Is the Queen Dead? Effeminacy, Homosociality and the Post-Homophobic Queer

Stephen Maddison

Alan Sinfield has suggested that 'effeminacy has over manliness the advantage of being a central gay cultural tradition which we may proudly assert'.[1] If gay effeminacy has been historically complex, potentially tying us to deferential class identifications, to pathologising medical discourses, to lingering intimations of self-loathing, and to restrictively safe and de-sexed images of our acceptability, it is also the case, as Sinfield acknowledges, that effeminacy has afforded an extraordinary range of dissident opportunities to gay cultures.

Gay culture has historically manifested the abundant faultlines in the prevailing accounts of sexuality and gender inherited from medical, political and social commentary, from the birth of sexology onwards. In the late 1980s, Joseph Bristow suggested that 'gay men are out to show that we are not "pansies", "poofs", "faggots", "queers" – all those feminizing and, implicitly misogynistic insults first heard at school and which remain with us for the rest of our lives'.[2] In 1983 Richard Dyer noted that the effeminate queen and the butch dyke have been associated with 'failing' to be 'real women or men' and 'are thus often seen as tragic, pathetic, wretched, despicable, comic or ridiculous figures'.[3] Yet elsewhere Dyer has noted that as a young gay man attempting to forge an identity he was positively drawn to culture and the arts because of its associations with sensitivity and femininity: 'being queer was not being a man'.[4] Earlier still, in 1976, Dyer had suggested that 'camping about is not butch...camp is a way of being human, witty and vital...without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role'.[5] Again, however, he registers the ambiguity of effeminacy, noting

that 'one of the sadder features of the gay movement is the down so many activists have on queens and camp – on the only heritage we've got'.[6] Eric Anderson has suggested that 'camp culture...served to show heterosexuals that we...were not afraid of them'.[7] Controversy surrounding the Austrian winner of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest, Conchita Wurst, would indicate that camp culture remains challenging. Wurst's win became an international political event, simultaneously hailed as a 'victory... for tolerance and respect'[8] and as a 'freak show'[9] that signaled 'the end of Europe'[10]. Wurst, aka Tom Neuwirth, has been described as an 'emphatically ... gay male performer rather than being trans' whose 'look is perhaps Eurovision's most genderqueer yet: ... a drag queen with a beard...this is not the comedy butch bloke in a frock look but something altogether more striking (and apparently hard for many people to compute)'.[11]

These accounts of the tribulations of effeminacy indicate some of the ways in which contemporary gay identities have struggled to reconcile same sex passion with gender roles, identifications and structures.[12] They indicate the vexed history of a concept that has been seen as emblematically oppressive and self-hating, and indicative of gay men's troubled relationship with women and feminism. Effeminacy is politically significant and life affirming as a resistance of gender expectations – a bulwark against drab gender conformity, yet self-hating and misogynistic. Effeminacy is historically and culturally vital ('the only heritage we've got') yet inherently a symbol of failure. But what of effeminacy today? If effeminacy has historically posed a series of political and cultural dilemmas for gay men, does it continue to do so? Does the effeminate queen remain a central or significant part of gay culture?

In this essay I aim to situate effeminacy culturally and historically in order to attempt to locate some of its political effects. I will be drawing on two key works in

queer theory in order to do this: firstly, Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* and secondly Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men*. Sinfield's work allows us to isolate the cultural moment in which the ideas of effeminacy and male same-sex desire became conflated, and Sedgwick's allows us to understand the leverage exerted by this conflation upon the field of masculinity. Insights drawn from both will then be used to critique work by Eric Anderson on new patterns of 'inclusive' masculinity which apparently evidence an emerging post-homophobic environment; I suggest that such environments merely work to underwrite the ubiquity of masculinity as both a site of desire and of aspirational identification for gay culture. Finally, I aim to consider the idea of effeminacy in the context of neoliberal capital and the enterprise culture in order to consider whether gender dissent, 'refusing to be a man', can offer gay culture a way out of the impasse of identity politics, and a way of imagining resistance to neoliberal biopolitics, which despite offering affluent gays consumer entitlements, continues to underwrite structural inequality. If the contemporary historical conjuncture is characterised by both an increasing public tolerance of diversity, and a decline in the social and welfare obligations of the state,[13] the legal equality of gays in advanced neoliberal democracies can almost be taken for granted. Whilst some gay liberation ideology was characterised by social radicalism, the current privileges afforded to gays are largely a function of consumer freedoms and the competitive individualization propagated by neoliberal ideology.[14] In this context, Lois McNay has suggested that 'individual autonomy becomes not the opposite of, or limit to, neoliberal governance, rather it lies at the heart of its disciplinary control'.[15]

Effeminacy and *The Wilde Century*

Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* offers a key contribution to the literature on the question of effeminacy. Published in 1994, at the high water mark of optimism of the emerging discipline of queer theory, and drawing on a legacy of radical literary work in cultural materialism, Sinfield's highly influential account benefits from both a long historical view and a sense of urgency informed by the flowering confidence of lesbian and gay intellectual work in a post-AIDS environment. Sinfield traces the history of the association of effeminacy with male same-sex passion, his starting point being the acknowledgement of a series of serious discontinuities between accounts of same-sex intimacy, and accounts of effeminacy, that lead him to suggest that it was only through the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 that a clear association between the two became instated. Even up to the point of Oscar Wilde's literary and cultural notoriety, the equation of effeminacy with same-sex passion was not fixed: Sinfield suggests that 'effeminacy was still flexible, with the potential to refute homosexuality, as well as to imply it'.[16] It was in the midst of a set of moral panics about manliness and sexual propriety that the Wilde trials took place, and 'as a consequence, the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisured idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image'.[17] This intelligibility of the queer subject, sexualised and recognisable in appearance and manner, operates as a 'Wilde-shaped silence'; famously Maurice in Forster's novel fears becoming 'an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort'.[18]

What are the key problems associated with the effeminate homosexual as he emerges from the Early Modern period onwards, through Mollies and leisured dandies, finally to become emblematically identifiable in the figure of Wilde? Firstly, from the point of view of that effeminate homosexual himself, Sinfield suggests that 'the

effeminate model of queerness', as manifested in the late twentieth century archetype of Quentin Crisp, 'was precisely self-defeating'.[19] Tracking an inversionist notion of same-sex desire, the effeminate homosexual, bearing the soul of a woman trapped in his man's (if not manly) body, desires a 'real' man, but a 'real' man doesn't go with other men, and thus reciprocal homosexual desire is impossible. The legacy of inversionist accounts continues to constitute patterns not only of desire in contemporary gay culture, but of identification too. We might see the fixation of gay porn and gay sexual cultures (erotic fiction, Tumblr, personal ads, magazines, calendars, fashion and fetish wear, and so on) with a highly masculinised, putatively heterosexual figure, as at best a hegemonic and ubiquitous aspirational ideal, and at worst a hysterically overdetermined counter-identification with contemporary genderqueer notions and historical third sex accounts of queer male identity.

Secondly, the concept of the effeminate homosexual rests on a medical model of homosexuality which, according to Sinfield, locks in place a 'cross-sex grid' that designates masculine and feminine traits attached to men and women respectively, locking in place expectations associated with sexual activity and passivity, and social and cultural agency.[20] Sinfield is clearly right in problematizing the naturalizing effect of such binary structures, yet his critique is itself weakened by a residual investment in the homo/hetero binary: 'feminine and masculine are cultural constructs, obviously with the primary function of sustaining the current pattern of heterosexual relations'.[21] How far would we agree that this *is* the primary function of femininity and masculinity? Do gender roles police sexuality and a specific form of heterosexuality, as Sinfield seems to be suggesting here, or does sexuality police gender in order to protect men's interests? Gender may signify through highly over-determined, eroticised and commodified performances and aesthetic codes, but what it signifies is a structurally unequal

distribution of social, cultural and political power. The issue in considering gay gender

dissent is the extent to which our practices of gender reinforce or trouble this

distribution of power. If we collapse notions of gay identity and culture back into desire

and sexuality, without a political engagement with gender, we obscure the extent to

which those desires potentially underwrite the signifying practices and structural

conditions not only of homophobia but of a patriarchy that has become stronger, not

weaker, in the era of neoliberal ideology and the metrosexual.[22] I will return to this

problematic in relation to the question of homosociality, presently.

Thirdly, there is the legacy of biologism in relation to what Sinfield refers to as

the question of 'who we are'.[23] Sinfield suggests that 'our terms – "gay", "lesbian",

"lesbian and gay"... are markers of political allegiance, far more than ways of having or

thinking about sex'.[24] Anxieties about macho and effeminate formations articulate the

difficulty 'we' gay men have in finding conducive modes of identity in hostile

conditions, and reactions to this difficulty tend to seesaw between poles of Sinfield's

cross-sex grid. In this context, 'dumping effeminacy because it has been stigmatised

hardly seems heroic', and indeed, 'macho-man has a good deal in common with the

effeminate, Wildean tradition – not surprisingly, since he is premised on a comparable

acceptance of the masculine/feminine binary structure'.[25] Sinfield suggests that

'effeminacy is founded in misogyny...The function of effeminacy as a concept, is to

police sexual categories, keeping them pure. The effects of such policing extend vastly

beyond lesbians and gay men'.[26] However, this rehearses a problem that the schematic

offered in *The Wilde Century* can't resolve; the cross-sex grid is indeed restrictive and

oppressive in a range of ways, but its ideological and material force is not primarily

concerned with inscribing multitudinous queer identities as deviant, pathological or

socially unacceptable. As we shall see below, Sedgwick has suggested that homophobia

is merely a secondary effect of the larger project of maintaining an 'exchange-of-women framework'.[27] The 'terrorist potential' of 'blackmailability' arising from subjecting all men to a homosexual 'panic' arises from their inability to determine whether their bonds with other men are homosexual.[28] In this context, 'dumping effeminacy' not only lacks heroism but actually colludes with, and reinforces, gender inequality and the homophobia it inscribes. If we are to find a dissident negotiation of gender, then we need to address ourselves to the effects of the policing of sexual categories Sinfield alludes to above, a project which is beyond the scope of *The Wilde Century.*

As a rejoinder to the difficulties associated with negotiating the Wildean model, Sinfield asserts the importance of gay subculture, and offers a critique of the idea of working for mainstream acceptance: 'this is self-oppressed...the centre takes what it wants, and under pressure will abuse and abandon the subcultures it has plundered'.[29] What is the political objective here? And how is it to be assessed? The move to abandon a desire to be tolerable is surely right, but to what extent does the claim for a dissident subculture resolve the problem of effeminacy, macho-man and the cross-sex grid? Sinfield suggests that 'lesbians and gay men have long been perceived as disturbing conventional categories – masculine souls in feminine bodies and so on – and it hasn't got us very far'[30] but far where? Far along which road, and to what end? *The Wilde Century* concludes with a series of contemporary case studies, designed to celebrate gay culture and to avoid demonizing its varieties, and to posit a subcultural dissidence based in flexibility and cunning, with the objective of improving the life chances and experiences of lesbian and gay people – examples given include overcoming experiences of shameful fantasy and obscure frustration, not being prosecuted for soliciting, having your child taken away, and so on.[31] These case studies aim to animate historical and conceptual theorizing for a subcultural audience, and such

a move characterises Sinfield's self-consciousness about the politics of being a queer intellectual: he is working to clarify not only what is at stake in cultural theorizing for marginal subcultures, but why public intellectuals have a responsibility to the subcultures of which they are a product. But this important project notwithstanding, even at the time Sinfield was writing it was becoming clear that far from inhibiting the social progress of certain kinds of gay men, lesbians and queers, the prevailing ideologies of neoliberal capital were enabling their advancement and consolidating their economic and social privileges. Many of the specific political goals Sinfield offers in *The Wilde Century* have since been achieved, largely in the name of promoting neoliberal competitive individualism.[32]

In this context, what does being gay or lesbian mean, politically? And once we've achieved a degree of protection from having our lifestyles and choices punished and discriminated against, do we need to be gay or lesbian any more? This is an argument pursued by James Penney in his recent book *After Queer Theory*. He argues that the rise of identity politics, which he suggests reached its apogee in the 1990s when Sinfield published *The Wilde Century,* has been exploited by ideologies of liberal democracy and multinational capital that have offered fragmented identity groups important concessions, thereby forcing us 'to abandon ambitious agendas for social change as the price paid for the defence of hard-fought victories on the terrain of race, gender and sexuality'.[33] Again, I will return to this below.

From Homosociality to 'Inclusive' Masculinity?

Eve Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial relations has been highly influential. In her account, homosocial bonds describe relations between men, be they intimate, combative, competitive or collegial, through which the authority and centrality of men's

interests are secured. In the homosocial network, women are exchanged as tokens of social desire between men, and homosexuality is constantly conjured as a visible and threatening proximity to the interior plausibility of masculinity. Sedgwick suggests that male homosocial bonds maintain a functional relationship with homosexuality that acts as a policing mechanism: 'the result has been a structural residue of terrorist potential, of *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia'.[34] Sedgwick's formation of homosociality has been influential because it addressed many problems that have haunted homosexual identity categories. Here, any residual understanding of homophobia as caused by latent or repressed homosexuality was debunked: all male relations, according to Sedgwick, are circumscribed by homoeroticism, by virtue of the instability of being a 'man's man'; this doesn't mean that all men are latently homosexual, but that masculinity is predicated on an identification not only with the materiality of male power but the symbols and aesthetics of that power. In the homosocial model, masculinity is governed not by fear of male intimacy, but by fear of feminization; effeminacy is not a property of queers, but a fear organizing masculinity itself, and transposed on to queers. Homophobia is fear of being a feminised man, of inadequately demonstrating actual and potential exchange of women, and of being unable to display the social and economic privileges attendant on such exchange.

For the present project, the key challenge of applying Sedgwick's mapping of homosocial structures to the contemporary question of effeminacy is the status of homophobia. For Sedgwick, homophobia exerts 'definitional leverage over the whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution' and is a '*necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage'.[35] But gayness isn't as foreign or feared as it was in 1985, at least not in the overdeveloped North. As Finn Bowring has

pointed out, the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey showed a 'radical thawing in people's conservative attitudes to same-sex relationships'.[36] And this view is supported by a number of smaller studies of traditionally homosocial environments, such as team sports and schools, where once we would have expected to find virulent homophobia but instead may now discern patterns of a 'softer' masculinity. Mark McCormack has suggested that 'homophobia maintains markedly less significance in twenty-first century Britain and America than it used to'.[37]

McCormack undertook an ethnographic study of three state secondary schools in the south of England and documents evidence of heterosexual students 'espousing pro-gay attitudes, being inclusive of gay students, condemning homophobia, and having close friendships with gay students'.[38] Furthermore, he asserts that 'there is a total absence of evidence suggesting that homophobia is present or esteemed'.[39] McCormack concludes that 'the stigma now attached to homophobia indicates that the concept of gay equality has become dominant...even if this has yet to be fully realised'.[40]

For any of us with school experiences radically less tolerant and inclusive than those described in McCormack's study, his work is not only politically welcome, but emotionally reparative. But despite his optimism, we should be wary of over-stating the case for a post-homophobic environment; whilst it is clear that things are improving for LGBT people in a range of contexts, the studies that show these improvements derive from precise social circumstances. In the US a report published in 2010 and based on the FBI's national hate crime statistics found that LGBT people were 'far more likely than any other minority group in the United States to be victimised by violent hate crime'.[41] And in the context of the cultural environment in the UK, the Archbishop of Canterbury remains opposed to gay marriage, despite its legalization, because he believes the Church of England's potential support for it would have a 'catastrophic'

effect on Christians in South Sudan, Pakistan and Nigeria.[42] Here, an assumption of the social tolerability of homophobia underwrites a call on gay people to put aside their interests and subscribe to hegemonic racist 'truths' in the name of a 'civilising' Christian mission. That his statements met with such little opprobrium in the mainstream press indicates the residual authority of mutually reinforcing ideologies of colonialism and homophobia in UK culture, to say nothing of a powerful and troubling anti-secularism that is increasingly offsetting liberal advances made by queers. In 2013 Stonewall published research that showed that one in six lesbian, gay and bisexual people had experienced a homophobic hate crime or incident in the previous three years.[43]

McCormack's work is predicated on a framework of so-called 'inclusive masculinity' proposed by Eric Anderson in his studies of team sports and fraternities in the US and UK. 'Inclusive' masculinity, according to Anderson, describes conditions in which we might find Connell's notion of 'hegemonic' masculinity subject to flux, under pressure from a decline in 'homohysteria' and a rise in the stigma associated with overt displays of homophobia.[44] In such circumstances, 'multiple forms of equally esteemed inclusive masculinities exist, even if heterosexism persists'.[45] But the conditions under consideration here are ones in which white middle-class young college men are experiencing a high degree of entitlement and little threat: far from demonstrating a liberalization of the possibilities of being a man, these college jocks tolerate variations as long as they reinforce the power and desirability of masculinity.

An acknowledgement of the reactionary nature of 'inclusive' masculinity haunts Anderson's theorizing of it: 'while decreased sexism is a characteristic of an inclusive culture of masculinities, it does not guarantee social parity for women' but 'there should at least be *some* social benefit for women'.[46] Such feeble optimism points to a failure to connect the idea of inclusive masculinity to a structure of homosociality, and Anderson

indicates this failure in his conclusion, where he suggests that 'inclusivity and the ability to homosocially bond is simply the byproduct of decreasing homohysteria'.[47] A moment of incoherence reveals the investment in a conventional organization of gender roles in which masculinity is privileged: 'while inclusive masculinities are not built around any of the traditional variables of masculinity, it may remain vital to have one trait that might help keep men's dominant social status – maleness'.[48]

Conceptual slippages and incoherences aside, Anderson's central contention is perfectly intelligible and unambiguous: 'inclusive' masculinity arises from decreasing levels of 'homohysteria' and represents a shift in the gender system that allows 'heterosexual men to both engage in behaviours and permit them to occupy arenas that were previously associated with homosexuality without threat to their heterosexual masculinity'.[49] For Anderson, scholars who hold on to the idea that homophobic violence points to a persistence of homophobic culture are guilty of 'poor sociology', whilst men being 'permitted to carry one-strapped bags' or photos of heterosexual male students kissing one another on Facebook point to a 'rapidly changing culture' of inclusive masculinity.[50] Here, the evidence Anderson documents of decreasing patterns of homophobia in male sporting environments, whether we accept his overarching thesis of declining 'homohysteria' and rising 'inclusive' masculinity or not, points, in his own terms, to a lessening of the restrictions placed upon men, and an expansion of their cultural, sexual and social opportunities. Meanwhile, patriarchy '*should*'[51] retreat in such contexts; but why would it? Anderson's post-homophobic, inclusively masculine, heterosexual young men kiss one another, wear one-strap bags and vilify gays, lesbians and other queers less, because their masculinity is beyond reproach, and not because it has been deconstructed. The implication of Anderson's work is simply that homosexuality no longer challenges heterosexual masculinity, and has instead been

assimilated by it, in terms that chime with Henning Bech's suggestion of the 'disappearance' of homosexuality.[52] To be clear: Anderson is describing a culture of masculinity in which, contrary to his claims for it, Sedgwick's structure of homosociality remains fundamentally intact in its valorization of bonds between men in the interests of securing an 'exchange-of-women framework'. What has changed is the extent of homosexual panic that terrorises these bonds as the range of permissible expressions of masculinity has expanded.

A key problem of Anderson's work is the implicit valorization of masculinity, and one that rests upon a fetishistic investment in the erotic potential of homosocial environments from the perspective of an outsider-observer gay male voyeur. This desiring gaze upon the spectacle of masculinity is so naturalised in gay male culture that we could note it as almost being constitutive of that culture. The ubiquity of this desiring gaze attests to the continuing influence of inversionist models of homosexuality, and of what Sinfield describes as the 'cross-sex grid'. What has changed is the extent to which that desiring gaze can now be understood as being consistent with the masculine identification of the gazer, rather than confirming him as pathologically third sex. In another article presenting his research in all-male team environments, Anderson notes that such environments are governed by a logic in which 'one same-sex sexual experience is equated with a homosexual orientation in masculine peer culture, ruling out the possibility of men engaging in recreational same-sex sex without being homosexualised by their behavior'.[53] Here, as elsewhere, the trope of apparently heterosexual men engaging in same-sex genital acts haunts Anderson's discursive framework as it haunts gay porn. Anderson notes that one research subject allows a flamboyantly camp member of the male cheer leading squad to drink a shot off his torso, and then admits to a history of same-sex intimacy in the 'good cause' scenario: 'If

I have to kiss another guy in order to fuck a chick, then yeah it's worth it. It's a good cause.'[54] Here, not only is a post-homophobic and inclusive masculinity attractive to heterosexual men because of the range of masculine behaviours it allows, but because it facilitates a wider range of contexts for getting your sexual needs met ('We let Aaron give the three of us a blow job'; 'Hey, getten some is getten some').[55] For all the prurient value such scenarios offer Anderson's text, such encounters nevertheless retain a 'conventional gender hierarchy'.[56] The dominant partner here retains the privileges and status accorded to men in homosociality who exchange women (or in this case, feminised men) and is not subject to homophobic injunction.

Anderson's work points to a pattern of declining homophobia in certain all-male environments, where that decline is signified both by a willingness to be more physically intimate with other men (including genital contact in the 'good cause' scenario, or being serviced by gay men) and by a rising intolerance for explicitly anti-gay behavior and sentiment. The question is, do such changes signal a restructuring of homosocial networks, and the power such networks underwrite? And who prospers from such changes? In Sedgwick's formation, homophobia is simply a by-product of the ways in which homosocial patriarchy exchanges women. What we see in Anderson's notion of an inclusive masculinity is a potential lessening of the restrictions placed on gay men in all-male sporting environments to be closeted or fearful (as long as they are themselves sporting, 'professional', and masculine); we also see that such men may be condescendingly afforded opportunities to service the sexual needs of heterosexual men. These seem like slight advances in the context of a virulently masculine culture predicated on the sexual exchange and marginalization of women (and effeminate, passive or willing gay men).

Beyond Metrosexual Homosociality? Effeminacy and Gender Dissent

David Alderson suggests that the conduct and appearance of masculinity is increasingly circumscribed by 'metrosexual' values, the defining characteristic of which is 'a narcissism fed by consumerism'.[57] Here the reconfiguration of masculinities – whether they are becoming 'softer', more 'inclusive', more 'sexualised', or 'metrosexual' – opens up the possibilities available to heterosexual men, and expands the range of their entitlements, at least in the context of self-presentation, aesthetics and the organization of same-sex intimacy. There may be new, commodified standards for displaying homosocial masculinity, an awareness of clothing, grooming and domestic fashions, and an ability and willingness to spend money on them, but we must question the extent to which such opportunities and standards, like those offered by an 'inclusive' masculinity to sporting jocks, have much effect in terms of reconfiguring the power relations inscribed through homosocial structures. An enlargement of the privileged category of masculinity, and a lessening of the legislative force of homophobia upon the homosocial continuum, may have offered gay men and other queers advantages, and as such we might celebrate them. But a number of pressing questions remain. The opportunity to acquire the privileges associated with homosocial masculinity represents a structural concession offered to some gay men that arises from a reconfiguration of masculinity, and of subjectivity more widely, and not principally because of social pressure exerted by queers. These changes are part of a wider neoliberal project to secure conditions of competition in every sphere. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault describes neoliberal governmentality as 'a formal game between inequalities', designed to propagate the equality of inequality, where competition and the enterprise form become generalised as the primary mode not only of social institutions and interaction, but of individuality itself.[58]

Thus, whilst this lessening of homophobic effects in the homosocial continuum may feel liberatory, or be identified as social progress, such advances potentially mark the redundancy of gay identities: if heterosexual masculinity accepts us, and looks like us, and is willing to cultivate intimate relations with itself and us, what does 'gay' mean? Moreover, if we are to preserve a meaningful engagement with the realm of politics, *as gay men and queers*, shouldn't we be working to make sense of the extent to which the 'advances' we might be experiencing are actually predicated on our relative local advantages in conditions that more broadly work to maximise economic and social inequalities? Where does the apparent decline of homophobia leave effeminate gay men and other men disenfranchised by their relative economic or social poverty, ethnic heritage or racial identification, or who may lack access to metropolitan cultural resources, and who may therefore experience difficulty in acquiring the contemporary trappings of metrosexual man? And more importantly, as I've been noting throughout, whilst this reconfiguration of the homosocial continuum seems to offer opportunities and privileges to (suitably privileged and aspirational) gay men, the position of women is much less clear. As Harvey and Gill have suggested, postfeminist culture has offered women entitlements, but it has also given rise to new modes of heterosexual femininity. These modes of femininity stress the importance of 'sexual entrepreneurialism', where beauty, sexual performance and desirability to men are 'tightly policed', and require labour, skills and economic privilege.[59] Furthermore, neoliberalism depends upon, and reproduces, a social and economic repression of women that Lisa Duggan has suggested is upheld by what she describes as a class of 'homonormative' gay men.[60] This is a mode of gay politics, and a powerful and influential one, that reinforces and underscores an intensely patriarchal and masculinist set of values, where erotic celebration of masculinity, and economic and political celebration of masculinity are

mutually reinforcing. Here, the lessening of the force of homophobia in homosociality facilitates not a reconfiguration of masculinity but a reconfiguration of homosexuality, such that it not only upholds the desirability of masculinity, but upholds a suppression of the economic and political interests of women. Susan Stryker articulates a similar problematic in her critique of the liberal politics of 'LGBTQ' in which the 'T' can get bundled up, assimilated, by the wider rainbow coalition of queers. She says: 'trans thus conceived of does not trouble the basis of the other categories – indeed, it becomes a containment mechanism for "gender trouble" of various sorts that works in tandem with assimilative gender-normative tendencies within the sexual identities'.[61] Thus, mainstream gay and lesbian politics may accept trans in liberal terms that effectively outsource those connotations of homosexuality previously associated with gender dissent or gender dysphoria to transgendered 'others'.

Conclusion: Effeminacy as Gender Dissent?

If the Wilde trials installed, as Sinfield suggests, a particular equation of same-sex passion with effeminacy, it is important for us to be clear that this cultural break was not simply about an emergent intelligibility of the queer male, his recognisability. A man of the Oscar Wilde sort was unspeakable because he was politically threatening. Effeminacy as a mark of queerness was not just about aesthetics and flamboyance, but about gender dissent. If, as Sinfield suggests, the trials resolved a nexus of ideological unease about masculinity, class, culture and sex into a 'brilliantly precise image',[62] the force of this image lay in its formation of a dissident subject position that gave rise to 'the Wilde century'. Edward Carpenter was pessimistic about this: 'the Wilde trial had done its work...and silence must henceforth reign on sex-subjects'.[63] But Sinfield takes a more nuanced view from the vantage-point of history: Wilde 'afforded a simple

stereotype as a peg for behavior and feelings that were otherwise incoherent or unspeakable' and 'it became much harder to maintain that same-sex practices might be an obvious way to intensify manly bonding'.[64] Certainly, once identifiable, particular, the effeminate queer could be located and punished, but more importantly, after the Wilde trials same-sex passion and effeminacy became mutually politicizing: manly bonding could no longer be lubricated by a bit of 'how's yer father' without it inferring a threat to homosocial masculinity, and swishing about with dyed hair and make up no longer just meant that you were cultured or artistic, but that you were intolerable and challenging. Sinfield suggests that Quentin Crisp was 'ashamed',[65] but elsewhere I've suggested that for Crisp and his peers, effeminate homosexuality, 'was not about engaging in sexual transactions...but about resistance of straightness, dullness, suburban mediocrity, masculinity and normality.' Such resistance necessitated becoming fabulous, not getting fucked.[66] Boy George notes that on watching *The Naked Civil Servant* on TV, he identified with Quentin and in that identification rejected the taunts of heterosexual classmates at school ('I didn't want to be part of their boring little world'[67]); this response articulates the dissident opportunity afforded by the effeminate homosexual as he emerged through Wilde, and later through Crisp. To linger on the self-loathing rhetoric of a figure like Crisp is not only to miss the point in terms of his deployment of camp affectation, but to misrecognise the force of his effeminate challenge to the masculine homosocial continuum.

A reconfiguration of homosociality, and a partial lessening of the force of homophobia, has made homosexuality less threatening to masculinity (and especially if the gay man is willing to lick shots off jocks' torsos), and has given rise to a politically and economically significant class of homonormative gay men, especially in the US, whose influence works to promote the terms through which homosocial masculinity

underwrites the competitive individualism of neoliberal capital. Given the extent to which the emergence of 'recreational' sexual subjectivities, like that of the homosexual, are in part dependent on the history of capital,[68] the dialectical relationship between sexuality and economic formations shouldn't surprise us; what is surprising, and disappointing, is the extent to which LGBT culture has so uncritically allowed itself to become coopted to dominant neoliberal trends: as Michael Warner so eloquently suggested back in 1993: 'post-Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity. We give off the smell of capitalism in rut'.[69]

Where does this leave the question of the effeminate homosexual? Homosocial masculinity has been exploited by neoliberal ideologies that foreground competition and emphasise the social value of a domestic nuclearity that is atomised, and works to offset conditions in which the state has become increasingly 'weightless' in terms of its social welfare obligations and, at the same time increasingly 'weighty' in terms of its political authority. Duggan points out how such conditions put increasing pressure on women, whilst Angela McRobbie forcefully reminds us of the importance of gender difference to neoliberal forms of both labour and governmentality, and upbraids a generation of *operaismo* writers for their failure to account for gender in their critique of capital, and their enthusiasm about the creative affectivity of the multitude.[70] I'm conscious of potentially over-reaching here, but surely it is not outlandish to connect up a legacy of political ideas about effeminacy as a refusal of masculinity with a critique of neoliberal ideology that depends upon a continuing and increasing repression of women and feminism, in part facilitated by an 'inclusive' and less homophobic homosocial masculinity? James Penney suggests that:

The current state of rights-based queer political activism, including that aspect of

19

it that acknowledges the limitations of the liberalist rights framework, is so deeply mired in the exploitative logic of capital that the optimal radical strategy is actually to declare the whole category of sexual orientation irremediably bourgeois.[71]

But the histories of gay cultural dissent, of effeminate and other articulations, are not reducible to a 'liberalist rights framework'. If queer theory, and the politics it apparently underwrites, has reached the impasse James Penney describes – an impasse of identity politics and its failure to gain a purchase on the deprivations of the enterprise culture – but we remain invested, despite Penney's somewhat lofty dismissal, in the importance of identifying ourselves culturally, socially and politically as gay men (and other queers), then effeminacy may offer one way of organizing our identities as gender dissent where that dissent not only refuses the heteronormativity and masculinity of homosocial assimilation, but its neoliberal and entrepreneurial privileges too.

In as much as we might agree that there are some limited contexts in which homophobia is declining, this represents an expansion of the range of permissible ways of being a man on the homosocial continuum. In such a context, the opportunity for a gay man to lick a shot off the torso of a willing heterosexual man, or even have (unreciprocal) sex with him in the 'good cause' scenario, is politically (if not sexually) meaningless. What would be considerably more meaningful, however, is a gay male culture less preoccupied with the value of masculinity, and one willing to apprehend its growing privileges not as liberal breakthroughs, but as precariously contingent upon political and economic conditions that do not serve our interests. One direction such an apprehension could take, drawing on a rich cultural legacy of the tribulations of effeminacy, is gender dissent: refusing to be an entrepreneurial, neoliberal or

homonormative queer. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore represents a potential archetype of a dissenting effeminate queer for neoliberal times. An activist and writer, he draws on the rich legacy of camp iconography in gay culture to articulate a politics that is socialist, pro-feminist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. Sycamore was a founder member of Gay Shame, an activist group that opposed the commercialism of US gay culture using parodic tactics and 'revolting' drag performances. His blog, called 'Nobody Passes, Darling' combines autobiographical reflections on life as a young gay man, with political commentary on subjects such as the fixation of the gay scene with masculinity, US patriotism in the context of Israeli air strikes against Gaza in 2014, and lack of state funding for the arts. A particularly noteworthy recent entry, 'Ashamed to Play', argues that despite official corporate endorsement of LGBT athletes by Google, YouTube and others during Pride week, gay athletes should be ashamed to play in the 2014 World Cup that has seen massive investment go into building sporting venues that have caused mass displacement and structural inequality, and where opposition has been savagely repressed. Sycamore suggests that 'Yet again, an allegedly pro-gay agenda is deployed as a covert advertising gimmick for multinational corporate whitewashing'.[72] Elsewhere he has suggested that 'as...gay sexual culture morphs into "straight-acting dudes hangin' out", we wonder if we can still envision possibilities for a flaming faggotry that challenges the assimilationist norms of a corporate-cozy lifestyle'.[73] At its most striking, post-Stonewall effeminacy has manifested a stylised yielding of masculine privilege that has offered gay men the opportunity to undermine the 'terrorist' potential in homosocial structures. But those structures have changed, and gay men have become more tolerable and privileged, and their stylization of gender dissent has become more masculine, in metrosexual terms. We therefore need new terms for imagining dissent that reconnects effeminate legacies to the urgent politics of the moment. Otherwise,

why bother being gay?

Notes

[1] Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London & New York: Cassell, 1994), 196.

[2] Joseph Bristow, 'Homophobia/misogyny: Sexual fears, sexual definitions' in Simon Shepherd & Mick Wallis (eds.) *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 62.

[3] Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 37.

[4] Derek Cohen & Richard Dyer, 'The Politics of Gay Culture' in Gay Left Collective (eds.) *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), 178-9.

[5] Richard Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going' reprinted in Fabio Cleto (ed.) *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 110-1.

[6] Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp', 111.

[7] Eric Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (London & New York: Routledge 2009), 87.

[8] President Heinz Fischer of Austrian, quoted in Caroline Davies, 'Conchita Wurst pledges to promote tolerance after jubilant welcome home' *The Guardian* 11 May (2014).

[9] Veteran UK broadcaster, Terry Wogan, quoted in Aaron Day, 'Terry Wogan says Conchita Wurst made Eurovision a freak show', *Pink News* 3 November (2014).

[10] Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, quoted in Caroline Davies, ibid.

[11] Thomas Calvocoressi, 'Can a bearded Austrian drag queen give Putin the bird?', *New Statesman* 28 April (2014).

[12] Stephen Maddison, *Fags Hags and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonding in Gay Culture* (London: Palgrave, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); David Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[13] Finn Bowring, 'Repressive Desublimation and Consumer Culture: Re-Evaluating Herbert Marcuse' *New Formations* no. 75 (2012): 8-24.

[14] Jeremy Gilbert, 'Signifying Nothing: 'Culture', 'Discourse' and the Sociality of Affect', *Culture Machine* 6 (2004).

[15] Lois McNay, 'Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucaults's *The Birth of Biopolitics, Theory, Culture and Society*, 26: 55-77 (2009): 62.

[16] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 93.

[17] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 118.

[18] E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 136.

[19] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 139.

[20] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 162-66.

[21] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 169.

[22] The term metrosexual was famously coined by journalist and cultural critic Mark Simpson in 1994 in 'Here Come the Mirror Men: Why The Future is Metrosexual' originally published in *The Independent*, and available at http://www.marksimpson.com/here-come-the-mirror-men/ (accessed 27/4/15). David Alderson has recently suggested that 'this figure's defining characteristic is a narcissism fed by consumerism. Since such traits are presumed to have once been characteristic of gay men specifically, but to have subsequently extended to men more generally, the result is an erosion of visible distinctions and a liberalization of attitudes.' Alderson, 'Acting Straight: Reality TV, Gender Self-Consciousness and Forms of Capital', *New Formations,* (2014), 83: 7-24, 14.

[23] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 177.

[24] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 180.

[25] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 195-6.

[26] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 26.

[27] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 86.

[28] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 88-9.

[29] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 198.

[30] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 200.

[31] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 207.

[32] Gilbert, 'Signifying Nothing'.

[33] James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto 2014), 51.

[34] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89, emphasis in original.

[35] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89, emphasis in original.

[36] Bowring, 'Repressive Desublimation'.

[37] Mark McCormack, *The Declining Significance of Homophobia: How Teenage Boys are Redefining Masculinity and Heterosexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 57.

[38] McCormack, *The Declining Significance of Homophobia*, 123.

[39] McCormack, *The Declining Significance of Homophobia*, 123.

[40] McCormack, *The Declining Significance of Homophobia*, 136.

[41] Mark Potok, 'Anti-Gay Hate Crimes: Doing the Math' *Intelligence Report*, Winter no 140 (2010).

[42] Huffington Post 'Archbishop Of Canterbury Justin Welby Suggests African Christians Will Be Killed If Church Accepts Gay Marriage' http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/04/archbishop-of-canterbury-gay-marriage_n_5091301.html (accessed 10 June 2014).

[43] Stonewall (2013) *Homophobic Hate Crime: The Gay British Crime Survey*, www.stonewall.org.uk/.../homophobic_hate_crime__final_report.pdf, (accessed June 2014).

[44] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 93-7.

[45] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 97.

[46] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 98.

[47] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 158.

[48] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 159.

[49] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 159.

[50] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 160.

[51] Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, 158, emphasis in original.

[52] Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[53] Eric Anderson, "Being Masculine is not About who you Sleep with...:" Heterosexual Athletes Contesting Masculinity□and the One-time Rule of Homosexuality', *Sex Roles*, 6 October (2007): 105.

[54] Anderson, 'Being Masculine is not About who you Sleep with', 109.

[55] Anderson, 'Being Masculine is not About who you Sleep with', 115.

[56] Alan Sinfield, (1998) *Gay and After: Gender, Culture and Consumption* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 55.

[57] David Alderson, 'Acting Straight: Reality TV, Gender Self-Consciousness and Forms of Capital', forthcoming; see also Mark Simpson, 'Here come the mirror men: Why the future is metrosexual', http://www.marksimpson.com/here-come-the-mirror-men/ (accessed June 2014).

[58] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008), 120.

[59] Laura Harvey & Rosalind Gill, 'Spicing it up: Sexual entrepreneurs and The Sex Inspectors' in Rosalind Gill & Chirstina Scharff (eds.) *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 2.

[60] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

[61] Susan Stryker, 'Transgender history, homonormativity and disciplinarity' *Radical History Review*, 100, Winter (2008), 148.

[62] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 118.

[63] Quoted in Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 124.

[64] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 125.

[65] Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 171.

[66] Stephen Maddison, 'Small Towns, Boys and Ivory Towers: A Naked Academic' in Jan Campbell & Janet Harbord (eds) *Temporalities: Autobiography in a Postmodern Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); 157.

[67] Boy George, *Take it Like a Man: The Autobiography of Boy George* (London: Sigdwick & Jackson, 1995), 52.

[68] John D'Emilio, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', reprinted in Henry Abelove et al. (eds) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (London & New York: Routledge 1993); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (Harmsworth: Penguin, 1978).

[69] Michael Warner, 'Introduction' in Michael Warner (ed.) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxxi.

[70] Angela McRobbie, 'Reflections On Feminism, Immaterial Labour And The Post-Fordist Regime' *New Formations* 70 (2010): 60 & 69.

[71] Penney, *After Queer Theory,* 48.

[72] Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, http://nobodypasses.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/ashamed-to-play.html, (accessed 10 July 2014).

[73] Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *Why Are Faggots So Afraid Of Faggots?: Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012), 1.