANYWAY?
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE OLD DAYS

As one of the “first generation” of gender historians to study masculinity in the United States, I welcome the opportunity to revisit this subject. Things have certainly changed, since the “old days,” when the notion of “men’s history” or “men’s studies” elicited only puzzlement.

On the other hand, as someone who has not worked on masculinity since 1995, I feel a bit like Rip Van Winkle, awakening from his twenty-year nap. Much is familiar; much has changed. Certain assumptions about why we studied masculinity—so obvious they barely needed to be spoken in 1990—have fallen away. Conversely, as a member of that older generation I am not always clear about what members of this generation of masculinity scholars really want to know, or why.

My paper will, in fact, remain mostly in the past, as an invitation to the scholars of the present to think about why they are studying masculinity. What does it actually mean to study masculinity—particularly when we consider it as “invisible” or “performative?” Consider this, as well, a report about how difficult it was to imagine how to study masculinity twenty-five years ago, when I was

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a graduate student. As a historian, I find use in understanding how new genera-
tions of scholars adopt, adapt, and forget the assumptions and resources of
previous scholars, as time passes. I hope that those who study masculinity in
the present may find some use in seeing how we “old-timers” tried to cobble
together a “history of masculinity” in the 1990s.

I will begin with a brief argument that masculinity (as scholars use the term)
is a heuristic category, and should be recognized as such. Second, I will deal
with what kinds of resources were available to historians of masculinity when
I began working on my dissertation, in 1986 (Bederman, 1995). Third, I would
like to distinguish between the two very different scholarly movements work-
ing on “masculinity” in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ One, “men’s (or masculinity)
studies,” was led by Michael Kimmel, R.W. Connell, Joseph Pleck, and Harry
Brod, among others. The other, “poststructuralist gender analysis,” is exem-
plified by Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam. I will use, as examples, the
scholarship written by Kimmel (1993), Connell (1995), Butler (1990), and Hal-
berstam (1998). I hope to show that at the time, “men’s studies” and “post-
structuralist gender analysis” had entirely different goals, and therefore
entirely different understandings of “masculinity,” as well as “invisibility” and
“performance.”

Putting these two traditions into conversation (or argument) with one an-
other, as I hope to do here, illuminates the kind of problems that can be caused
by citing masculinity as a self evident “thing” rather than using it as a heuris-
tic category. “Men’s studies” and “gender analysis” scholarship need not be
intrinsically incompatible. Yet these approaches are most usefully combined
when we understand their quite disparate goals and assumptions—that is,
when we understand precisely what each one means when they invoke “mas-
culinity.”

This paper will be valuable only if it helps us to define what we think mas-
culinity scholarship ought to do, today. What do we mean when using the
heuristic term “masculinity?” And how does our definition of that term help us
understand what we, as twenty-first century scholars, want to know?

“Masculinity” Is Not a “Thing:” It Is a Heuristic Category

In any type of academic research, the answers we find depend on the ques-
tions we ask. This is true even about subjects that are concrete and intuitively
self-evident, like “What caused the fall of the Bastille?” or “How do we map the

¹ I place scare quotes around the term “masculinity” in order to emphasize that as I
use the term, “masculinity” is a heuristic device, rather than a self-evident thing (See
below). The scare quotes are intended to remind the reader that I am not using the term
“masculinity” colloquially, and that I do not see it as an unproblematic category. I am
attempting to foreground the insight that “masculinity” is not in itself an idea at all.
Rather, as scholars use (or should use) the term, “masculinity” is an analytical tool, and
needs careful and precise explanation, so that readers may understand precisely what
is being analyzed, and why.
human genome?” This is all the more true about subjects that are neither con-
crete nor intuitively self-evident. “Masculinity” is not a natural thing, like a
tree or a table. Like “class” and “ethnicity”—like “gender” and “capitalism”—
“masculinity” is a heuristic category. “Masculinity” has not existed throughout
time. We do not find Plato discussing “masculinity.” In the English language,
the word “masculinity” did not even exist before about 1850; and did not come
into regular usage until almost the turn of the twentieth century (Bederman,

Whether self-conscious about this or not, scholars who study “masculinity”
use that term as a heuristic device, in order to allow them to ask particular
questions—whether about human beings who are “men,” or about human be-
ings who are not “men,” but whose gender performances destabilize common-
sense assumptions equating male bodies with “masculinity.” “Masculinity”
helps some study men’s behavior, or men’s psychological makeup. “Mas-
culinity” helps others analyze the kinds of power and authority that men
have—or do not have. Some scholars invoke masculinity to ask—following
Joan Scott (1986)—how “gender” signifies power, and what “masculinity” can
tell us about imperialism, state histories, or political theory in different times
or places. Still other scholars—influenced by Judith Halberstam—analyze “fe-
male masculinity,” which may, among other things “name a deliberately coun-
terfeit masculinity that undermines the currency of maleness” or make “an
embodied assault upon compulsory heterosexuality” (Halberstam, 2002, p.
345). During the 1990s, many historians were inquiring about how certain
groups of people became “men” in the first place. In other words, “masculin-
ity” is a placeholder. It exists and is useful to scholars, only as it allows us to
ask particular types of questions about gender. Without “masculinity,” we can-
not ask questions about “maleness” in a time, place, psyche, or text.

When scholars do assume that masculinity is a thing—as recognizable in
other contexts as a tree, building, or bone—their analysis often reifies their own
unstated assumptions about what “masculinity” is. Those who associate “mas-
culinity” with “anxiety” discover men who are anxious. Those who presume
“masculinity” entails “patriarchy” or a “will to power over racial others” find
men who dominate women or engage in racial violence. Scholars who believe
masculinity entails vulnerability and fellow feeling will find vulnerable men in
social groups. Scholars who assume that all men, by definition, are “mascu-
line,” can write about almost any male, in almost any context, and—mirabile
dictu—analyze “masculinity!”

2Judith Halberstam’s brilliant Female Masculinity (1998) makes the essential point that
one must never assume scholarship on “masculinity” must focus solely on the study of
“men”—precisely because the relationship between male bodies and masculinity must
never be taken for granted. Indeed, as Halberstam demonstrates so forcefully, analyz-
ing “female masculinity” effectively demystifies the power of both males and hetero-
sexuals. Moreover, the first chapter of Female Masculinity defines precisely what
Halberstam means by “masculinity,” and how she plans to use it as a heuristic cate-
gory. It may be taken as a model of precisely the type of definitional and methodolog-
ical specificity I am asking for, when discussing “masculinity.”
Writing about masculinity in terms of anxiety, power, vulnerability or males is not, in and of itself, a problem—as long as the writer explains and theorizes the approach taken. Problems occur only when scholars fail to explain—or even consider—why conceptualizing “masculinity” as they do facilitates their analysis, rather than simply re-inscribing common-sense assumptions or rehashing over-worked, perhaps ossified scholarly trends. For example, numerous U.S. history articles now suggest that “nineteenth-century masculinity” caused insecure white men on the frontier to battle Indians in order to assuage their gender anxieties. Is “masculinity” truly enough to explain the complex phenomena of Indian wars? What do these articles tell us about the histories of racial violence, politics, or even “masculinity” that we did not already know? Often, not much.

In short, there is nothing self-evident about what it means to study “masculinity.” “Masculinity” (as used by scholars) is primarily a heuristic category, a conceptual placeholder which allows us to ask certain kinds of questions. The term is useful only when the scholars who employ it define precisely what they want to know and what they mean when they use the term “masculinity.”

U.S. Men’s History Before 1986: Analogies to Women’s Studies/Women’s History

The rest of this paper situates the scholarship on masculinity as I came to understand it when I was writing Manliness and Civilization between 1986 and 1995. I would like to differentiate between the three major types of academic approaches to the study of masculinity I encountered in those early days. It seems to me, as a recently awakened “Rip Van Winkle,” that the differences between those approaches were more obvious at the time; and while all three remain extremely useful to the study of masculinity, some of their premises were, and remain, incompatible. Consider this, then, a kind of sympathetic “excavation” of the most basic assumptions of all three fields at that time, undertaken by someone whose roots were always primarily in “women’s studies” and “poststructuralist gender analysis” (as practiced in the USA) rather than in “men’s” or “masculinity studies.”

Like many scholars, perhaps, I stumbled on the study of “masculinity” in graduate school, when I was trying to find something new to say about my chosen field, “women’s history,” a sub-field of “women’s studies.” Although I did not at first try to define what I meant by “masculinity,” I had an intuitive sense of what I wanted to know. My questions were shaped by my own field’s existing questions and scholarship. Here, too, I think I was a typical graduate student. But it was not easy for me to figure out how to answer my questions about masculinity within a 1980s women’s studies paradigm.

By women’s studies, I mean the interdisciplinary study of women and the relations between the sexes, as practiced in and institutionalized by colleges and universities, particularly in the United States, since about 1970. Women’s studies was founded during the late 1960s, by young feminist graduate students and professors, mostly in the humanities and social sciences. Inspired by second wave feminism, they began to research hitherto-unexplored topics
about women’s hitherto-ignored voices and experiences. They were particularly eager to analyze the unequal power relations between men and women. Yet despite the vibrancy of this intellectual movement, given the culturally conservative and overwhelmingly male character of the American academy at the time, women’s studies’ longevity might have been doubtful, were it not for the concurrent passage of new legislation and policies directed against sex discrimination. Faced with affirmative action mandates, universities across the United States devoted new academic lines to historians, anthropologists, and others who studied “women” (or “blacks”) knowing that these lines were among the best ways to recruit talented female (or minority) scholars. By about 1980, these young feminist scholars had become numerous enough to organize their own interdisciplinary programs in colleges and universities across the United States. Women’s studies (like “Black Studies”) had become a recognized force in the American academy. And so was women’s history.

At the time, however, it was not entirely clear to feminist scholars what “men’s studies” might be, nor how “masculinity” should be studied. This was particularly true in my field, history. Women’s historians were not opposed to studying men. We knew we ought to do so. In 1976, in a much-quoted passage, historian Natalie Zemon Davis had insisted that historians needed to study both sexes: “But it seems to me that we should be interested in both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past” (1976, p. 90; emphasis in original).³

Nor was it true that no U.S. historians had written about men or masculinity. Elliot Gorn’s brilliant _The Manly Art: Bare Knuckle Prizefighting in the USA_ (1986), E. Anthony Rotundo’s much-cited, “Manhood in America: The Northern Middle Class, 1770-1920” (Ph.D. Diss, 1986), and Peter Filene’s path-breaking _Him/Her Self_ (1975) were among the best. Perhaps the most influential, although unheralded, early men’s historian was Joe L. Dubbert, whose 1974 article “Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis” pioneered the useful and much-im-

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³ After being quoted in the introduction to Pleck and Pleck’s foundational collection _The American Man_ (Pleck & Pleck, 1980), Davis’s two sentences were frequently reprinted by early men’s studies scholars (e.g., Brod, 1987; Kimmel, 1993), who rightly saw them as one of the earliest and most eloquent calls for studying masculinity in history. In this light, however, it is worth quoting the two sentences immediately following this passage, which clarify that Davis envisioned a history of men and women together, rather than histories of men as a discrete sex. Indeed, she presciently describes the field of gender studies, as it came to be practiced after about 1990: “Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or promote its change. Our goal is to explain why sex roles were sometimes tightly prescribed and sometimes fluid, sometimes markedly asymmetrical and sometimes more even” (Davis, 1976, p. 90). In short, the “history of women and men” Davis described was a history of sexism and of gender as a system, rather than as a discrete type of “men’s history.”
tated trope of “masculinity crisis.” Yet, especially for those just entering the field in the 1980s, it was not at all clear what questions historians should ask about men or masculinity in history.

By 1980, existing women’s history frameworks were useful to learn about women, but of little help in understanding men, except as “oppressors.” Our primary question at the time was “how, when and why in history did women, as a group, manage to acquire social power and influence?” Two types of feminist theory had shaped women’s history: socialist feminism (which tended to see women as a class) and radical/cultural feminism (which tended to analyze women’s special cultural resources). These frameworks allowed women’s historians to discover entirely new information about women’s lives in the past and to learn how women’s daily experiences, as shaped by the cultures in which they lived, allowed them to take action, as a group, on their own behalf, to accomplish the goals which seemed important to them. This was a revelation to that generation of historians, and drove decades of women’s history scholarship (Downs, 2010).

Yet that approach tended to assume men’s power, rather than to explain it. It seemed of scant use to historical analysis of men and masculinity. There was no point in doing research to discover that many men in the past had political and social power over women. We knew that already. Simply studying men in public did not get us very far. As Kimmel himself noted at the time, existing histories of politics, war, and almost everything else were chock-full of men, but illuminated nothing at all about the sex-gender system.

Nor did historians get very far by simply establishing that men in the past, like women, had private lives. Some scholars took great pains to establish that nineteenth-century men, like nineteenth-century women, lived in the private sphere, enjoyed their homes, had both loved and dominated their wives and children. Yet nobody had doubted that, to begin with. And then, as now, there is no point doing research to prove something that one already knows.

In 1986, I sensed my most useful framework for analyzing male power was related to the turn to hermeneutics occurring in disciplines ranging from literature to anthropology. Inspired by theorists like Clifford Geertz, Louis Althusser, E.P. Thompson, and Antonio Gramsci, historians of all types—not just women’s historians—were trying to decipher the cultural meanings embedded in texts, daily practices, political and social movements. Some historians were already writing good books and articles deciphering these “meanings for manhood,” as embedded in Masonic movements, fatherhood, spectator sports, and so on (e.g., Carnes & Griffen, 1990). But these often failed to explain what I wanted to understand about the resilience of male power, which constituted

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my own, as yet inchoate, definition of “masculinity.” This was how I under-
stood my field, as I began trying to conceptualize my dissertation.

**POSTSTRUCTURALIST GENDER ANALYSIS AND MEN’S STUDIES ANALYZE**

“**MASULINITY,” “INVISIBILITY” AND “PERFORMANCE,” 1986-1995

Meanwhile two important but relatively dissimilar English-language schol-
arly movements were developing more explicit ways to study masculinities. One, gender analysis, used poststructuralist theory to analyze the cultural con-
struction of gender. Influential practitioners include Judith Butler, Judith Hal-
berstam, Joan W. Scott, Denise Riley, Teresa de Lauretis, and Gayatri Spivak. The other—somewhat less influential in the U.S. academy, but equally inno-
- vative—was the movement that turned into “masculinity studies,” represented by Michael S. Kimmel, R.W. Connell, Harry Brod, Joseph H. Pleck, and others.

Both academic movements analyzed “masculinity.” Both spoke of gender in
terms of “invisibility,” “power,” and “performance.” Indeed, at the time, both spoke of cultural construction. However these two approaches’ interest in and questions about masculinity were entirely different—at times incompatible. Even their definitions of “masculinity” differed profoundly.

Here again, some definitions and institutional histories may be useful. To begin with “men’s studies” (also known as “masculinity studies”): This acad-
emic movement was originally formed by feminist men, who appreciated the
growing discipline of women’s studies but wished to extend its approaches to
the experience of men. The movement arose later than women’s studies, and
at least in the USA, has never been as influential. Unlike U.S. women’s studies,
men’s studies benefitted neither from affirmative action policies (as men were
already dominant in the U.S. professoriate) nor a widespread “men’s” move-
ment inspiring a generation of male academics. Nonetheless, an informal net-
work of mostly male scholars and activists began holding annual conferences
“Men and Masculinities” as early as 1975. The first formal “Men’s Studies
Task Group” in the U.S. was formed about 1980. By 1991, the men’s studies
movement group had split into two rival bodies, over (among other differ-
ences) the question of whether or not to support scholarship about men and
masculinity that was not explicitly feminist. Although women were welcomed
by both camps, most men’s studies scholars were male. Even more significant,
most were social scientists.

“Poststructuralist gender analysis,” on the other hand, drew on postmodern
literary and philosophical theory to try to understand how gender works, in
culture, history and language, to construct what (falsely) appear to be tran-
shistorical truths about men, women and sexuality. To quote Judith Butler and
Joan W. Scott, “[P]oststructuralism’ indicates a field of critical practices that …
interrogate the formative and exclusionary power of discourse in the con-
struction of sexual difference. This interrogation does not take for granted the
meanings of any terms or analytical categories, including its own. Rather, it
asks how specific deployments of discourse for specific political purposes de-
termine the very notions used.” Ideas, institutions and practices (i.e., dis-
gresses, enacted in history, and through language and culture, effect the very
categories through which people understand their own experiences and identities. Poststructuralist gender theory allowed scholars to analyze the coercive and embodied power of gender in new and productive ways (Butler & Scott, 1992).

Which approach was more valuable? That is the wrong question. Both did important work, with lasting value. The point I want to make is that twenty-first century scholars, with their own reasons for studying “masculinity,” will be able to use both traditions most productively if they understand the profound differences between them, at least, at the beginning.

Moreover, these two movements exemplify my original point: for scholars, masculinity is best understood as a heuristic category, and not a thing. We can see this, I think by considering how during the 1980s and 1990s, these two academic movements worked out productive—but entirely different—ways to study masculinity. In the rest of this paper, then, I would like to contrast the very distinct ways “poststructuralist gender analysis” and “masculinity studies” approached “masculinity” during these years.

I want to introduce this by analyzing Kimmel’s famous story about masculine invisibility, taken from his 1993 article, “Invisible Masculinity.” Kimmel tells us that in the late 1970s, in a post-grad seminar on feminism, he listened to a black woman and a white woman argue about sisterhood: “The white woman asserted that all women were ‘sisters’ because they had the essentially same experiences, and because all women faced oppression by men.” The black woman disagreed, and asked the former,

“When you wake up in the morning, what do you see?’…
‘I see a woman,’ replied the white woman.
‘That’s precisely the problem,’ responded the black woman. ‘I see a black woman. Race is invisible to you, because it’s how you are privileged.’ (p. 29)

This, in turn, made Kimmel groan. The others—all women—asked him what was the matter. “Well,” he said, “When I look in the mirror, I see a human being. I’m universally generalizable. As a middle class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I’m the generic person!”

Kimmel’s point is that this was the first time he had realized that even though he was a privileged white man, he, too, had both race and gender, even if he did not notice them when he saw himself in the mirror. As he put it, he realized part of the benefits he enjoyed, based on his sex and race, was what he called the “privilege of invisibility. The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not to another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred.” What was visible to the black woman and to the white woman—his own masculinity—was invisible to him (Kimmel, 1993).

It is a powerful story: it made a profound impression on me, when I heard him recount it at two conferences during the 1980s. His 1993 article makes it clear that this experience had a transformative influence on him, making him the admirable scholar and activist he has been for at least two decades.

But—does this mean that men really are, in Kimmel’s words, “the invisible gender?” Does his story demonstrate that his “masculinity” was, in fact, invis-
ible? Obviously not. As Kimmel himself points out, masculinity is invisible only to men. Kimmel’s masculinity was perfectly visible to everybody in that 1970s seminar room except him.

Now, let us unpack that a bit. There are two points here that seem to me worth highlighting. First, as I have already suggested—and as Kimmel himself argued—the “invisibility” of masculinity is an illusion, experienced only by men. For this reason, I think, men’s inability to see masculinity—in contrast to their ability to notice femininity—truly was an important insight for the men’s studies movement.

Conversely, most of those doing gender analysis had never found “masculinity” any more “invisible” than was “femininity.” For them, the important invisibility was the supposed naturalness, but actual constructedness, of gender itself—the fact that gender differences were not inborn, but culturally created. For those doing gender analysis the “invisibility” of masculinity was part of a more profoundly invisible sex/gender system. Above all, that masculinity did not need unmasking. It needed explaining. How did contingent, historically variable, assumptions about sex, gender, and male dominance become so unquestionable that they appeared “natural,” whether constructed in terms of “men versus women,” “masculine versus feminine,” “gay versus straight,” or “normal versus abnormal?”

The second—related—difference between those doing poststructuralist “gender analysis” and those doing “men’s studies” pertains to their interest in analyzing those types of naturalized dualisms. Kimmel’s own story dramatizes the fact that his own “invisible” attributes became visible to him only in the context of their dualistic opposites. That is, he could see his masculinity only in contrast to women; and he could see his whiteness only in contrast to African-Americans. Kimmel of course realizes this and says so. But he leaves it there. Neither he nor men’s studies as a discipline was particularly interested in analyzing these dualistic opposites as seeming-binaries, nor in how these and other binaries worked to construct masculinity in relation to its “others.”

In fact, as I recall, as the years passed, men’s studies was increasingly interested in analyzing men themselves—as individuals or in relation to other men—rather than in relation to women. This is certainly true of Connell’s Masculinities. And as we will see, this made sense in terms of one of early men’s studies’ primary goals: enabling men to understand and oppose sexism without disavowing their own masculinity.

For Butler and the “cultural constructionists,” on the other hand, deconstructing binaries—that is showing how binary categories worked, and what they left out—was an essential element of analyzing gender. “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 31). According to Butler and poststructuralist gender analysis, these oppositional categories—individually and in relation to one another—were precisely what rendered gender,
heterosexuality, [and race] compulsory, natural, and therefore invisible. So we needed to study how these coercive binaries were constructed. Conversely, it made no sense to analyze “men” or “masculinity” in isolation from its “others” (whether “man’s” opposites were understood to be women, savages, queers, etc.).

So far, then: men’s studies wanted to unmask the invisibility of masculinity—particularly for an audience of men. Conversely “gender analysis” wanted to use poststructuralist scholarship to explain the coerciveness and naturalness of both gender and heterosexuality.

This gets us into the question of epistemologies. Precisely because one goal of poststructuralist gender scholars was to understand how historically contingent gender arrangements became seen as “normal,” “natural” “unchanging” and “common sense,” they were drawn to postmodern—and frequently French—thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Levi-Strauss. Like such theorists, they wanted to unmask the coercive power behind “common-sense assumptions” and “every-day practices.” To do this they needed to go beyond the easier “materialist” or “commonsense” explanations of culture and power. Not surprisingly, “gender studies” scholars tended to be in the humanities or in anthropology—disciplines where the late-twentieth-century turn to hermeneutic analysis had been most powerful.

Conversely “men’s studies” scholars had (and have) far less interest in complicating commonsense understandings of either gender or politics. Their ultimate goal—at least the goal of Kimmel’s and the NOMAS (National Association of Men Against Sexism) side of the movement—was to empower men to oppose their own unfair privileges and to reject sexism, without rejecting themselves or their own masculinity. They were and remain eager to build a non-sexist men’s movement in which sympathetic men could avoid both abjection and self-loathing, merely for being men. To do this, they needed neither “French feminism” nor the “linguistic turn.” (Connell, unlike Kimmel, was particularly scathing about that type of theory, which he clearly did not understand. He considered it merely the study of “metaphors,” divorced from the “reality” of “bodies.”).

Connell’s fallacy in seeing Butler’s Gender Trouble as merely invoking bodiless metaphors, however, can be suggested by taking up her concept of “performance,” which necessarily involved actual, not metaphorical, bodies. Judith Butler’s idea of “performance” or “performativity,” which she introduced in her 1990 book, Gender Trouble, has been both one of the most powerful, and most misunderstood, concepts of modern gender theory. From the very beginning, readers—even, and perhaps especially those whose first language was English—have misunderstood the way Butler was using the term “performance.” Butler spent about ten years and several books trying to clear up the

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5 Indeed, at the time, it was very difficult for me to appreciate how useful its practitioners found this project of “unmasking” or “making visible” masculinity. My misunderstanding of this point made me far more critical of some of this work than I ought to have been.
confusions raised by this word, as used in Gender Trouble, until she finally moved on to other projects. Those who (like myself) have not read all that subsequent work may still find her term confusing, precisely because the English word “performance” has so many different meanings—many of which Butler did not intend.

So let us disaggregate some of those meanings. Let me begin with some French vocabulary, in order to disaggregate the possible meanings of “performance.” In French, “jouer un rôle” is NOT what Butler means by performance. When an actor “plays a role,” he is doing something voluntary. Upon ceasing the performance, he can return to his real self. This is NOT what Butler means. “Performances,” as Butler understands them, are coercive and not voluntary. One cannot simply “step out of one’s role” or “refuse the performance of masculinity,” in Butler’s terms. This is because, as Butler saw it (at the time), there is no “authentic self” prior to, or outside, gender or its performance. (Pace Connell, this does not mean that there is no body outside discourse; but rather that it is nonsense to imagine that any “body” can escape discourse, unless entirely outside all human contact).

So what did Butler mean by “performance?” To understand this concept, French speakers should translate “perform”—not into “jouer un rôle”—but into the verbs “exécuter” or “effectuer.” Conversely, English speakers should think of “performance” as used in the phrase “high-performance engine.” It is the “performance” of an engine that makes it an engine. An engine can perform efficiently or inefficiently. But if it ceases to perform, it ceases to be an engine. It is a mass of useless metal—unrecognizable and incoherent, in the world of operating machinery. In the same way, refusing “performance” (which probably is not possible) would render a person’s embodiment entirely incoherent and illegible. Such a situation is difficult to imagine; but perhaps closest to the ambiguously sexed Saturday Night Live character “Pat,” and/or to the “difficulties of masculine women” attempting to use the ladies room, both described by Halberstam (1998).

In short—for Butler, as for Halberstam, Scott, and many other gender studies scholars—gender (of any kind) was neither inauthentic nor a role. The project of poststructuralist gender analysis was to denaturalize masculinity and femininity in order to show how gender worked—that is, how it was performed—in ways that were coercive, violent, yet naturalized, and made invisible; in ways that had material effects and that instantiated important power relations upon embodied human beings of various genders and sexualities.

I hope, then, it is becoming clear what I mean by saying that during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the term “masculinity” meant entirely different things to the practitioners of men’s studies than it did to the practitioners of poststructuralist gender analysis. One group, composed primarily of male social scientists, wanted to help ordinary, non-scholarly men join the fight against sexism without abjuring their own masculinity. They were particularly interested in understanding how men of different classes and races—different masculinities—related to one another. The other group, composed primarily of female humanities scholars, wanted to unmask the coercive, but misleading “naturalness” of the sex gender system. They wanted to explain
how gender coerced performance, thus marginalizing women and sexual minorities, repeatedly, yet quite differently in various times and places.

It should not be surprising, then, that by the 1990s, men’s studies and postmodern-influenced gender studies scholars found relatively little useful in one another’s scholarship. This is not to say that twenty-first-century scholars cannot utilize both Kimmel and Butler, both Connell and Halberstam. As a newly awakened Rip van Winkle, I hope that they will use all this old scholarship, creatively and thoughtfully, in order to answer their own questions.

I would suggest, however, that the very best way to use these scholars simultaneously is to be very conscious that “masculinity” is not a thing to be studied—it is a heuristic category, which allows scholars to ask different types of analytical questions. In retrospect, I think that we (and especially I, myself) could have had more productive conversations across disciplines if we had been more conscious of doing just that during the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

So where does that leave us in the twenty-first century? I no longer study masculinities, but others do. What do they mean by “masculinity?” If “masculinity” is not a self-evident “thing,” like a “tree” or a “table,” then what is it? What do they all want to know about it?

The sex-gender system has changed remarkably since the 1980s—it is almost unrecognizable, in my opinion, at least in the United States. Oppression (gender oppression of both men and women) is both the same, and different today, twenty-five years later. Can we figure out why it has changed? And how?

Are there any reasons to still study “masculinity”—whatever that is? If so, what are those reasons? What, if anything, does the study of “masculinity” contribute, which is unavailable without using that term? In short, what are the stakes in studying masculinity, in our various disciplines, other than getting a few more publications under one’s belt, in order to keep one’s job?

I cannot answer these questions, myself. I do not do this work any more. But I am fascinated by the question, and hope the present generation of scholars will answer that for me.

REFERENCES


