

Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 16: 278–284, 2015
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ISSN: 1524-0657 print/1940-9206 online
DOI: 10.1080/15240657.2015.1107452



Diaspora, Exile, Colonization: Masculinity Dislocated

Avgi Saketopoulou, Psy.D.

New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis

With the help of 5 short vignettes that explore some aspects of clinical material and a brief personal experience, I discuss masculinity's constitutive relationship with the normative center. Experiences occurring in the periphery of the canonical and outside the margins of the expectable expose masculinity's anxious and unstable underpinnings. When dislocated, masculinity fans out into masculinities, roomier and airier versions of itself that allow for more and better living. Relying on psychoanalytic theory, I also propose that even as we encounter the amount of invisible cultural work that gives masculinity its seemingly natural appearance of robustness and vigor we have to take note of how our own internal relationships with the masculine center are enduringly conflicted. For the most part and despite our most stringent critiques, most of us, creatures of our cultures that we are, both frown upon and covet the masculine center.

If anyone had asked me where I felt most at home I would have replied—“*in the wrong*” [Crisp, 1968, p. 41].

VIGNETTES

1. It's the second year of my clinical training. I am presenting my work with an Iraqi patient to Gabriella, my Brazilian supervisor. My patient speaks of his country longingly; his Iraqi self is illegible, even demonized by New Yorkers. But then, to his dismay, when he visits home he discovers that something similar happens there too. The New York self he's come into is equally incomprehensible to his people. At the time, I am a recent immigrant myself and Gabriella and I talk about nostalgia, national identity, and loss. Mine and his and, at times, Gabriella's. “For those of us who have migrated as adults,” she tells me including herself, “there is no home anymore.” That statement pierces me like a dagger.
2. Max, who is 33, is being treated for his cancer diagnosis with an overpowering medical regimen. He adheres to it with no small dose of ambivalence; the cocktail comes with numerous and debilitating side effects that are ravenously eating away at his sense of masculinity. In the early part of our work, he stays home beating himself up and beating off. Then, to me, he reports the catalogued details of his erections and ejaculations.

3. A Greek man, Stefanos, wants to set up a consultation. On the phone, he's bursting at the seams. He's been living in the United States for nearly a decade, but he is considering returning home because, he describes, "I've never been able to be a man here." But this is not the problem he's seeking help for—his is a problem of thinking. Here's Stefanos again: "When I try to think about all this, it's like my mind shuts down. Everything goes blank. Could there be something wrong with my brain?"
4. My 6-year-old patient Jenny has never confided in me something I know from her parents; she was born in a male body.¹ A lot of work has to happen in treatment before, one day, she tells me sadly, "I don't want you to think I've been lying to you but there's something I haven't told you." Then comes her confession, softly: "Dad thinks I am a boy. Sometimes I wear boy clothes so his heart doesn't keep breaking." Such emotional precocity, of course, is never without psychic cost: "Then I get mad, and I *really* act like a boy and I get in trouble."
5. During a recent summer vacation in Greece, the country I was born and raised in, I ride my motorcycle into a gas station. The male attendant is surprised: "Look at you," he says condescendingly and I wince anticipating—correctly it turns out—what's coming next. "Only a girl, riding a big thing like *that!*" he says with affected admiration undergirded by masculinist contempt. Gripping my front break lever, he shifts some of the weight of the bike onto his body. "It's okay," he says in an attempt at reassurance, "I got it, you can let go. I am not going to let the bike tip." Whatever. He fills up my tank. I pay for the gas. I am ready to leave but his hand is still on the lever; "I am going to let go," he warns. Almost as amused as I am annoyed, I nod. He, however, is dead serious: "Are you sure you got it?"

REFLECTIONS

It is both belated and relieving that in the last few years masculinity has been, discursively speaking, entering what Melanie Klein called *the depressive position* (1946). Not to be confused with depression proper, the depressive position is a developmental achievement. It ushers subjects into a critical engagement with ambivalence, making it imaginable to experience genuine sorrow for all that one is not, to mourn the fantasized omnipotent control over the other that marks the beginning of all human life.

Omnipotence is a particularly crucial concept in masculinity studies. Rigidly constructed around notions of invincibility (pitted against vulnerability), self-sovereignty (vs. dependence), and rationality (over emotionality; Chodorow, 1978; Benjamin, 1988; Corbett, 1996, 2008, 2009; Dimen, 2003; Goldner, 2003; Dimen and Goldner, 2005; Harris, 2005), the trope of stereotypical masculinity has been nothing short of a meditation in tragedy. Feminism, queer theory, anthropology, postcolonial studies, sociology, literature, and history have done the foundational work that makes it conceivable to ask of masculinity today the questions psychoanalysis is now taking on. We are, alas, in psychoanalysis, oftentimes arriving with significant delays. That is regretful because psychoanalysis has an incredible

¹ For a detailed discussion of this case see Saketopoulou (2014).

amount to add to this conversation, because analytic theories can help elucidate the processes through which the social etches itself on the psychic on both the individual and the collective level.

In this brief communication I draw on Bion, a psychoanalytic rock star, who had a seemingly counterintuitive idea; humans are not born with but need *to develop* a mind that can think thoughts (Bion, 1967). In that sense, being able to convert affect to thought is something that psychoanalysis does not at all take for granted. In—admittedly broad strokes—here is how Bion (1967) described that process, which, of course, operates on the level of the unconscious. From the perspective of emotional development, one of the most critical tasks for the infant’s primary caretaker(s) is to help the caretaker manage primitive affect as well as intolerable bodily sensations. Good parents sit with these pressures, allowing themselves to be porous to the contagion of the infant’s affect. Instead of becoming overwhelmed by it, though, they absorb it, infuse it with meaning, and respond to the infant having detoxified its intensity. It is such, for instance, that when a parent hears the child scream the cries of despair following a minor fall that comes with a small injury, the parent may feel distressed enough to understand the child’s experience of urgency. If all goes well, the parent will not become so shaken up by the transmitted affect that he or she escalates rather than modulates the intensity and will be able to offer to the child a metabolized and, thus, better regulated version of the explosive emotions that previously loomed catastrophic. Melding empathy with emotional regulation, this sort of intersubjective process is soothing and reassuring for the child. Even more critically, though, it offers up for introjection an entire psychic function: the ability to withstand affect and the capacity to think through its stressful forces. It is through this ongoing repartee of affective detoxification and responsive engagement that children develop minds of their own.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CULTURE

We usually think of indoctrination into culture in a variety of familiar ways: being hailed into particular subject positions (Althusser, 1970), being called upon to account for ourselves in answer to social rules (Butler, 2005) [a common example being the gendered imperative “boys don’t cry”]. What psychoanalysts also know is that our minds have culture embedded *in their very structure*. In my understanding, this is how this process operates on its foundational, unconscious dimension: as parents detoxify and process affect, shards and fragments of the caretaker’s mind and affective life enter the child, becoming through the process Bion (1967) articulated the building blocks of the child’s prototypical thinking function. These transmissions of the undecipherable parental unconscious, enigmatically signified as Laplanche (1999) described, are saturated in cultural imperatives, in normativities, and in social conventions. Since the caretaker is herself a product of culture, the range of meaning-making options that are both consciously and unconsciously available to her are both shaped and delimited by racial, economic, class, educational, and gendered factors as they are by language, religion, and ethnicity. The caretaker’s psychic porosity to culture, variable but always unavoidable, as well as efforts to resist and counter it, are of course also similarly transmitted and introjected.

As such, reconfiguring conventional notions of masculinity is extremely complex. It requires more than the necessary and important revisions in collective thinking and social institutions. It also involves the exceptionally demanding task of psychic structural reconfigurations. We cannot

hope to achieve deep revisions in canonical and normative narratives of masculinity without being prepared to also encounter the waves of psychic disorganization that they will invoke in some subjects (more pronounced effects are obviously expected in psychiatrically vulnerable patients) and without an attendant—although hopefully transient—cultural disturbance and destabilization. This disorganization sometimes manifests as lapses in thinking, problems in stringing thoughts together, which Bion (1967) called *attacks on linking*.

Remember Stefanos, who is considering repatriating to Greece? Stefanos talks about the immigration trauma of having to adapt to a new culture. Acculturation pressures become iconically condensed in the moment when he realizes that a call made by a neighbor to child protective services is now requiring him to answer to the State for spanking his children. The investigator finds no abuse and the case is subsequently closed but Stefanos is left at a loss for how else he is to assert paternal authority. This was done to him and “to all children of my generation in Greece and I was not traumatized by it.” Under the aegis of what he feels is the State’s intrusion in his family affairs his sense of sovereignty over his home now falters. A crisis in masculinity emerges and the situation escalates—Stefanos is confused, despairing, at a loss. Eventually he starts experiencing difficulty in following his own thoughts. Might what he describes as his brain “not working” be evidentiary of the attacks on linking that arise when his new culture insists that he do fatherhood and, thus, masculinity differently? Is the opening up of a mind also about the reassembling of a mind?

“Acculturation,” the anthropologist Stanley Diamond (1974) wrote, “has always been a matter of conquest” (p. iv), a process by which the dominant culture ensures it remains, well, dominant. To maintain the stability and fixity of its center, the hegemonic host culture interpellates, coerces, and conquers. This calls for a reflection on the intersections between *diaspora* and *masculinity*. Merriam Webster defines diasporic as “the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland.” Homeland, however, is more than just a descriptive term; rather, as political theorist Hooper (2001) wrote, homelands rely heavily on illusions of uniformity and coherence to establish a national identity, to claim a canonical center that then proffers to speak for the whole. This is, of course, often built on the back of exclusionary practices. Nation building, history is tired of reminding us, is underwritten by violence, colonization, and domination.

Funny that a sense of “robust” masculinity similarly relies on splits, repressions, and dissociations (Goldner, 2003; Dimen and Goldner, 2005). Traditional masculinity’s discursive location trades in the unremarkable, in the ideal. Might placing the demands of masculinity side by side with *diasporic*, with homeland’s other, threaten to destabilize and unsettle it? In moving away from a canonical center is masculinity multiply dislocated?

What if Gabriella, my old supervisor, had been partly right? What if, for some adult immigrants, there is no home anymore? How might that impact a masculinity that is, in our collective cultural fantasy, always located in the center? How does psychic home-lessness intersect with the demands of sustained centeredness that marks the masculine ideal?

Enter immigration. Consider the series of ever-traumatic encounters with the State’s immigration agencies (and what is more hegemonic than that?), a shaming gatekeeper and a humiliating state apparatus, as those of us who are immigrants immediately recognize. Each successive encounter with immigration services is like a tier in a hazing process and, much like hazing, it produces compliant citizens.² Step-by-step, as arduous as it is psychically exhausting, this process chips

² On the relationship between hazing and the construction of white heterosexual masculinity, see Ward (2015).

away at agency so that one comes out at the other end branded a loyal and submissive subject. When Stefanos says he cannot be a man in New York, might he be embodying the confusional state that arises from the fact that the centeredness of masculinity is radically undermined (as much as it is also underwritten) by the submission required by the State? Later, he'll tell me about how encounters with immigration officers collapsed him further into feelings of helplessness, leaving him feeling emasculated. How interesting that to answer to an other is so foundationally antithetical to masculine power! For Stefanos, relocation offers itself as the fantastical panacea that will purge him from the "otherness" of the diasporic, promising to transport him smack into the center, to restore his injured masculinity.

In its marginality and capacity for multiplicity *diasporic* can be a multivalent concept. The work it does extends beyond the literal interpretation of a departure from a geographical "homeland." What if, for example, we thought of diasporic not as referencing a stable and decipherable national topos but, instead, as the home to the center, to the canonical? Take Max, for instance, and his tragic circumstances. Working hard to conceal the fragility of his body and the incapacitating side effects of his painful medical treatments, he worries about being read as a "cripple." He finds it unbearable to live as a man whose masculinity is breached, a masculinity that is diasporic to the "homeland" of the myth of male bodily materiality, which, in turn, leans heavily against able embodiment and physical strength. We might then see his lived masculinity as diasporic to a central, idealized masculine embodiment. And indeed, Max too seeks repatriation. You see, Max reads his compulsive masturbations, the repetitive measurements of his erect penis and the attempts to measure the amount of his ejaculations, as efforts to determine the degree of his physical deterioration. I, on the other hand, understand them differently: I see them as desperate efforts to reinstate a masculinity by enacting its stereotypical center: penis as the measure of man.

Things are a lot different for my 6-year-old, Jenny, for whom masculinity has *become* the diaspora. Jenny, whose gender does not contort to fit her natal body, tells me she performs masculinity by dressing in "boy clothes" to protect her father. In that, she places herself outside her own center, a position we might also think of as diasporic. Or, flipped on its head, rather than the diaspora, might we think of this masculinity as the exile into which Jenny is being relationally pressured? Consent is what mediates the difference between diaspora and exile. There is perhaps an illusion, perhaps a reality that diaspora is a consensual process. Consent and coercion, however, as Gramsci (1971) has taught us, are porous to each other. We sometimes consent to something not because we genuinely want that to which we agree but in order to avoid experiencing the humiliations of being forced to do it anyway. Consent, in that sense, forces an encounter with the illusory nature of some choices. Our eager and willing consent oftentimes works to ensure that we will not have to contend with the painful recognition of the limits of our self-sovereignty.

If we wince when we hear Jenny say that she acts boy for dad's sake, it's because we recognize that although Jenny may be initiating the cross-dressing into boy clothes, she does so not because she wants to but because she wants the results it will yield—reassuring dad. "I get angry," she tells me and describes fits of rage during which she violently breaks things at home—enacting the caricatured attributes of the role she feels pushed into. In his 1933 paper on the "confusion of tongues," Ferenczi talked about the muddle of "who is who" that emerges for a child before a scene of molestation. You see how you are mirrored in the other and partially identify with their vision of you—a mimetic identification with significant implications and complications as elaborated in Benjamin's (2004) work around doer/done-to intersubjective entanglements.

In the case that, like me, you find yourselves becoming protective of Jenny and feel a sense of concern about what she has to do in order to care take her father, let me say something about fathering and masculinity. There is a particularly interesting scene in the film *Gunhill Road* (2011), which explores the relationship between a father (played by Esai Morales) and his transgender adolescent daughter. The father returns home after completing a jail sentence to find that his child has transitioned and is living as a girl. The film chronicles his endless struggle with her gender. In a particularly poignant scene, a friend tries to mediate the conflict by advising the father to let his daughter do what she will. She is, after all, the friend insists, not hurting anyone. As the audience we cheer for her, relieved someone is taking a protective stance. And then, something both banal and interesting happens. The father protests. That's not true, he says, he [his daughter] is hurting *me*, I had dreams for him. I am his father and he was my son.

One way to read this narrative is that the father is anxiously masculine—and there's a lot in the movie that underscores the anxiety inherent to masculinity—laying a territorial claim to his child's imagined, male-gendered future. But another, and I think more interesting, way of looking at this is to consider how fathering is not only a gendered noun but also an act of *gendering*. The oedipal complex works in the chronologically inverse way too, bolstering the father's masculinity in relation to his son as the force of prohibition, as he who threatens, and eventually spares, castration.

Whereas Jenny toggles between diaspora and exile, my experience with the gas station attendant catapults us well into the territory of exile. This man deems it necessary to hold my break lever to ensure my bike doesn't tip over because he assumes that I, "a girl," wouldn't be able to keep it up. I have been riding motorcycles for years and although girls can ride bikes and still be girls, for me it is one of the ways in which I do my masculinity. But all of this fades under the burden of his interpellation, and I feel emasculated. One does not need to be male, male-bodied, or male-identified to feel castrated. The attendant's behavior signals a forceful eviction from the land of masculinity that he, as its owner and purveyor, feels authorized to enact—"you! girl! out!" Like most subjects, I too, am in a vexed relationship with the masculine center—how to rebel and conform at once. Despite ourselves, centers exert a gravitational pull on us all. If there is something synchronous indeed between masculinity and the centrality of "homeland," what citizen does not want to belong?

I think the answer has to be that it depends on the "homeland." Interestingly, motorcycles do nothing for my masculinity in my life in New York, where it has found other forms of expression. For me, that raises an interesting question: Might we think of masculinity not as a psychic property whose contours and contortions we are trying to map but rather as a category of experience that ebbs and flows, more akin to what relational psychoanalysts call a self-state, a segment of the self that kaleidoscopically shifts between foreground and background (Davies, 2015) as it becomes inflected with the different discursive and psychic meanings masculinity carries across national borders?

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AUTHOR BIO

Avgi Saketopoulou, Psy.D., is faculty at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and the Stephen Mitchell Center. She serves on the editorial boards of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* and *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. Dr. Saketopoulou has received the Ruth Stein Prize, the Ralph Roughton Award, and the 2014 Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association and Symonds Prizes.

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