

MASCULINITY AND CULTURAL IMAGINARY

# Masculinities, Imagination and Cultural Practices

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Illustrator: Lara Lars

In recent decades, masculinity has moved into the centre of debate, thrust into the spotlight by critiques of normative masculinity launched by feminist movements, civil rights movements and postcolonial movements across the world. At the same time, part of the far right has seized the banner of masculinity to defend a particular social order from attack by all these movements in general and by feminist movements in particular. The debate about what to do with masculinity in such a disputed context has been met with very different approaches.

At times there has been talk of abolishing masculinity entirely—a posture driven by an enduring association between masculinity, violence and patriarchy. This essentialist approach sees abolishing masculinity as the only possible course of action following the conclusion that masculinity is an unreformable monolith belonging exclusively to men. Other approaches, however, focus discussion on the notion of privileges and suggest that the concept of blame can be a mobilising logic for addressing these privileges and masculine practices (acknowledging blame is the first step to rethinking oneself as a man), as well as a form of identity for bringing together bold men who want to embark on the process of deconstructing their masculinity.

This perspective is closely linked to another approach that draws on a key component of

normative masculinity: a rational, calculating, self-sufficient male subject. Following this line of thinking, only this type of subject can undertake a process of social transformation that involves rethinking gender roles and relations from a sharply individualistic position. These three interlinked notions—the existence of an inherent essence to masculinity; the idea of a self-sufficient subject, almost a warrior, who can take on himself and rebuild himself individually; and the focus on privileges as the fundamental stress field—provide a set of frameworks which, curiously enough, are employed by movements critical of masculinity and by the far right in their defence of masculine order. This article aims to set out several alternative perspectives.

First and foremost, this text stems from the belief that there is a constitutive relationship between normative masculinity, the patriarchal dividend and various forms of violence (against women and members of the LGBTI community, among others). This approach falls within the area of research labelled Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities, which is based on the basic premise that there is nothing essential about masculinity: it is a social construct that changes across space and time, as well as shifting throughout an individual's lifetime, given that we can experience and practise different forms of masculinity over the course of our life. Second, we recognise that there are a number of different forms of masculinity, each with their own internal contradictions and distinguished by various differences and hierarchies, and that this diversity contains the seeds for transformation. Urging us to embrace this diversity, Jablonka invites us to politicise masculinities by “subverting masculinities rooted in domination and energising dissident ones” [1]. Third, we don't see the task of transforming masculinity as an individual effort but one that requires arenas of collective discussion, political spaces for fiercely democratic debate on what to do with one of the main factors that condition our ways of life.

Most policies and practices designed to combat hegemonic masculinity tend to focus more on prevention than imagination and, therefore, dedicated more to describing the kind of men we shouldn't be than to opening up spaces for imagining and offering ideas of the kind of men we can be

This collective endeavour requires us to come up with mobilising forces which, while recognising men's responsibility, are not held back by a structural logic of blame and can open up spaces to explore questions such as: What can men and masculinities gain from a society characterised by gender equality? How can we widen the focus to talk about the pathways for creativity, desire and pleasure opened up by other forms of masculinity or even by the mere process of imagining them? Because imagination is precisely what we need to answer further questions such as: What is winning all about? What exactly is it that is won? How can we open up discussion to include new subjects rather than the same old tropes? How can we mobilise desire? However, most policies and practices designed to combat hegemonic masculinity tend to be burdened by the general political framework of

our age, focused more on prevention than imagination and therefore dedicated more to describing the kind of men we shouldn't be than to opening up spaces for imagining, putting forward and offering ideas of the kind of men we can be.

## Art practices for rethinking masculinities

Certain art practices can play a key role in sparking creativity and imagination as part of the process of creating spaces for collective discussion. First, because these practices can configure symbols and identities that can help us create and interpret our ways of life. Second, because they have become a particularly fertile ground for analysing the process for constructing normative and hegemonic masculinities, together with other masculinities that enjoy the same benefits. In short, artistic and cultural practices have set themselves up as a space for critique, while at the same time providing the opportunity to create new representations of masculinity, visibilising other masculinities and opening up, in Connell's words [2], "a sense of multiplicity and possibility" [3]. Art practices offer different arenas for articulating different forms of knowledge in order to analyse and deploy counterhegemonic narratives about related behaviours and attitudes [4].

Furthermore, the field of artistic and cultural practices has been particularly prolific not only for imagining other forms of masculinity but also for putting them into practice, as in the case of the communities created around "houses" in the 1980s and 1990s ballroom scene. Within these communities, made up mainly of members of African American and Latin American LGBTI communities, new relationships were created that went beyond traditional forms of the family, together with otherwise unavailable forms of care and solidarity in the face of HIV, and new, far more accessible pathways for knowledge transmission (from dance to health) were forged than those provided by traditional institutions [5].

This article analyses how some of these questions are explored in three cultural initiatives carried out by a range of agents in very different contexts (Finland, Brazil, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States). The projects in question are *Construindo Masculinidades Outras* [Constructing Alternative Masculinities] (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), *New Masculinities Festival* (New York, United States) and *RE/defining Masculinities* (Finland, Belgium and the Netherlands [6]. The *Re-defining Masculinities* programme is an initiative set up by the Finnish Cultural Institute for the Benelux in response to one of the questions that emerged within a 2018 project run by the Institute on feminist challenges: What about men? The programme was carried out between 2019 and 2020 through a series of events (performances, debates and cultural activities, among others) held in Brussels, Amsterdam and Helsinki. The first *New Masculinities Festival* took place in 2012 and its eighth edition was held in 2020. It was set up by the Man Question company, building on their experience of running performance-based workshops on masculinities to create an exhibition platform to widen access to the more specific debates held in the workshops. Finally, *Construindo Masculinidades Outras* is a joint initiative by the [Observatório de Favelas](#) and the contemporary art production company Automática as part of an international cooperation project on Global Gender and Cultures of Equality, led by a team

of researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London, which runs programmes in several countries. The case in question is carried out by Elã (Escola Livre das Artes), an educational initiative at Galpão Bela Maré, a training, education and exhibition space for artists in a favela on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. *Construindo Masculinidades Outras* gives artists and collectives the chance to explore the subject of masculinities as part of a residency that culminates in an exhibition [7].

Artistic and cultural practices have set themselves up as a space for critique, while providing the opportunity to create new representations of masculinity; not only for imagining them but also for putting them into practice

The names of these three initiatives give a flavour of the debates on what to do with masculinities. They follow the line that masculinity is a social construct and explore the possibilities and needs for intervention, together with ways of recognising and visibilising other forms of living, imagining and practising masculinity. And they do so by linking this attempt to imagine masculinities with wider projects seeking to create more equitable cultures of peace, debates on a more inclusive future and new possibilities for gender expression. But there is also something else: a connection with the idea of rights held by counterhegemonic schools of thought that invite us to think about which aspects of masculinity are accessible or appropriable, or how masculinity can be rewritten by making it a safe space.

Halberstam's work on female masculinities plays a central role here by posing questions such as: How can masculinity cease to be worn as a stigma and instead be infused with a sense of pride? How can masculinity cease to be the exclusive privilege of certain men? [8]. But the most interesting part of Halberstam's work is the idea of seeing how practices of rewriting masculinities can become part of the future of these very same masculinities themselves. We can think of this idea of the future of masculinities through the lens suggested by Gleyce Heitor, coordinator of the educational programme at *Construindo Masculinidades Outras*, in response to the question of whether the goal was to create alternative masculinities or to break completely with the whole idea of masculinities: "What is at stake here is the right to a specific way of being a man, *the right to a specific way of performing masculinity*... the search for the possibility of other ways of being masculine".

All three projects share the same idea that art is a particularly productive sphere for rethinking masculinities. Why? Because, as a field of discussion, art practices can help overcome personal or political hurdles to debate (such as when thinking about the links between feminisms and masculinities), that is, because art can create new political possibilities. "Masculinity can be very hard. There's a lot of violence in it, very powerful emotions... and part of the code of masculinity is that you don't experience those feelings, so there's a double blindfold. Working on these questions through art creates a certain sense of security, it distorts things, so that people can experience things which in other

situations might cause them personal difficulties or problems with their family or friends. In this context, we can simply watch a play, project our imagination onto delicate subjects, have important conversations, without having to expose ourselves personally.” This is how Michael Wilson, one of the founders of the *New Masculinities Festival*, describes the power of art to open up reflections or questions on masculinity that participants would find hard to engage with in others areas.

Malin Bergstrom, coordinator of the *RE/defining Masculinities* project, also talks about how art can get men to engage with critical questions on masculinity and, in turn, on feminisms. “Art is a particularly fluid area with a tremendous facility for fostering dialogue between feminisms and masculinities. My understanding of feminism is based on the idea that men have to be actively involved... I also think that men can benefit from it, can equip themselves with the tools for tackling many of the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity... and art is a particularly creative field for encouraging this approach”.

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Art’s ability to spark discussion takes on a collective dimension in these three projects. They all include debates and processes where individual reflection clearly plays a major role, but this isn’t the main goal of a discussion on which ways of life and organisation we want for ourselves. “Some questions can be tackled individually, but the really important thing for communities is to change their rules collectively,” says Michel Wilson. “Through performance, art, etc., the community as a whole can collectively negotiate their idea of masculinity.” This leads us to one of the main questions crisscrossing the field of masculinities, and one which can be tackled from different angles: Can discourses that put responsibility, and therefore solutions, in the hands of men really be politically transformational? If we are faced with a structural problem, the negotiation of masculinity and the construction of alternative ways of being a man will only be successful if it is a collective endeavour that actively involves society as a whole.

## Skills, subjects and audiences for discussing masculinities

The three projects considered in this article share the same essential premise: masculinity is an umbrella that embraces a number of subjects such as mental health, care, violence and social exclusion. But the salient point here is not only how these projects address different aspects, but also how they bring diverse approaches to the debate on masculinities by mobilising a range of skills, knowledge and forms of participation and engaging with very different actors to produce a collective discussion or negotiation on masculinity.

Given that it includes an educational programme, *Construindo Masculinidades Outras* is the initiative that looks at the most complex range of subjects through the prism of masculinities [9]. The education, training and debate that takes place in the first part of the process considers questions such as how to challenge canonical forms of representing masculinity and how these representations include/exclude certain participants; how to link studies of masculinity with intersectional practices; what forms of exclusion might be created by art and what conditions would enable more democratic art forms and structures to emerge; how to rethink care and paternity; and how to use the body as a critical space for art practices analysing masculinities.

As well as exploring a wide range of subjects, these projects also manage to engage with a wide variety of actors to think about masculinity. The skillset for discussing masculinities is expanded by including not only professionals from the world of academia and public policymakers but also practitioners from the field of culture (music, dance, visual arts, performance, film, fashion and literature) and activists from the queer and feminist movements and alternative masculinities. Each initiative sets about widening the audience for debates on masculinities in its own way, and the *New Masculinities Festival* project came up with a particularly intriguing idea: working with inmates at Garner maximum security prison. Across several editions, they exhibited pieces on masculinity created with prisoners. As well as bringing work on masculinities to a collective often ignored in policies on masculinity, this project also brought their families into the fold of the festival, thus widening its reach.

For their part, the organisers of *RE/defining Masculinities* decided that “it wouldn’t be fair to promote discussion simply on the basis of our Western perspective on the issue” (Malin Bergstrom) and strove to decolonise knowledge and audiences. In a similar vein, Gleyce Heitor, coordinator of the Brazilian project, also talks about the importance of tapping the potential of peripheral practices for shaping critiques of representations of gender and race. “We have to tackle this question from a range of different angles, while appreciating that since oppressive notions of masculinity are rooted in the structural problem of patriarchy, there is a specific framework of expectations of being a man, of being masculine, which directly affects Brazilian men living in favelas... the way in which a racialised man on the periphery is expected to act in the world according to a very specific register of masculinity, the expectation of being a virile, hard, irrational and even violent man.

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When it comes to expanding the spectrum of subjects for debate and widening the range of eligible participants in these debates, we are particularly struck by the focus on fashion in

the RE/defining Masculinities project. As a system for managing appearance, fashion is an especially rich area for constructing identities and has historically been one of the key forms for performing the most hegemonic masculinities, as well as other, more complex varieties. Over decades, if not centuries, the relationship between fashion and hegemonic masculinity has been called the *Great Masculine Renunciation* [10], an eschewing of extravagance in male dress in favour of sombre, stripped-back, distinctly nonfeminine tailoring freed from ephemeral whims (and therefore able to express its enduring essence) [11]. However, fashion is not linked exclusively to the most normative forms of masculinity; it offers an array of possibilities for expressing other kinds of masculinities and forges ties between forms of practising masculinity and the dressed body.

In our area of interest, namely how to involve a group of people in the collective negotiation of masculinity by exploring possible forms of representing it, fashion considerably widens the audience that can participate in the debate. First, because it opens a door to working with young people, picking up on debates already taking place in popular culture and certain spheres of design. And second, because it gives us an opportunity to change the thrust of the conversation with these audiences and talk about the problems and possibilities of masculinity through ideas such as happiness and desire and the rich variety of ways for expressing elegance and beauty.

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