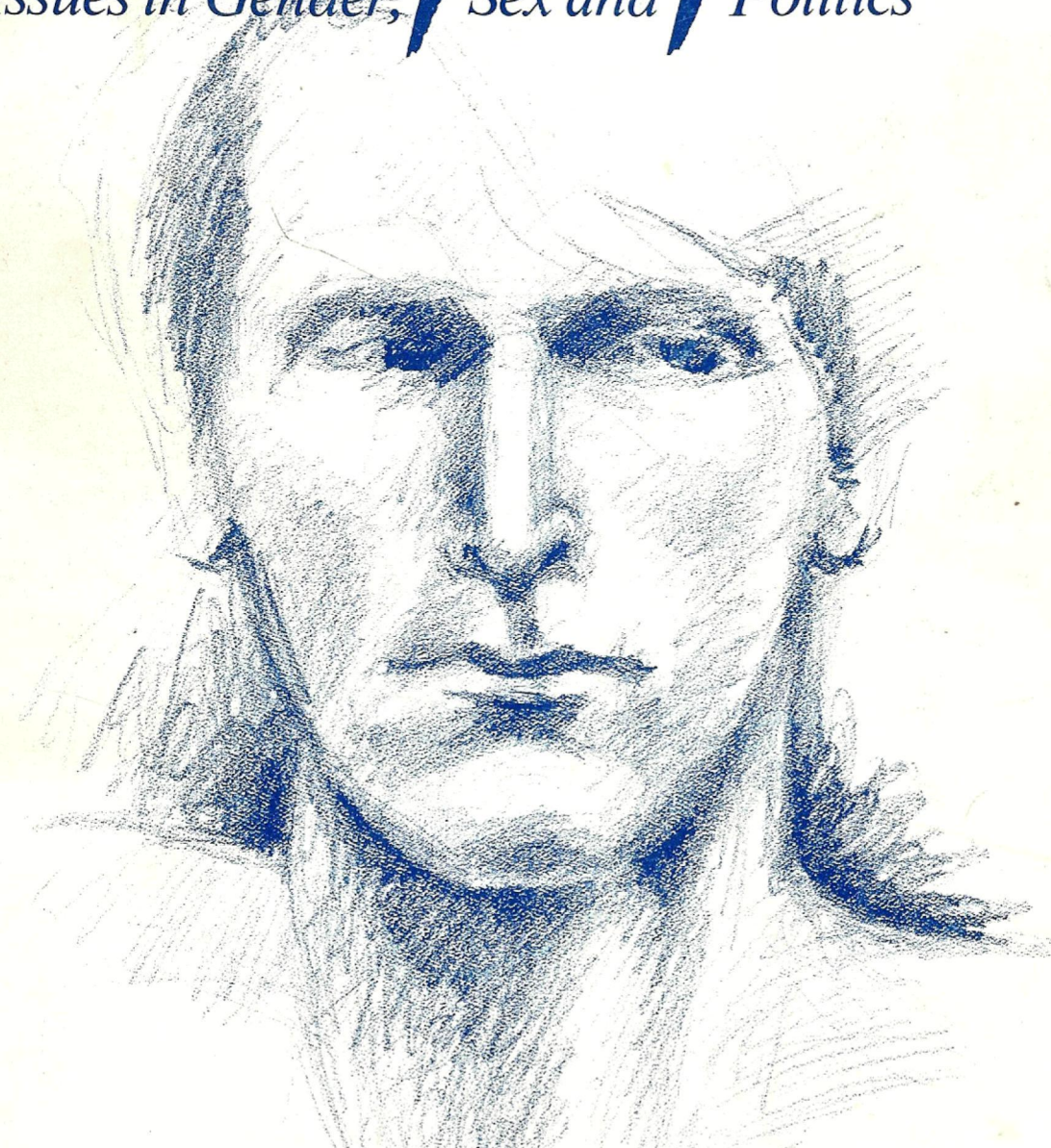


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Changing Men

Issues in Gender, Sex and Politics



Abortion and Male Sexuality • Wild Men and Warriors
Gays and Pornography • Male Rape
Bisexual Marriages • AIDS in the Workplace

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FEATURES

His Sexuality, Her Reproductive
Rights

by Richard Newman

2

A Soft and Gentle Paw

by Patrikiya deWicce

5

Just Friends

by Andy Plumb

6

Of Wild Men and Warriors

by Christopher X. Burant

7

You Can't Fight Homophobia and
Protect the Pornographers

at the Same Time

by John Stoltenberg

11

Married and Gay

by David R. Matteson

14

In Living Color

by J. Cheyenne

17

Male Rape: The Hidden Crime

by Jim Senter

20

March on Washington for Lesbian
and Gay Rights

24

AIDS in the Workplace

by Shaun Knox

26

The NAMES Project

29

DEPARTMENTS

LETTERS

compiled by Timm Peterson

SPORTS-MEN

AIDS, Homophobia and
Sports

compiled by Michael Kimmel..30

BEFORE US

The Iroquois Confederacy:
A Native American Model for
Non-Sexist Men

by Sally Roesch Wagner32

MEN AND WAR

Why Men (Don't) Love War

by Tony Switzer34

INTERNATIONAL

Slave Trafficking of Women

by John Goetz36

BOOK REVIEWS

compiled by Michael Kimmel..38

NOCM NEWS

compiled by Randy Hilfman...43

POETRY

compiled by Daniel Garrett

..... 10, 22, 23, 48

Notes on the Poets47

Cover illustration
by Dickey Lee Stafford

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His Sexuality, Her Reproductive Rights

By Richard Newman © 1987

Your lover on the phone is very excited.

"Congratulations!" she says. "You're going to be a father! I just got back from the doctor and she tells me I'm pregnant. Isn't that great?" Your heart sinks. You want to scream, "What do you mean, 'Isn't that great?'" You want to tell her to have an abortion.

Or she calls and her voice is slow over the phone, and she has a hard time getting the words out. Finally, she tells you, "I'm pregnant." "Why so glum?" you ask elatedly. "That's wonderful!" She replies, "I want an abortion."

Or she calls and tells you she's already had an abortion. She says she feels guilty for not telling you first but she was afraid. You hang up screaming "Murderer!" into the phone.

Or she tells you she's pregnant and doesn't know what to do. Neither do you. This is the first time the subject has come up.

Abortion: Whose Rights?

These scenarios, each perfectly understandable in its own context, raise questions about the rights of both men and women in relation to the fetuses we create together. Can a man claim a fetus as half his? Can he say that if his lover aborts it against his will, she violates his bodily and reproductive rights? Or can he claim that if he does not want to have a child, she has no right to carry the pregnancy to term? On the other hand, can the woman claim that, since *she* carries the fetus and his body is no longer involved, the man's claims are irrelevant?

An important difference separates these two sets of claims. The man's claim assumes power over the body of the woman. Although his active par-

ticipation in the reproductive process is finished, he believes that his feelings about having children are enough to keep the woman from doing what she wants with her body. The woman's claim, however, involves no such power over the man. She merely states that since the sex act is over, he has no bodily and/or reproductive rights to exercise. She refuses to acknowledge his claim to power over her, and instead asserts her right to her own autonomy.

Women's liberation concerns precisely this right of women to their own independence without regard for patriarchal ideas of who, what or how women should be. Women's liberation, in other words, concerns woman-centeredness, or "gynocentrism." In the situations described above, the woman's claim concerning her right to abortion is based on a woman-centered sexuality in which her relationship to her own body is more important than her relationship to the man. The man's claims grow out of an hierarchical sexuality in which the woman's body—because of her relationship to him—becomes an object over which he has control. Her body becomes a part of him the way anything we acquire becomes in some way a part of ourselves.

If we men want to redefine the nature of our reproductive and sexual relationships with women, we must look, not to the women, but to other men. From men comes the possibility of a male-centered, male-defined heterosexuality in which our relationships to ourselves and each other become primary. Developing these relationships should command our attention with some urgency because any hopes we have of real and complete male liberation depend on our ability to live our lives without recourse to the possession/oppression of a subservient other—the role into

which we coerce the women of our culture.

The politics of abortion seem to me a good place to start defining this male-centered sexuality. This is because the issues concerning women's reproductive choice and men's role in the reproductive process ultimately involve understanding the boundaries between male and female sexualities.

Relinquishing Male Privileges

We can begin with what is probably a radical assumption in our culture, an assumption that we shouldn't have to mention at all: that women are fully adult human beings, fully capable of making responsible life decisions. They do this not only within the context of the female community but also, along with fully adult and fully capable men, within the context of the human species. Second, we can recognize a simple biological fact: men do not get pregnant. Because the physical processes of pregnancy, abortion and childbirth are experienced only by women, it is only common sense that the final decision to experience either childbirth or abortion should rest with no one but a pregnant woman. (Just imagine how unreasonable it would be if women decided when and whether men should undergo vasectomy operations.) I accept this right of women to reproductive choice as a fact inaccessible to argument; it simply is, and demands nothing more of me and other men than our full awareness and acknowledgement of this right. To the extent that we lack this awareness, or that we fail in our acknowledgement, we can not enter fully into egalitarian relationships with women.

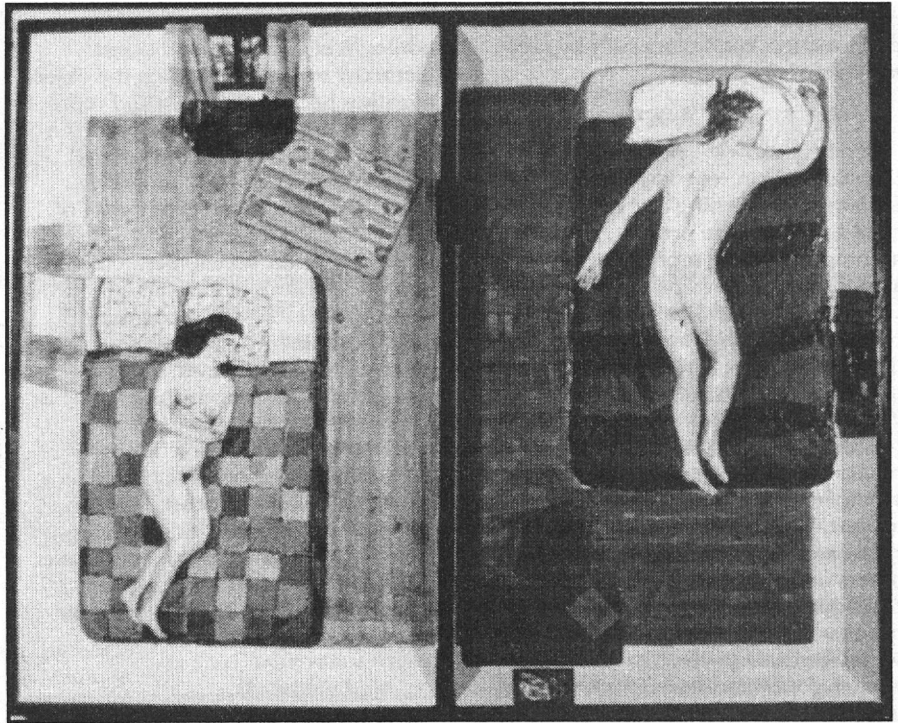
Probably most men would agree with a woman's "right to choose," but I wonder how many of us understand fully the implications of what we are agreeing to.

The politics of abortion is a good place to start defining a male-centered sexuality.

The politics of reproduction in our culture are such that women have functioned primarily as baby machines without their having much, if any, control over when or whether this function should be performed. Even today, despite the relative availability of birth control, many women—for religious, economic, social or family reasons—have children they can't afford, don't want or shouldn't have all because "that's what women do." The patriarchal institution of monogamous marriage has "privileged" the reproductive aspect of female sexuality by essentially enslaving women to the "duty" of having a family. We have created the notion that a woman without a husband and children lives, by definition, an unfulfilled life. In effect, women acquire fulfillment in a patriarchal culture by prostituting themselves, offering their bodies as sexual and reproductive machines serving the needs of men.

Such a hierarchical relationship between ourselves and women has deep implications for how men perceive our sexuality and our role in reproduction. By presuming to insist that women's sexual biology exists to serve male needs, we have, in essence, confined our reproductive role to one of control. We also have made it virtually impossible, for both men and women, to separate erotic sex from reproductive sex.

In an essay entitled "Erotica and Pornography," Gloria Steinem observed that human beings are the only animals who engage in erotic sex, in sex as "a way of bonding, of giving and receiving pleasure, bridging differentness, discovering sameness, and communicating emotion"(1). She also makes the point that the yoking together of erotic sexuality and reproduction, and the insistence that the breaking of this yoke is somehow obscene and pornographic, con-



"Bedroom Diptych," mixed-media, 36"x42", Julie Feferman 1982

stitutes a major strategy by which men use religious and political institutions to intimidate women into resisting women's liberation. If a woman, having conceived, can decide without recourse to any authority but herself whether or not to carry her pregnancy to term, she is a woman free to determine the who, what, when, where, why and how of her own sexuality. Her sexuality, then, becomes a part of her whole identity, and she can, at her will, explore whatever other parts of herself she chooses. Her life becomes woman-centered and the patriarchal power of the male collapses.

When the courts of this country granted women the right to abortion, women gained a sexual freedom previously lacking in their lives. However, in our male-dominated society, what the King can grant the King can also take away. Presuming to grant women a right which is intrinsically theirs merely reinforces the same old attitudes about female sexuality. Even though male-permitted abortion-on-demand allows women, married or not, a necessary option to unwanted pregnancy, it also gives men one more possible reason to insist that women make themselves sexually available to us. Further, if we don't like how they use this "privilege" we have "granted" them, we can take it away. For example, anti-abortionists use this strategy when they point to the rise in the number of teen-age abortions as a reason to make abortion against the

law. The fact that the right to abortion can be challenged in court and its availability restricted by law indicates how little of our actual privilege men have relinquished.

Women's right to reproductive choice—if we men understand it fully—not only allows women freedom of sexual expression, both reproductive and erotic, it also leaves men with a minor biological role in the reproductive process. Full reproductive choice for women means they regain the control we previously enjoyed. If a woman, simply by having an abortion, can thwart a man's desire to have children, he loses a great deal of what men traditionally invest in having children to begin with.

Currently, male control of conception and childbirth functions to reinforce heterosexual notions of virility, self-worth and masculinity. Part of the traditional significance for men in the birth of a child is not only that we perpetuate ourselves, but that we *cause* it to happen. Take, for instance, the notion of "fathering" a son to carry on the family name, tradition or business. Also, it was common to blame the lack of a male child in the family on the wife's inability to produce one—as if her interference botched what the husband could, almost by himself, do all along. If women possess complete control over their reproductive biology—which unrestricted abortion on demand provides them—we men may perpetuate ourselves through the birth

of a male or female child, but that self-perpetuation takes place only by *permission* of the mother.

Male-Centered Heterosexuality

Merely acknowledging the reality of the male role in reproduction and thereby relinquishing our perceived right to control the process, however, accomplishes little more than an inversion of the present situation. The injustice of men controlling the biology of reproduction will find no remedy in the injustice of women's control over our emotional investment in having children.

I think we men need to redefine our relationship to reproduction, both symbolically and physically. We need to find a way of being sexual and reproductive that neither exploits others nor puts our sexual and reproductive fulfillment at the mercy of someone else's freedom of choice. We need to put ourselves—not the women (or other men) with whom we make love—at the center of our sexuality. Then we can begin to learn truly who we are as loving and vulnerable human beings.

To the degree that the primary power relationship in patriarchal society is between men and women, gay men, by virtue of their sexual choices, do not participate in one aspect of that relationship: they do not require/ask for the specifically sexual surrender of women. I do *not* mean that gay men, because they are gay, are not sexist. I do not mean that by definition relationships among gay men will not duplicate the sexual hierarchy of the dominant culture. Nor do I mean that the gay male community, simply by existing, subverts the connections between sexism and heterosexism. I *do* mean that relationships between gay men take place in a community which is defined by men in terms of men. Heterosexual men can begin to develop from this aspect of the gay male community a political/physical male-centered sexuality for ourselves that is analogous to the women-centered sexuality I discussed above. Because a male-centered sexuality asserts the primacy of our relationships with ourselves and other men, it will subvert the hierarchy of a heterosexuality organized around our possession and control of women.

Probably the most common and easily identifiable aspect of sexist culture is the physical/sexual objectification of women by men. Such objectification is, however, an aspect of any sexual relationship. It is reasonable that bed

partners like each other's bodies as bodies. A sexually defined power hierarchy reveals itself when the objectification becomes chronic and represents the entire relationship, or even just the entire sexual aspect of the relationship.

Of course, sexual objectification of men by men does not in and of itself avoid or subvert sexual hierarchies. A homosexual couple may fall quite conventionally into easily recognizable male ("dominant") and female ("submissive") roles. However, if it is the "idea" of the female which determines the hierarchical structure of the relationship, it is possible for each man to recognize himself, if only on a physical level, in the other. Since a chronic hierarchy can only be maintained by the denial of the basic sameness between the two lovers, such recognition will work to subvert the hierarchy.

***Male
heterosexual responsibility should begin with the realization that once we fertilize the egg—unless we have agreed beforehand with our partner on the consequences—what happens thereafter is beyond our control.***

Recognizing aspects of oneself in another human being and accepting that basic sameness as positive requires a certain amount of self-acceptance, of self-love. A male-centered sexuality will depend upon our claiming the primacy of our relationships with ourselves and other men. I can only love the man in other men if I love the man in me *as a man*. If this self-love becomes the basis for my life decisions, then my art, my science, politics, religion—everything I do, including my sexual activity, becomes an expression of my love for myself. My homo/autoeroticism gives my life its power, and I do not need to depend on someone else's surrender, male or

female, to tell me who and what I am. A community in which the primary motivating principle of human action is self-love would honor non-hierarchical social arrangements. The integrity of its communal structure would depend on a constant awareness of, and fidelity to, the basic sameness of each of its members.

Heterosexual Responsibility Redefined

Currently, male heterosexual responsibility usually consists of something like "don't get her pregnant unless you're ready to accept the consequences" (i.e., marry her, pay for the abortion). But women either get pregnant or they don't, *and we need to know what we're about if we take the chance that they might*. The basic assumptions are still the same. Since women exist as objects to fulfill male sexual and reproductive needs, traditional male heterosexual responsibility requires that, if we choose to use them, we maintain them properly.

Real male heterosexual responsibility requires that we be aware of and responsible for the consequences *for ourselves* of our own sexual activity, not the use to which we put women-as-objects. How many of us, for instance, can honestly say that before we became sexually involved with a woman we found out whether we agreed on what would happen if she got pregnant—and then, *based on that discussion, decided the extent to which we were willing to become physically involved with her*. I suggest this discussion as the very point at which male heterosexual responsibility starts.

That the physical facts of abortion and childbirth take place within an exclusively female community does not prevent men from having feelings and opinions about those facts. Nor should it prevent us from taking responsibility for what we think and feel. For instance, if a man who believes abortion is murder finds himself involved with a woman who explicitly says she will have an abortion should she become pregnant, that man has a responsibility to himself to avoid *completely* the possibility of her becoming pregnant.

Since he cannot question her right to an abortion, the moral dilemma if she gets pregnant is his, not hers. If she has an abortion because of his sexual involvement with her, he—according to his own ethic—implicates himself in a murder. Since he cannot hold the woman accountable for any beliefs but her own, the responsibility to say "no"

continued on p.47

Male Sexuality

continued from p.4

is his. The same reasoning would apply to a man who does not want to have a child and a woman who does not believe in abortion.

Male heterosexual responsibility should begin with the realization that once we fertilize the egg—unless we have agreed beforehand with our partner on the consequences—what happens thereafter is beyond our control. We need to start with what we can control: the extent and nature of our heterosexual relationships.

For heterosexual men, the idea that we can and must control only our own participation in our sexual relationships has many implications. It implies a new way of thinking about ourselves that is in direct opposition to the general stereotype of men as people whose sexual responsibility hangs

from our penises by a thread which breaks when we get hard.

It means we can tell a woman, "No, I don't want to fuck," out of fidelity to our own beliefs about abortion or our desire not to have children—not simply to avoid the fertilization of an egg.

It means that our choice of sexual partners and the character of our sexual relationships will be determined by our sexual biology (not a comfortable situation for anyone). One possible result is that men will discover a renewed interest in developing—for ourselves as well as our partners—truly safe and effective contraceptives, thereby rendering obsolete the question of abortion.

It means we can assert and explore the fullness of our own erotic selves by insisting that oral, anal and manual sex—or even non-genital intimacy such as massage—are not mere substitutes for or preludes to sexual intercourse. Rather, they are perfectly valid erotic acts in and of themselves.

Finally, it means that men will learn how true erotic fulfillment comes from within ourselves, as a result of understanding who we are, and not from

controlling who does what to whom and how often.

Richard Newman is a poet working as an adjunct writing teacher at the New York Institute of Technology, Old Westbury, Long Island, NY.

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Notes on the Poets

Hugh Brownlie is employed as production manager for a typographical company. He lives with his wife, Joanne, and Rockit, the Skye Terrier, in Toronto.

Jerah Chadwick lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, and is the author of *The Dream Horse* and *Absence Wild: Aleutian Poems*.

Li Min Hua (a.k.a. Brother Thorn-in-the-Flesh, Louie Crew, and others) has published over 550 items. His new chapbook, *Midnight Lessons*, has been released by Samisdat. He has just ended 4 years of exile in Asia.

Bradford Evans is a poet and therapist who lives in Washington, D.C. He has recent and upcoming work in the *Mid-American Review*, *Fine Madness*, the *Laurel Review* and other literary magazines.

Stuart Frieberth directs the writing program at Oberlin. He has published 10 books of poems (among them *Dreaming of Floods*, *Up in Bed* and *Uncertain Health*) and 4 volumes of translations.

Daniel Garrett is a young, black male writer whose work has appeared in regional publications. He has studied with Addison Gayle, D.H. Melham and Grace Schulman.

Tom Koontz is the editor-in-chief of the Barnwood Press and poetry magazine. Some of his poems have been collected in the chapbooks *To begin with* and *Charms*.

Clive Matson has published 6 books of poems. *Green Heart* is in progress, on coming into manhood. "Sailing (a true story)" was previously published by *Poetalk/Poemphlet*, *Veljeysviesti* and appears in *Shaved at Dawn* by Clive Matson and John Oliver Simon (Neon Sun/Aldabaran Review).

David Means recently received his M.F.A. in creative writing from Columbia University and is an editorial assistant at William Morrow publishers. He is married and lives in Manhattan.

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