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From Metrosexual to Retrosexual
The Importance of the Shifting Male Gender Role to Feminism
Thinking Gender 2008 Conference Presentation
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I. Introduction

I have to admit, shamefully, that I am a popular culture junkie—I watch T.V. and I read random glossy magazines while waiting in line at the grocery store. As a feminist student for several years, I covertly claim to my compatriots that I watch television and look through these magazines just out of a feminist bizarre fascination, and to keep a finger on the pulse of our national culture. It is out of this lurid fascination with television and other sites of popular culture that I came to conceive of this paper.

One night in 2006, I was home watching T.V. when I witnessed a commercial that profoundly disturbed me—Burger King’s “I am Man” commercial for their Texas Double Whopper. My immediate response was, “Are you kidding me?” After watching this commercial my mind started analyzing what I saw. Here, to Helen Reddy’s iconic anthem, “I am Woman” from the women’s liberation generation, we have men refusing “chick food,” men running out of salons and spas ending their facials, men ripping their white brief underwear off, punching each other, flexing muscles, breaking bricks, all leading up to a mob of men throwing a mini van, the cultural symbol of family, off an overpass into a dump truck that is pulled away by a macho body building man, teased by the sight of a ginormous burger. All of this seemingly saying to us that, this is what a “real” man is and that eating Burger King’s Texas Double Whopper will liberate men from “chickdom.”

Soon after this Burger King commercial I began to notice a slew of advertisements advocating this same ideology, this is what a “real” man is, and these are the rules of being a real man. You might remember and still occasionally see Miller “Man Law” beer commercials, the Axe Bodyspray “Axe Effect” commercials, and Old Spice deodorant commercials, all of which sell the ideology that certain products would save men from the realm of the feminine, by making them more macho, creating a masculine code or rules of what a real man is, and by

making them definitively heterosexual and magically attractive to the cliché perfect women. The tone was being set by corporations selling liberating “real” manhood to the nation, in an overt and blatant response to a cultural perception that men were being feminized and in response to the perception that feminism was successfully suppressing “real” masculinity.

I originally began my research to find the root of this drive towards hypermasculinity, which, as a feminist, I view as a dangerous and repugnant machismo. What I found when researching was a remarkable shifting of the hegemonic idealized male gender role in society that correlated with popular acceptance and extreme rejection of the metrosexual male trend: A shifting which went seemingly unnoticed by feminist academics. My research now focuses on this feminist academic silence. I want to understand why feminists have overlooked the metrosexual and the backlash of hypermasculinity embodied in the retrosexual man.

The metrosexual to retrosexual shift is easily seen in studying recent pop-culture sources. The metrosexual is clearly fleshed out in numerous magazine and newspaper articles, television shows, films, internet blogs, self-improvement books, and various forms of advertisements. The amount of backlash retrosexual evidence is increasing everyday in the wake of the metrosexual’s cultural retreat. Unfortunately due to the time restraints of this presentation I will only briefly touch on the multitude of evidence in favor of theorizing why feminists have overlooked the metrosexual to retrosexual trend and what I believe is valuable in studying it—gender role fungibility and the end to sexual difference.

II. What is the Metrosexual?

The metrosexual largely came into popular culture and consumer culture in the mid 1990s.

A metrosexual is:

- 1: twenty-first century male trendsetter
- 2: straight, urban man with heightened aesthetic sense.
- 3: man who spends time and money on appearance and shopping
- 4: man willing to embrace his feminine side.

(Flocker 2003)

In 1994 the metrosexual trend was first named and observed by a British journalist Mark Simpson in his article “Here Come the Mirror Men” published in the *Independent*. Simpson wrote extensively about the emergence of certain stylized, discerning, vain men which he named “metrosexuals,” such as the David Beckham, who were becoming the “most promising consumer market of the decade.” Simpson rooted this new kind of man, this new consumer as being found beginning the eighties in, “fashion Magazines such as GQ, in television advertisements for Levis jeans or in gay bars,” and by the nineties, Simpson notes, “he’s everywhere and he’s going shopping.” (Simpson 2006c)

In fact the Metrosexual man can be defined as, “a commodity fetishist: a collector of fantasies about the male sold to him by advertising (Simpson 2006c).” He arose in the 80s, grew in the 90s and achieved monumental popularity in media, popular culture, and marketing until the year 2004. During his existence he embraced four distinct areas of commodification:

- Fashion—He is a trendsetter, fashion forward, concerned with appearance, properly put together and accessorizes. He carries a man-purse or “murse” with head held high, and chooses aesthetic home décor.
- Food and Beverage —He practices healthy eating habits, likes gourmet foods, cocktails, and wine (he has knowledge of and preference of the refined), he drinks import over domestic beer (if drunk at all). He has basic cooking knowledge and is interested in gourmet cooking devices. He knows how to host a great party or social event.
- Grooming— He uses “products” for better skin, hair, and nails. He practices hair removal, shaving, and styling, called “manscaping.” He uses cologne, makeup. He is concerned with fitness of body and will work out or undergo surgery to achieve the perfect form.
- Culture—He has basic etiquette, has learned romantic relationship and interpersonal skill. He is interested in, career building. He is, “in touch with his emotions.” He boasts a basic knowledge of art, music, and other cultures. He likes the social scene. He knows how to remove a stain, sew a button on a shirt, and iron.

The popularity and success of this commodification can be measured in statistics which show up to and over triple digit growths for companies marketing metrosexual products as well as polls showing men’s growing perception that metrosexual trends were acceptable and desired. For instance, in the early part of this decade a poll showed that 90% of the American men said it’s ok

to go to beauty salons and spas (my father finally becoming one of them). In another poll 43% of men said they are dissatisfied with their overall appearance. (Factio-Magazine.com)

Popularity and cultural acceptance of the metrosexual trend can also be seen by the resounding success of television shows which were premised on metrosexuality, such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* launched in 2002 (which I watched with bizarre fascination and feminist adoration), and also the increasing numbers of men on the different plastic surgery makeover shows. In 2003, Michael Flocker's *The Metrosexual Guide to Style: A Handbook for the Modern Man* was published and soon after several of *Queer Eye*'s "Fab Five" also penned books which educated men in the ways of metrosexual sophistication. By 2004, everywhere you turned there were images of the metrosexual filling billboards, magazines, television shows, films with his buff, suave, sophistication. He was the topic of lighthearted news pieces, editorials, and blogs which discussed such things as the development of new male centered salons and spas, the acceptability of the carrying the "murse," manscaping technologies, and debated which top shelf vodka reigned supreme.

III. Enter the Retrosexual: Let the Back-Lashing Begin

However, starting in 2004 there came journalistic rumblings of a massive backlash against the metrosexual. Online blogger communities and print journalists were exposing the idea the people were fed up with metrosexuality and with the notion that the cultural metrosexual hype had gone too far. Mark Simpson in an article entitled, "Metro-Warriors," said, "As you may have noticed, the press has had rather a lot to say lately about 'my' bastard child with perfect skin the metrosexual. Apparently though the media have begun to run out of things to write about him, as in some quarters there is now talk of a 'metro backlash' (Simpson 2006e)." Also in this article, Simpson gives a name to the group of men driving this backlash, he calls them retrosexuals because they, "were men who refused to get with the programme and pluck their eyebrows and cultivate their cuticles. Men who were, I suppose, 'real' (Simpson 2006e)" The

retrosexual is conceived as a genuine guy who is the antithesis of the metrosexual. He is the cliché strong, virile, hairy, uncouth, homophobic, misogynist man who is a cross between classic icons of the marauding frat boy, the caveman, the football linebacker, and the regular Joe.

The turning point in popular culture from metrosexual acceptability to retrosexual respectability is demarcated with the infamous 2004 *South Park* episode “South Park is Gay” or the “Crab People” episode. In this episode crab people invade South Park by using metrosexuality, with the help of the *Queer Eye* “Fab Five” to sissify the men of South Park, thus making it possible to invade earth without human male resistance. After this landmark *South Park* critique of metrosexuality, numerous other television shows followed poking fun at the metrosexual. At the same time companies, like Burger King, launch retrosexual marketing campaigns which urge men to embrace his “true” masculinity, and be “real” men. Popular films, such as *Fight Club*, *X-Men*, *Talladega Nights*, *Nacho Libre*, and *Zoolander*, were geared toward retrosexual tastes and were premised on poking fun and beating up metrosexuality. Today the retrosexual fills the place of the metrosexual in popular culture but it isn’t really reversing the commodification of the male gender role that came with metrosexuality. Men are still being sold an image, and told to fetish the retrosexual commodities which have taken the place of metrosexual commodities. Mark Simpson wrote in observation of this retro/metro commoditized male phenomenon:

“This reveals something truly terrifying about metrosexuality. It is much more than a trend. It is in fact nothing less than an *epoch*. Metrosexuality is such an integral part of a mediatised and consumerist world that even what is sold as its anti-thesis is still metrosexuality. The metrosexual trend, whereby the male body is transformed (‘transfigured’ if you work in the fashion industry,) into an aesthetic commodity, is apparently irreversible. As is the neurotic male anxiety caused by Adam’s newly-discovered nakedness. Barring a nuclear winter, or the exhaustion of the earth’s supplies of lanolin and loofa, or, even less likely, the unionizing of personal fitness trainers, metrosexuality – love it or loathe it, or call it by any other name – is here to stay (Simpson 2006e)

IV. Where is the Feminist Critique?

As a person who has often scoffed at the traditional patriarchal male gender role I feel the metrosexual trend brought a new ethos of masculinity which was appealing and more in line with the feminist ideologies in certain areas. To me as a post-modern philosopher and queer theorist interested in blurring the lines of the ingrained gender binary, the popularization of the metrosexual signaled that society could accept a different form of heterosexual masculinity. Society could allow a *straight* man to wear makeup, nail polish, carry a man-purse, and be refined in mannerisms and tastes—or any combination of expression which fell under the umbrella of metrosexuality. To some men, the acceptance of the metrosexual trend into mainstream culture allowed them to express their identity in freer new ways (Kimmel, 2006). With the rise of the metrosexual, masculinity experienced a remarkable fungibility—a fact that should be a great interest to the feminist quest of ending the gendered binary because it shows that our gender roles, both feminine and masculine, change. The metrosexual trend can be seen both as men expressing femininity and as masculinity being defined more broadly. During this time the acceptable male gender role expanded and became more inclusive of divergent expressions of male identity. It no longer stood in stark binary contrast to the feminine, because part of metrosexual masculinity embodied traditional notions of feminine traits.

So, where is the feminist critique of the metrosexual? For a trend rooted in the 80s and into the 90s there is a disturbing silence in academia surrounding the metrosexual. When I attempted to find academic writings on the metrosexual, I found only a few scattered paragraphs of him in a handful of newer texts, most of which were not classified as “feminist,” but rather classified under “masculinity.”

Perhaps, the disturbing truth is that the metrosexual was only popular because it was a consumer marketing ploy. If so, then there might be an avoidance of him because feminists cannot respectably study the negative gendering force of consumer capitalism and claim it as

valuable, even when it changes the traditional fixed binary we theorize about. Mark Simpson in a 2003 article suggested that the reason for the creation of the metrosexual by consumer capitalism is that, “The stoic, self-denying, modest straight male didn’t shop enough—his role was to earn money for his wife to spend—so he had to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image (Simpson, 2006d).” How can a feminist value this trend of metrosexuality when ultimately consumer capitalism expanded the exploitation of personal insecurity? However, feminists have long critiqued and attacked the role of consumer marketing in the creation and perpetuation of the oppressive and exploitative female gender role. Feminists have pointed out that women are inculcated in a culture where they must buy products that make them young, beautiful, and attractive to men, and they often advocate rejecting the consumer culture as a way of fighting patriarchal domination. We all know the theories purporting the unholy fusion of capitalism and the patriarchy: men control high power positions in capitalism and use sexual insecurity of women created by the patriarchal system to exploit and make a profit. But what happens to this feminist theory of gender role construction when men are sold the same, or very similar, bill of goods? Is patriarchy then dominating itself? Or is capitalism really the only ultimate dominator?

If we realize that the metrosexual male finds himself in exactly the same commodified position as women have been for years, feminists who argue in terms of women’s oppression by the male patriarchy must then be forced to reevaluate women’s situation in the system of power and the construction of gender roles--or at least offer creative explanations for metrosexual in patriarchal terms. In other words, I see that there is a death to the theoretical patriarchy as we have known it in favor of an increasingly gender neutral dominator—capitalism. Maybe it is time to set aside the “holy grail” of feminist social critique, male dominance, and look at dominance more broadly. Maybe holding on to the notion of patriarchal oppression is holding us back from the ultimate goal of feminism which, for me, is about dissolving the gendered binary and ending

sexual difference. With the birth of the metrosexual and the retrosexual commodified masculinity blatantly staring feminism in the face, sing a rehashed version of our liberation anthem, perhaps we can finally admit that *both* women and men are restricted to certain roles and face exploitation because of their sex from a common oppressor—the capitalist culture.

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