Race, Gender & Class: Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter 1995

Men's Lives and Feminist Theory

ROBERT JENSEN
University of Texas at Austin / Journalism

The two main points of this essay may seem self-evident or simplistic to feminists, but they are important for men to consider: (1) For men who are messed up (that is, facing problems related to their emotional lives, sexuality, their place in society, and gender politics -in other words, me and virtually every other man I have ever met) feminism offers the best route to understanding the politics of such personal problems and coming to terms with those problems. (2) If men accept the first point, feminism will confront and confuse us about ourselves, and our job is to embrace, not run, from that challenge. Put more simply: Men need to (1) take feminism seriously, and (2) take it personally, for their own sake as well as in the interests of justice.

While these may seem like common-sense observations, they are not easy for men come to terms with. When I began studying feminism six years ago, I did not immediately realize that feminism explained not only men's oppression of women, but my own isolation, alienation, and pain. Nor did I realize that I could understand myself through feminism without denying my participation in the oppression of women or falsely equating men's and women's problems. While I understood that the personal is political, I was slow to realize that the phrase applied not only to women but to me; it took time for me to understand that feminism required me to not only criticize patriarchal constructions of masculinity in the abstract, but to be unrelenting in my critique of my own behavior.

I was socialized and trained to be a man in this culture, and like most men, I learned my lessons well. Feminism helps me reject patriarchal constructions of masculinity and, at the same time, reminds me that my identity was formed within that patriarchal construction. For me to both help myself and make good on my commitments to feminism, I must confront that male identity in a responsible and politically progressive manner using feminist theory. If I want to understand myself and my society, I must be willing to apply, in ways that

can be difficult and distressing, a feminist critique to my life, and to leave that process open to evaluation by women. This approach differs from the goals and methods of the men's movement (see various critiques in Hagan 1992); I suggest men should reject being part of any men's movements and - for their own sake as well as the sake of women, children, and the world - engage feminism.

I am not suggesting that women in general, or feminists in particular, should focus more on men's pain or that women have an obligation to like and trust men who advertise themselves as pro-feminist. However, the common goal of liberation can connect men and women; I come to feminist theory with the realization that my future as a fully moral and responsible human being depends on women's liberation.

While this essay is rooted in personal experience, my goal is not to use it as a confessional or hold myself up as a model; I do not write to cast myself as one of the "good guys," distinct from non-feminist men. Instead, I want to use my own admittedly stumbling progress toward these goals to make some tentative claims about this liberatory process. I will begin with a short discussion of identity politics and the contemporary men's movement, then move on to explain why men should take feminism seriously and personally.

MALE IDENTITY

"Identity politics," as it is commonly used, suggests that group identities can be the basis of analysis and action. This essay is a call for a progressive male identity politics that uses a feminist critique of male power and male sexuality, and that requires of men an honest engagement with their lives and a commitment to real change. Because we usually think of identity politics as a way for marginalized groups, such as African- Americans or lesbians and gays, to resist oppressive power, it may seem odd to talk of a progressive identity politics for heterosexual men. My male identity gives me privilege and protects me: What kind of liberatory identity politics can a straight white boy have?

By a progressive male identity politics, I mean the process of understanding one's social location and practicing a politics informed by that understanding. Identity is not static and dictated by biology, but is the product of the obstacles or privileges that the culture in which one lives attaches to one's characteristics. Identity politics need not be essentialist or falsely totalizing, but simply an acknowledgment of the pattern of those obstacles and privileges. If we view identity as a strategy for action, not as an essentialist marker, we can focus on

how all oppressions in this culture are interlocking, mutually reinforcing, and based on some similar dynamics of domination and subordination. Identity politics is often criticized for turning people inward, toward themselves and others in their groups, and for inhibiting coalition-building. But rather than fragmenting resistance to oppression, an understanding of politics informed by identity can produce solidarity. In my own life, feminism was the first critical approach I discovered, and what I learned about power and oppression from feminist theory led me to a new understanding of racism, heterosexism, and the workings of class/wealth privilege.

Understanding identity in this way makes it possible that a man might choose to become a traitor to his privilege, to take an anti-patriarchal stance and do whatever work in resistance that one finds meaningful. Resistance to institutionalized sexism (which implies and demands, I think, resistance to white supremacy, heterosexism, and class-based oppression as well) is obviously not the only option, nor is it the most popular option with men. My goal is to find a way to persuade men that their identity politics should be based on a feminist critique, which is no small task in this culture. One of the hurdles is to convince men that feminism is not crude "male-bashing." To some men, any feminist criticism will be perceived that way, and countering that image is difficult. But in six years of interaction with feminists, including a number of lesbian and radical feminists, I have never been bashed. I have been held accountable for my behavior, and I have been told when my presence in a group was not preferred. I have not always felt comfortable listening to feminist critiques, of men or of me, but I have never been attacked, harassed, or intimidated simply for being a man. Whatever criticism I have received has been offered, if not kindly, at least clearly without malice.

A commitment to feminism is plainly not the only avenue open to men. A man might recognize his various forms of privilege and decide to actively work to shore up that privilege by being, if not anti-feminist, at least non-feminist. This is the approach of the men's rights movement, which casts men as the victims of women's liberation movements and of men's lack of attention to their own needs. The men's movement is right in identifying the way in which some men are hurt by rigid gender norms, but this analysis often fails to distinguish between the suffering of those who, as a class, hold power and the oppression of those who don't. Many men are miserable in this culture, and that misery is sometimes tied to gender politics. Being miserable, however, is not the same as being oppressed (Frye 1983, 1). When men experience things that we could call oppression, they are tied to other systems of power, such as racism, class/wealth privilege, and heterosexism. None of these systems work wholly separately, but

men are not oppressed along a gender axis; men are not oppressed *as men* in contemporary U.S. culture (Clatterbaugh 1992). For example, men often point out that because they have been the only ones drafted into military service, they are oppressed (Farrell 1993, Chapter 5). This ignores the fact that certain men created and maintained a system in which only men are drafted and that men hold the vast majority of positions of power in the military. While it makes sense to talk about the way in which elite men tend to impose the duty of killing and dying disproportionately on poor or non-white men - to inject a class or race analysis - it is nonsensical to suggest that men are oppressed as men.

A less political path for men who want to obscure the real-life consequences of sexism for men and women is what is commonly called the mythopoetic wing of the men's movement, but which might more accurately be called a form of "masculinist nationalism ... a reconstellation of patriarchal rules and roles and an attempt to consolidate cockocratic power in response to challenges from the women's movement" (Caputi and MacKenzie 1992, 71-72). These men acknowledge the problems with traditional gender roles - "the images of adult manhood given by the popular culture are worn out; a man can no longer depend on them" (Bly 1990, ix) - and pay lip service to women's problems - how the"dark side of men" has resulted in the "devaluation and humiliation of women" (Bly 1990, x). The mythopoetic men's movement understands that traditional markers of masculinity - repression of emotion and vulnerability, a need to control and dominate - are destructive. But in its commitment to Bly's celebration of the "Wild Man" - to the idea that being a man is centrally about a power and strength that flows from an essential "deep" masculinity - the men's movement undercuts its own project. While some of these men believe that the solution to sexism lies in rescuing the concept of masculinity from crude machismo, my concern is that in a deeply entrenched patriarchal system, men's obsession with masculinity - no matter how it is reconceptualized - usually ends up reinforcing male power. Michael Kimmel (1992, 12) points out that this movement is the latest attempt by men in American culture, in response to women's movements, "to create islands of untainted masculinity" rather than examine critically the claim that there are essential characteristics of the masculine. Said another way by Bell Hooks (1992, 112), the emphasis of these men seems to be "more on the production of a kind of masculinity that can be safely expressed within patriarchal boundaries" than a critique of patriarchy.

The anti-patriarchal position which I take is rooted not only in feminist theory but in a growing body of literature by men who embrace the insights of feminist theorists and activists. In general, these men reject essentialist explanations for men's behavior and view masculinity and femininity as social

constructions (Kimmel 1987a, 13). The way in which societies value some characteristics and denigrate others, and define those characteristics as male or female, is not natural, biological, or inevitable. Men have the ability to resist negative definitions of masculinity and change behaviors, and to challenge the notion that a single definition of masculinity should exist. As Patrick Hopkins (1992, 128) puts it: "personally do not want to be a "real man," or even an "unreal man." I want to be unmanned altogether. I want to evaluate courses of behavior and desire open to me on their pragmatic consequences not on their appropriateness to my 'sex.' ... I want to betray gender."

Many of these pro-feminist writers also point out the uncertain and contradictory nature of masculinity. Kimmel (1987b, 237) suggests that the "compulsive masculinity" common in American life - marked by "violence, aggression, extreme competitiveness, a gnawing insecurity" - is "a masculinity that must always prove itself and that is always in doubt," hence the frantic drive by men to control their environments. Along with the privileges of male dominance come isolation, alienation, and pain (Kaufman 1993).

Masculinity itself is marked with hierarchies; young, effeminate, and gay men, for example, are subordinated by other men. Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1987) call the dominant definition of maleness "hegemonic masculinity." While most men don't live up to the macho-cowboy ideal of that definition, most men are responsible in some way for maintaining that hegemonic model and most men benefit from the institutionalization of men's dominance over women that comes with the model.

Echoing the theme of this paper, these writers suggest it is in men's interest to work toward a new definition of what it means to be a man, which requires a personal investment and commitment - acknowledging the "me in "me(n)," as Joseph Boone puts it (1990), and resisting the temptation to talk in abstractions instead of in one's own voice from one's own gendered body.

From here forward, I will defend the notion that feminism is a better route for men to come to terms with their own lives. This self-interest argument is not meant to obscure the more important argument about the oppressive nature of patriarchal values and structures, and the injustice of sexism. Numerous feminist works eloquently make the case for gender equality and against patriarchy on moral and political grounds (Frye 1983). My approach here stems from the observation that a justice argument does not always persuade people with power to give up some of that power. As Marilyn Frye put it in an informal seminar at the University of Minnesota in 1991, if you have your foot on someone's head, you shouldn't have to be told that it is right to take it off. If the oppressor can't

see that, she pointed out, it's difficult to convince him of it through an argument about justice.

TAKING FEMINISM SERIOUSLY

The deeper and more fundamental the critique of an unjust system, the more difficult it may be to persuade privileged people to be part of the dismantling of their privilege. In this sense, I think most men do "get it"; while they may profess confusion about what women want from them, they understand at some level the nature of the feminist critique and the things at stake. If taken seriously, feminism requires men to evaluate not only the politics of public patriarchy, but their conduct in private, especially in the bedroom. Men, understandably, are often reluctant to do that, precisely because they "get it" (in the sense of understanding) and want to keep "getting it" (in the sense of consuming women's sexuality).

However, a clear presentation of feminism that appeals to men's self-interest - while making it clear that the feminist movement is focused on women's lives and that feminists aren't obligated to take care of men - can be effective. Feminism can help us answer many of our questions, ease our pain, heal our wounds, and allow us to be decent people because it is not just about concern for "women's issues" and it is not just a theory of gender relations; feminism also is an explanation and critique of the domination/subordination dynamic that structures power relations in this society. Feminism provides an approach to society that allows women and men to better understand the world in which they live and to apply insights about gender to other struggles in life, both in the private and public spheres (beginning with the realization that the private/public dichotomys problematic). Two examples, based on common concerns in the men's movement, illustrate this. One is about what is often called "the father wound," and the other has to do with intimacy and sexuality.

Many contemporary men lived with fathers who were emotionally repressed, unable to nurture, absent, cruel, and physically and/or sexually abusive - father-as-terrorist. I have what I take to be a fairly typical experience here, a father who could not deal with his own emotions, could not control his anger, and generally was more trouble to me as a child than he was worth. My mother played out the passive/aggressive counterpart to her unfeeling and abusive husband, and had her own equally important role in my emotional problems as a child and young adult. That quick sketch obscures, of course, a complex network of relationships, and for my purposes here more detail about those

emotional problems is not crucial. My point is that some men take this kind of scenario and cast the father as victim, the son as victim, and the mother as, at best, an unimportant bystander or, at worst, as active agent in retarding the development of the son's male identity.

Feminism gives me a much different take on it. There was a power discrepancy in my house: My father had it, and my mother didn't. Because of that, my father's personal failings dictated the tone of our lives. My mother - shaped herself by similar abuses of power in her childhood, constrained by cultural expectations, and lacking certain kinds of social, political, economic, or physical power - slipped into a role that both exacerbated the problems caused by my father and created other problems. Gender politics structured those roles and relationships, and for many reasons neither my mother nor father had the resources to move beyond those constraints. Neither of them can be held accountable for the system into which they were born, but both are responsible for their behavior. The key difference, however, was that the power differential gave my father more choices. Some men in his position made better choices. Some women made better choices than my mother, as well, but it is important to remember that my mother acted in reaction to the power my father, and other men, had wielded.

This analysis is important because it allows me to see how the ways in which I suffered at the hands of my father and my mother were directly tied to the systematic, institutionalized, and unjust distribution of power in my family and in the culture. The root of the problem was the power my father could wield in a patriarchal family and culture. If my father were to analyze his family history, I believe he would come to similar conclusions about his parents; I don't want to ignore the ways in which my father suffered as a child and continues to suffer because of that. The father wound, for both him and me, is real, and the resolution of it is important. But feminist theory can help a man heal the father wound, and make clear not only his mother's involvement in the creation of wounds, but the nature of his mother's wounds.

My first example of the value of feminist theory to men - coping with problems with parents - suggests that men will benefit directly and immediately from a feminist critique. My second example, problems with intimacy and sex with women, is less optimistic for the short term. However, feminism, especially radical critiques of male sexuality, hold promise. The work of feminist critics (e.g., Dworkin 1988) argues that the central dynamic of sexuality in patriarchy is domination and subordination, sex as the exercise of power and a form of control. As Dworkin (1987, 63) writes: "The normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation;

colonializing, forceful (manly) or nearly violent; the sexual act that by its nature makes her his." That conception of sex is, I believe, deeply rooted in the bodies of the vast majority of contemporary men. Any effort to reconstruct a more healthy sexuality that is not overtly politicized - that is, does not foreground questions of the play of power along gender, sexual orientation, and race axes - will fail.

My experience has shown me that the task of untangling myself from the norms of patriarchal sex and rebuilding an egalitarian sexuality is extraordinarily difficult. In this sense, I acknowledge that trying to persuade men to accept a deep critique of patriarchal sex is complicated by my inability to articulate specific alternatives. In my life, I have gradually become more aware that the core sexual lessons I learned as a child and young man in this culture were about objectifying and consuming women and their sexuality. This is fundamentally about being trained in a way of seeing women, to view them first and foremost not as human beings but as collections of body parts to be evaluated for their sexual possibilities. That statement is hardly ground-breaking; feminists have been pointing this out for decades. What I want to contribute to the discussion is an admission that overcoming that training, learning a new way of seeing, is more difficult than most of us want to admit. Despite some intellectual and emotional progress, I feel as if my sexuality is still rooted in the same way of seeing. I have made progress, some of it occurring as I write this and some of it encouraging, but that progress also sometimes seems minor in face of the journey that lies ahead.

So, if I am correct about the nature of the work ahead, and if I can't pretend to promise men that such work can be accomplished easily, what stake do men have in changing? What if, a man might ask, my body and I can't find a way to feel comfortable about sex? My only answer is that if, while I struggle to expand my sense of the erotic and find new language to use (see Lorde 1984; Heyward 1989), I am forced to choose between patriarchal-sex and no-sex, no-sex is the better choice. Those are not the only alternatives, of course, and I would hope that such a choice would be only temporary, but in this struggle feminist theory sustains me. Once I understood even the barest outlines of feminism, I realized why I had always felt vaguely uncomfortable about sex, why my use of pornography and consumption of women's sexuality had always left me feeling empty. Long before I had read a word of feminist theory, that feeling was with me, and from talking with other men I know that I am not idiosyncratic in this. Feminist theory helped me understand that empty feeling: Sex based on domination over another feels bad to me. No matter how sensitive I was, no matter how much attention I paid to my partner's pleasure, there was no way for me to totally repress the understanding in my body that my sexuality was built

on the objectification and commodification of women and a need for control. Feminist theory did not create that feeling in me; feminist theory merely helped me understand it. Having a name and explanation for it didn't clear up the problem, just as ignoring the problem didn't make it go away. No matter how confusing and troubling it has been to sort through my sexual responses and life choices, I gladly choose that confusion and pain to the unnamed confusion and pain of a sexual life built on a need for power that is ultimately unsatisfying.

One purpose of this essay is to contribute to breaking down the silence among men on these issues. Michael Kimmel suggests that men face a "general confusion about how we experience our sexualities, a confusion that remains fixed in place because of our inability to talk frankly and openly with other men about our sexualities" (1990, 3). Confusion and fear are lessened, though not necessarily eliminated, by such open talk.

TAKING FEMINISM PERSONALLY

So, when I talk about male identity politics, I do not mean the politics of men identifying their gender privilege and protecting it through various overt and covert mechanisms. I am interested in how men can be aware of their gender privilege, question it, and act as a traitor to that male privilege. I suggest we do that not only because it is the ethically and politically responsible thing to do, but because it will help us make sense of our own lives, even if at times that makes life seem confusing, tentative, undefined, and frightening. The only things more confusing and frightening, I would argue, are an unreflective commitment to patriarchy and the various strategies to pretend that the multiple oppressions that patriarchy supports don't really exist.

This work requires a willingness to confront not only the workings of patriarchy in the abstract, but one's own life in the most particular. I have not always done that, even after I identified myself as being committed to feminism. I am not convinced that most pro-feminist men do that. I believe men sometimes ally themselves with feminist theory or causes as a cover; once on the "right side," they feel protected from scrutiny themselves. Explaining her unwillingness to let men call themselves "feminists," Cleage (1993, 28) argues that the label: "tends to lead to smugness, self-satisfaction and the feeling that the man who is struggling to overcome his own sexism and the sexism of his brothers has somehow achieved a more exalted status, a safe conduct pass that allows him to be a little less rigorous on himself, having demonstrated his good intentions.

Maintaining an intense level of self-scrutiny, preferably within a supportive and honest community, is crucial to successful pro-feminist engagement. While I may fall short at times, it must be a central goal. When we evade that task, we are more prone to fall into the trap Cleage describes. Again, a personal example is useful here. I have suggested that male sexual training focuses on a quest for domination and control over women, an approach to sex that John Stoltenberg (1989, 9) has accurately labeled "rapist ethics." The implication is that men in contemporary culture are trained to be rapists, which suggests that to not rape takes effort. If that is true, and I think it is, then the inescapable conclusion is that most men have raped or tried to rape. By that, I don't mean that most men are guilty of rape as it is legally defined, but rather that "normal" sexual activity has rape-like qualities (MacKinnon 1989, 146). To take such a claim seriously is disturbing, and requires an examination of one's sexual history, but such an examination offers the best chance for positive change for individuals and society. Let me recount part of my self- examination.

Have I ever raped or tried to rape a woman? For the first 30 years of my life, I would have said no, without qualification. For four years after that, I typically said that I thought I had never raped, but that a complete answer required the input of the women with whom I had been sexually active. Now, I tend to answer with a simple yes, but that "yes" requires explanation and context.

First, a specific case. As a young adult I dated for several months a woman whom I will call Sue here. As the relationship became more serious, I made it clear I thought sexual intercourse was appropriate. Sue was hesitant, but talked about it in a way that suggested she agreed that sex of that nature was to be expected. Through a variety of delaying tactics on her part, however, we never reached that point. On occasion, I pressured her on the subject, pushing the level of intimacy as far as I could. I took this lack of intercourse to be an indication of some serious flaw, either in the relationship or in her. For a variety of reasons, some related to sex and some not, Sue and I stopped seeing each other.

Were my sexual advances attempted rape? Legally they were not, but politically and morally, I think I can be said to have tried to rape her. One was my willingness to take a lack of a vocal objection - the lack of a clearly stated "no" - to be consent, rather than assuming that any sexual contact should begin with mutual consent that comes out of human connection and communication. When I pressed physical contact and she resisted in subtle and covert ways, I often chose not to acknowledge her resistance. I always stopped short of forced intercourse, but that doesn't change the rape-like nature of the interaction.

Complicating the case even more is the fact that at the time I knew her, Sue was working with a therapist to address a troubled family history. She talked to me in guarded ways about an abusive father and angry brothers. Looking back on those conversations through a feminist lens - paying attention to what she said and didn't say - I now think it likely that Sue was an incest survivor. While I have no way of knowing that for sure, what I have learned in the past five years about family dynamics, sexual abuse, and gender suggests to me that the abuse she lived through in her family was sexualized. Assuming that to be true, my actions with her are even more problematic because of the common effects of childhood abuse on adult sexuality. That is not meant to stereotype adult survivors of childhood abuse as passive individuals waiting to be revictimized, but to acknowledge the way in which childhood abuse complicates questions of desire and agency in adults. It is impossible for me to know how Sue felt about what I saw as "harmless" inquiries and "gentle" nudges, but I can judge my inability to understand her situation as a failure. I had a moral responsibility to listen and an epistemic responsibility (Code 1987) to understand her abusive history and how those experiences likely framed her view of sex and intimacy, or to ask for more information when I didn't understand. Instead, I ignored or minimized what she said, preferring to pursue my own sexual interests. As a man, not only did I have the power to ignore her needs and interests, but the sexual script I was trained to follow called for such behavior. The fact that I stopped short of a legal definition of rape doesn't absolve me from the level of sexual intrusion that I did commit. In Frye's terms (1983, 67), I looked at Sue with an "arrogant eye," organizing everything I saw with reference to myself and my interests. The arrogant male perceiver shapes women to fit his mold, and when Sue didn't fit, I saw it as something wrong with her. As Frye (1983, 70) reminds us, such perception is not only wrong, it is coercive, a fundamental kind of harm, "a maiming which impairs a person's ability to defend herself."

What is the value of this examination of my sexual history? If I believe that the patriarchal construction of sex as dominance is politically and morally wrong, then I have an obligation to apply that belief to my life. Evaluating my past is crucial to understanding where I stand today; understanding my past is part of understanding patriarchy. Such understanding creates the possibility not only of personal change but of expanding our knowledge as a society. What I have learned from this self-reflection, and from conversation with others about it, is that separating men into two groups, rapists and non-rapists, can divert us from the deeper critique (Funk 1993). Some men rape in violent and terrifying ways that society condemns and, on rare occasions, actually punishes. But many men have engaged in sexual acts in which their pleasure is connected to the objectification of women, the expression of power as sex, and the eroticization of dominance. One way to avoid confronting that critique is to reason that (1)

rape is something bad men do, so (2) if I raped, then I am one of the bad men, but (3) I know that I am not one of the bad men, so (4) I do not rape, and therefore (5) I do not have to critically evaluate my own sexual practices. Feminist critiques of sexuality make a compelling case that the first premise is simply false. When I began to take seriously that critique, I began to understand myself better.

I am not suggesting that I have completed this process of evaluating my life, or that the process ever ends; it is a lifetime commitment. I argue only that it is an integral part of a commitment to feminist theory and politics. This kind of engagement with my male identity has strengthened my understanding of the feminist critique. It has been, and continues to be, difficult and painful. But it also has allowed me to grow, intellectually and personally, by acknowledging feminist insights that theory and practice are not separate, that experience is an important element of theorizing, that the public-private distinction is false.

I could live as a man working in feminist theory in the academy and avoid evaluating my own life, always talking about "men" and "men's violence" and "patriarchy" as if I lived outside of those terms. I could, in a sense, float between genders, critiquing other men and not myself, but such an approach would be based on a lie. So, if a man accepts my argument that feminism can help him make sense of his life and starts down that path, it is crucial to "take it personally" and not back away from the application of feminist theory to his own life. To back away would guarantee that the abstract engagement with theory fails to spur personal development.

Conclusion

Some men, and women, may object that my argument overgeneralizes about men's experience, especially men's sexual experiences. Men have told me that they do not believe they were taught rapist ethics, or that they had moved beyond crude locker-room machismo. Others have told me they do not have the problems with intimacy and emotion that I have referred to. I can accept these observations and still argue for the importance of my generalizations. First, no man in mainstream contemporary U.S. culture escapes sexist training. Sexism is institutionalized; sexist behaviors and values are widely seen as normal or natural and continue unless there is active intervention to counter them. If that is true, then men have an obligation to explore the ways in which that sexist training may have taken root in their bodies. And even if a man could completely erase any trace of sexism from his life, the culture continues to offer a kind of

"default" identity. In the absence of an open refutation of traditional masculinity, the culture gives men an identity that assumes male dominance. With that default identity come privileges that one cannot always refuse to accept; they are part of being male in this culture.

I do not want to appear self-denigrating or falsely humble with this analysis. In arguing that men should acknowledge the way in which their identity is tied to patriarchy, I do not want to suggest that men cannot change, that all men are equally culpable, or that I do not realize the ways in which I have successfully combated my patriarchal training. I believe that I am a better human being than I was a decade ago, with far fewer instances in which I fail to live up to feminist ideals. I believe that I do better in this area than the majority of men in this country. I try to acknowledge my successes as well as my failures. However, I know that none of that would be possible if I had not engaged, and continue to engage, in the male identity politics that I suggest here: intense self-evaluation, with help and feedback from like-minded people.

My goal has been to write a personal but not depoliticized essay. The primary goal of a feminist-based male identity politics is not just improving men's lives, but changing structures of power to end the oppression of women and children, as well as aid resistance to other forms of oppression in the culture. As I have suggested, while the answer to men's questions and quandaries about gender politics can be found in feminist theory, the answers are not easy, just as they are not easy for women. As Connell (1987, 282) puts it: "Breaking down the gender system means, to some extent, tearing down what is most constitutive of one's own emotions, and occupying strange and ill-explained places in social space."

It is not easy to occupy that strange space, and I realize that my argument may not persuade many men. What I have written has little power unless the man reading it feels in his body and heart some of what I have talked about. It is an argument that fails if it works only at the intellectual level, which is both its strength and weakness. By bringing my own life into this essay, I hope that men who read it will be encouraged to engage feminism. I also hope that those who do will continue the conversation, so that the gaps in my understanding - both emotional and intellectual - might be filled.

Notes: A version of this paper was presented to the *"Interdisciplinary and Identity"* women's studies conference at the Univerrsity of Delaware, Newark, on April 15, 1994.

References

Bly, Robert. 1990. *Iron John.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Boone, Joseph A. 1990. "Of Me(n) and Feminism: Who(se) Is the Sex That Writes?" In Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (pp. 11-25). New York: Routledge.

Caputi, Jane, and Gordene O. MacKenzie. 1992. "Pumping Iron John." In Kay Leigh Hagan, ed., *Women Respond to the Men's Movement* (pp. 69-81). San Francisco: Pandora/HaperCollins.

Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee. 1987. "Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity." In Michael Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy* (pp. 139-192). Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Clatterbaugh, Kenneth. 1992. "The Oppression Debate in Sexual Politics." In Larry May and Robert A. Strikwerda, eds., *Rethinking Masculinity* (pp. 169-190). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Cleage, Pearl. 1993. *Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot.* New York: Ballantine.

Code, Lorraine. 1987. *Epistemic Responsibility.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Connell, R.W. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Dworkin, Andrea. 1988. *Letters from a War Zone: Writings 1976- 1987.* London: Secker & Warburg.

Dworkin, Andrea. 1987. *Intercourse.* New York: Free Press.

Farrell, Warren. 1993. *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality.* Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

Funk, Rus Ervin. 1993. *Stopping Rape: A Challenge for Men.* Philadelphia: New Society.

Hagan, Kay Leigh, ed. 1992. *Women Respond to the Men's Movement.* San Francisco: Pandora/HaperCollins.

Heyward, Carter. 1989. *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God.* San Francisco: Harper & Row.

hooks, bell. 1992. "Men in Feminist Struggle - The Necessary Movement." In Kay Leigh Hagan, ed., *Women Respond to the Men's Movement* (pp. 111-117). San Francisco: Pandora/HaperCollins.

Hopkins, Patrick D. 1992. "Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities." In Larry May and Robert A. Strikwerda, eds., *Rethinking Masculinity* (pp. 111-131). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kaufman, Michael. 1993. *Cracking the Armour: Power, Pain and the Lives of Men.* Toronto: Viking/Penguin.

Kimmel, Michael S. 1992. "Introduction." In Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller, eds., *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States,* 1776-1990 (pp. 1-51). Boston: Beacon.

Kimmel, Michael S. 1990. "Introduction: Guilty Pleasures- Pornography in Men's Lives." In Kimmel, ed., *Men Confront Pornography* (pp. 1-22). New York: Crown.

Kimmel, Michael S. 1987a. *"Rethinking 'Masculinity': New Directions in Research."* In Kimmel, ed., *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity.* (pp. 9-24). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kimmel, Michael S. 1987b. "The Cult of Masculinity: American Social Character and the Legacy of the Cowboy." In Michael Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy* (pp. 235-249). Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Lerner, Gerda. 1986. *The Creation of Patriarchy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sister Outsider* (pp. 53-59). Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1989. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

May, Larry, and Robert Strikwerda. 1994. "Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape." *Hypatia* 9(2): 134-151.

Stoltenberg, John. 1993. *The End of Manhood.* New York: Dutton.

Stoltenberg, John. 1989. *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice.* Portland: Breitenbush Books.