FORUM

The Informal Regulation of Gender: Fear and Loathing in the Locker Room

DONN SHORT

ABSTRACT The author contemplates how shifting, but largely unexamined, codes of masculinity have led to an emergent practice among men in locker rooms to hide their bodies. Contemplating the informal policing and regulation of men by men with respect to increasingly infrequent displays of nakedness, the author draws an unexpected connection between an arguably innocuous modesty among men in locker rooms, on the one hand, and the safety of queers, on the other.

KEYWORDS: Masculinity, gender, homophobia, governmentality, self-regulation, heterosexism, social constructionism, sports

As queer life more and more sets up shop in rainbow-drenched storefronts on main streets, and less and less frequently down alleys and up staircases on hard to find streets, gays and lesbians have been throwing off the fetters of fear at increasingly younger ages. Outdoor coffee shops have replaced hard to find bars and a good many queer bookshops find themselves competing with chain stores carrying the same product. A good deal of this, I think, is attributable to AIDS/HIV activism. Anger fights fear like nothing else. Queer theory, queer space and the erosion of the line between the private and public places in which queers lead their lives and make their presence known have characterized the last 20 years of urban life. Queer youth now challenge gender boundaries with the same conviction that the previous generation attacked narrow definitions of sexuality tied to gender, and straight boys – to my shock – now dress and undress behind their towels in locker rooms, and shower in their trunks, uncertain.

The idea of what makes a boy a boy is not changing – it has changed. A friend tells me that this may be news only to straight boys, but I think not. I think straight boys are keenly aware that the internalized list of gender attributes every one of them carries around is out of date. Growing up, boys talk and figure out what it means to be a boy. Every boy does. What it takes to be a man may be more of a mystery – and a man’s man more so – but it was nonetheless the goal. Categories such as boy-toy, girly-boy were not discussed because they did not exist. Pre-pubescent sissies and post-pubescent fags one knew about and most boys were quite sure they could spot a queer who wandered into their midst. In fact, most boys could count on queers staying as far away as possible. It wasn’t a worry.
Standing in the middle of ‘Splash’ in Chelsea, I looked around at the short-haired, muscled gay boys dancing and turned to the friend I was with and asked, ‘What do you think most of America would think if they came in here?’ Without missing a beat, my friend replied, ‘That everybody’s gay’. I knew what he meant. Gay men have adopted a look that has burst out of so-called gay culture – and stayed out.

What, if anything, has this meant for the ever-shifting construction of masculinity? How is it possible to measure the cultural effects on the so-called straight male who, affected first by the dynamism of feminism, now finds, or suspects, queers in his midst – and can’t tell? The fear felt by many gay boys starting out their lives is now shared by straight boys, too, if less-pervasively and for different reasons. A trip to the locker room illustrates the point.

When I was growing up (let’s describe this phenomenon as occurring 15–20 years ago), boys and men strolled around the locker room, showing their private parts without hesitation. This was their space and they patrolled it in comfort. Towels were in their hands, around their necks, but very often, not around their waists. It was a time when older boys and young men shaved with their dicks foremost, resting with aplomb on the counter in front of them, and urinals were not often separated by dividers.

Surveying a locker room in the new millennium boys and young men in their twenties comprise the greater thrust of the population found there. However, I have been nothing less than jaw-droppingly-perplexed to discover myself, typically, standing next to a series of young, very masculine types undressing for their workouts or readying themselves for the outside world after their workouts by undressing modestly behind a towel. The first time I encountered such blushing diffidence, I thought ‘how quaint’, but also unusual. That kind of behaviour was never on my list of how to behave like a boy. Soon, however, I woke up to the trend. Tripping across one young man after another sequestered behind his towel, however, I began to stare. It didn’t matter: nobody was looking up to see me. Towels were held firmly in place, while eyes were doggedly averted. (Make a sudden movement, however, and watch how fast the heads snap up to see what you are up to.) What struck me most about the mummified semi-naked was the fact that there was no, well, embarrassment about being embarrassed. As a kid, age 11, the first time I found myself at the YMCA, I wrapped my towel around me and changed clothes so fast, I could have given lessons to Clark Kent. I remember praying (I mean, literally, praying) that nobody would notice; of course, they did. And that kind of behaviour was the object of tremendous ridicule. One of the codes of masculinity had been violated and a price must be paid. How had these codes come to reverse themselves so resolutely?

At my YMCA, there are two shower rooms. I have never yet seen anyone straight use the big shower room at the back, nor anyone gay use the smaller shower room at the front. Somehow, everybody just ‘knows’. Straight boys read the signs and guide themselves accordingly. Maybe it’s all about which way you face when you soap up. But in the locker room, itself, boys take refuge behind towels, unsure.

Being made aware of this meek brigade of 20-year-olds in such apparent need of being wrapped before striping off, rattled me. I asked several of my straight male friends about it: they all denied that such a thing went on. Surfing the net to find even the smallest shred of evidence to support my one-man survey on the demise of locker room nakedness, I did find a study undertaken by the National Health Club Organization (NHCO) documenting a whopping 54% drop in locker room nudity in the last 15 years. The study found that strolling buck naked through the locker room was pretty much entirely limited to the over-40 age group.
Back I went to the locker room to investigate further. A redheaded 16-year-old boy was using the pool. In fact, a pack of 16-year-old boys was there that day. I was on them like flies to honey, once again praying that nobody would notice. The boys staked out their space throughout the locker room. This was going to be tricky. I chose a group of three – one of them was the redhead – and waited. All three of them reached for their towels. And then they did it. Talking all the while, they adorned their forms in terry cloth and, properly wrapped, reached under and pulled off their trunks.

Having previously checked in with my heterosexual friends, I decided this time I would make inquiries among gay men. Yes, said my friend, Sean, he had noticed the same thing. Craig, Kevin and Brian confirmed it. Corroboration, at last. If this were going on, I asked them – why was it going on? Sean, over 30 and a former collegiate swimmer, told me that even his swim team had grown bashful, arriving at the locker room and doing the towel-wrap before yanking down underwear or swim suits. Now, this was too much. The swim team? But it was not always like that, Sean went on, and I was treated to stories of ‘shave downs’ in the shower and the days gone by of post-meet lollygags, penises uncovered, hanging in the air, indifferently.

I have come to realize that in a galaxy long, long ago and far, far away (that would be the 1970s), straight boys were unaware of their own attractiveness. Considering advertisements and commercials of the time, they certainly did not do much to foster it. But that has all changed. You can no longer tell a straight man from a gay man by the colour of socks he wears with shorts – although you can still tell Europeans from North Americans that way. Straight men finally get it. The hair is trimmed (boy, is it trimmed), the clothes fit now, and cleanliness is no longer equated with wearing your underwear inside out the day after wearing it right side out. They even pierce their ears – and God help me, this is true – they do not stop there. There was a time when those straight fellows who did pierce their ears were very conscious, indeed, of which side was the gay side. I do not think anyone even knows any more. What is the world coming to when even gay men can sometimes no longer identify another gay man? And if gays have difficulty identifying other gays ...

This brings us to straight boys stripping down among other straight boys. Perhaps there are many explanations for the towels. Here is one. Keenly aware of their newly-eroticized selves, unable to spot the naked queer, all of a sudden that bath towel can do more than just get a guy dry. Just as suddenly, there is more than steam in the air. Could it be – fear?

As an educator and a playwright, I have spent a good deal of time in classrooms observing and interviewing students. One of the most telling experiences involved a tenth grade class in which the boys and girls were split into two groups and asked to discuss gender. The boys, and girls, were asked to make lists of what makes a boy, what makes a girl. Not one student had any difficulty with the assignment – no one questioned how they would construct such lists. When the boys were asked to identify desirable traits for boys they pointed to such things as confidence, strength and freedoms. When the girls were asked to identify desirable traits for boys, they listed the same characteristics. When both groups were asked if it was ‘socially better’ to be a girl or a boy, both groups agreed it was better to be a boy. When the girls were asked to explain their answer, they unhesitatingly pointed to the freedoms and choices enjoyed by boys. When the boys were asked why it was better to be a boy, one popular response, was that boys didn’t have to suck cock ‘like girls’.

My research in schools investigates the limitations of formal law to address the problem of physical, verbal and attitudinal harassment of queer students. Having spent many hours talking with students, teachers and administrators, I have come to the conclusion that the
presence of formal law, alone, in the educational context compels discussion of tolerance alone. Policies aimed at punishing isolated incidents of bullying do not encourage a consideration that queers are harassed and sometimes killed, not because they are queer, but because their victimizers are straight. Education propels us towards a consideration of the construction and regulation of sexuality and gender, in general, and moves us away from a consideration of gays and lesbians as victims, in which queer victims represent all queers, but the victimizers stand only in their own shoes, unrepresentative of a greater regulation and culture that produced them, perhaps encouraged them?

As an educator and a playwright, I am seen by others to wear two hats, but when I look at my work in academia and my work in the theatre, I see no difference. In both, I think about the ways that people govern themselves and seek to govern others. I am fascinated at the seeming unlimited ways in which people make choices for others about how to be. My most recent play, Full Frontal Diva tells the story of Donnie Gallagher, a little queer kid who didn’t know his place or keep it either. Donnie’s ‘ahead of his time’ insights and behaviour in 1969 caused problems for, well, pretty much everybody in the small town in which he lived. My play investigates the significant role that fear plays in constructing masculinity and the price men pay for that in their relationships. Little Kenny, a neighbourhood boy much infatuated with Donnie, and a relentless observer of Donnie’s life, and friendship with Jimmy, considers the affairs of boys and boys, men and men:

Looking at Jimmy, I felt the same fear that he must have tasted each time he kissed Donnie’s beautiful face – and now it was in my mouth, too. And I understood then what it was, this power that brought men together and tore love away from them: fear, terror. Nothing less.

(Short, 2004, p. 59)

Formal regulation of streets, schools and public space of other sorts will not change things much for boys, girls, queers, nor straight people. The best policies and laws there ever could be will not change the Donnie Gallaghers of the world from growing up and knowing their place. Education, a broader consideration of the social construction of sexuality and gender, could do the job, however. The characters in my play react with fear – and a price is paid. Boys feel hurt and fear, but the only sanctioned expression of those kinds of emotions is the expression of violence. I possess a little bit of fear, too. I contemplate the towel-clad, modest straight male in the locker room and wonder at his construction right under our noses. Just how might his irrational fear of the queer-in-the-woodpile be expressed in more public places, where gay men are more identifiable – say, the streets for instance? When two gay men hold hands in public spaces, they are making a decision about their safety with real overtones. Apparently, when straight boys refuse to get naked or shower at the gym, they think they are making a choice about theirs. The decision of straight boys to hide behind towels is merely an ironic choice unrelated to cultural realities. In what ways does the shifting construction of masculinity have real meaning for queers? I worry that the yob in the passing car, who yells ‘queer’ out the window, while cruising with his buddies, possibly with a baseball bat in the trunk, has just come from the locker room.

Reference
