

Phallic Affect, or Why Men's Rights Activists Have Feelings

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Abstract

The men's rights movement and its academic offshoot "New Male Studies" are considered in light of the turn to affect. I argue that affective utterances, "I feel," become phallic in the men's rights movement and function in a defensive mode. Unlike the phallus as guarantor of masculinity, which is currently up for debate, the affective utterance cannot be denied—that is, affect is wholly subjective. However, we can, as theorists, ask questions about how and why affect is being used.

Keywords

affect, phallus, anality, castration, masculinity, emotion, feelings, men's rights, New Male Studies, men's rights movement

I decided to experiment with ways of getting men to express feelings.

—Warren Farrell

The men's rights movement has quickly gained a presence on many university campuses across North America. Brandon University, for example, where I teach and research, was the first Canadian University to have a "men's collective" that attended to "men's issues," positioned itself in opposition to the "women's collective," and received significant media attention. The collective, however, has stopped

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being influential on campus. At the University of Toronto, talks by a number of men's rights intellectuals, such as Warren Farrell, Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young, and Janice Fiamengo, to name but a few, have been disrupted by protests from opposing factions. At Ryerson University, the student union has voted to ban all mentions of "misandry" (a word that Microsoft Word does not recognize) and men's rights arguing that, in fact, men have always had these rights and there is no threat to men, save perhaps, to their right to hegemonic and patriarchal masculinities. On December 6, 2013, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), in their annual statement marking the Montreal Massacre, observed:

Disturbingly, we have seen in the past year the rise of misogynist men's rights groups on campuses and in communities across the country—an alarming trend that requires our attention and action. At the CAUT Council meeting last week, a motion was passed that CAUT commission a report to study the nature and impact of male rights groups across Canadian universities and colleges and take appropriate action to implement the Commission's recommendations. (Online)

What, then, are we, as scholars of gender, and perhaps especially scholars of masculinity and men to make of the men's rights movement and the aggrieved men who participate in these events to make of their presence on our campuses? Instead of imagining this as a debate about free speech and academic freedom (certainly valid and important concerns, which should be defended), how are we to theorize, contextualize, and account for the men's rights movement? What is the role of the gender studies scholar, particularly a scholar of masculinity, in these debates?¹

I admit that I am utterly fascinated by the men's rights movement for a number of reasons, ranging from their seemingly sudden presence to the kinds of arguments that are made, the so-called villain of their ideological framework and, perhaps most especially, because of how violent and aggressive its politics are while simultaneously denying, repeatedly, that it is misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, phallogocentric, and patriarchal. In the context of this article, I am chiefly interested in the young men who participate in these groups, the kinds of discursive arguments put forward on campuses, and how we as scholars of gender can respond. I am not, thus, thinking about the particularities, for instance, of "father's rights" groups, which, while often aligned with the larger men's rights movement, are focused squarely on the issues of the father and the child. Likewise, another faction of the men's rights movement might include "intactivists," which is "broadly considered to be an anticircumcision movement that began in the early 1980s around the time of Edward Wallerstein's *Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy*" (Sardi 2014, 94). In this movement, circumcision, especially routine neonatal circumcision is framed as a violation of genital integrity, and thus, the infant male's rights to that integrity. There are, of course, valuable discussions to be had about the common ground between various groups in the larger men's rights movement; however, this would require a much larger space that would be able to draw on a much larger body of knowledge.

Before moving further, it is perhaps useful that I position myself here as a critical theorist working at the intersection of affect theory and critical studies of men and masculinities. My work reads critically the rise of men's rights and what this might mean for critical studies of men and masculinities, especially since the discipline is committed to a pro-feminist, anti-homophobic, antiracist pedagogy, and practice. I do also want to acknowledge what this study is not doing, which is to say, a socio-historical analysis of the rise of men's rights movement; instead, I am interested explicitly in men's rights intellectuals, authors, ideologues, and how (interdisciplinary) scholars of masculinity might think about these texts. Finally, I am writing from the vantage of the North American (Canadian) academy, where we have seen significant debates about the presence of men's rights activism on campus.

Men's rights intellectuals, in their attempts to save maleness and masculinity, insist upon and deploy the language of affect even though, more often than not, they are only capable of demonstrating that they are angry and fearful, and it would seem that other affects are simply not an option. Do men experience joy? Certainly not if one reads through men's rights writings, what one finds over and over again is *anger*. This study largely focuses on what I am calling "men's rights activist literature," by which, I mean literature produced explicitly with the intention of speaking to and about men's rights, and a literature that has been largely endorsed by men's rights activists. The journal *New Male Studies* acts as the academic forum in which men's rights activists can feel welcome to publish their findings. The mission statement for *New Male Studies* reads, in part, "in response to a now well-documented decline in the overall wellbeing of males in postmodern culture, a group of Australian, Canadian, European, and American scholars have gathered to work together to publish research, essays, opinion pieces, and book reviews on all aspects of the male experience" (online). Likewise, *A Voice for Men* has endorsed—glowingly—the work of writers like Warren Farrell, Paul Nathanson, Katherine K. Young, Janice Fiamengo, Miles Groth, and others. In this regard, the movement is establishing a "canon" of works that ought to be read by men's rights activists. Additionally, with respect to a canon, *New Male Studies* also routinely includes "Classics in Male Studies."

Michael Kimmel's recent book is aptly titled *Angry White Men: American Men and the End of an Era*, but what is certain is that we are surrounded by a great deal of angry men lamenting their loss of rights, how feminism has attacked their right to maleness, and so on. I'm a critical theorist of gender, so my intention here is not to outline the theoretical and methodological problems of the movement (I will leave this work to sociologists, for instance) but rather to work through what is happening, how we might theorize the men's rights movement, what is motivating this movement, and how we need to shift the dialogue to consider ideas of shame and humiliation, which I will demonstrate is intimately caught up in castration anxiety.

The men's rights movement is distinct from other explorations of masculinity insofar as the movement itself is fundamentally situated in opposition to feminist theory and activism. Indeed, Michael Flood (1998, 69) summarizes that the men's

rights movement “is generally an anti-feminist perspective” and many cultural critics describe it as “representing a ‘backlash.’” I myself would frame the men’s rights movement as reactive rather than politically advantageous, that is, it has located its problem, namely women and feminism, but it has yet to outline a theory of its call to action. Jack Halberstam (2012, 104) provides a useful way of framing this discussion. The men’s rights movement draws on “reactive politics,” which are “weak politics” because they are generally “defensive,” and often define their politics “by the opposition” and “tend to retreat into justification instead of moving through provocations.” Thus, the movement frames itself as being defensive and it “defends” the rights of men. Pro-feminist men, or feminist men, are seen as joining the opposition, as “converts” in the words of Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young (2001,2006).

This article holds to a “pro-feminist” angle of inquiry and embraces ideas of “masculinity studies,” which are informed by feminist theory and which work to unpack ideas and ideologies surrounding masculinities. To study masculinity requires that the field must be informed by and committed to a pro-feminist, or simply put, feminist agenda (including antiracist and anti-homophobic pedagogies). Declaring masculinity studies as such is important especially today, living in rape culture, a culture that is witnessing the rise of misogynistic, transphobic, and homophobic men’s rights activists on university and college campuses, a culture of slut-shaming, continued violence against women, transmen and transwomen, and genderqueer kids, too many suicides of victims of bullying, and the faceless acts of violence committed on the Internet each and everyday whenever a woman dares to speak, whenever a feminist dares to demand an answer, and whenever a queer kid asks for justice. To study masculinity today requires that we be cognizant of what is happening in these various spaces and to once more reaffirm our commitment to feminist pedagogies, theories, and activisms. As such, what is politically at stake in this article is an argument about why scholars of masculinity studies, those of us who would be dismissed as pro-feminist scholars by the men’s rights movement, need to pay attention to this movement and need to think carefully about what is happening on our campuses.

Patriarchy, of course, as every scholar of gender surely agrees is not a zero-sum game. It is a site of intersectionality and multiplicity, wherein some men have a great deal of power and others less power. Being male often provides membership to patriarchy, but the quality of the male’s membership is not always the same. Intersectional theories have long demonstrated this point, being a gay man in a patriarchal culture is not the same as being a straight man, being a masculine gay man is not the same as being an effeminate gay man, being a racialized man is not the same as being a White man, being of a lower class is not the same as being of the upper classes, and so on.

Admittedly, I am oversimplifying the complexities of intersectional theory; however, it remains essential for the field to acknowledge and admit these complexities if we are to mount a critique of men’s rights activism, which has been routinely

dismissed—rightly or wrongly—as being about “White men.” Indeed, this is why Kimmel’s study of White men is so essential to the study of masculinity, precisely because White men, in general, hold a significant amount of power in not only the men’s rights movement but also patriarchy. This is an important point precisely because the men’s right movement quickly can be construed of as a kind of nostalgia for a simpler time of clearly defined patriarchal entitlement. It is easy to note this, it is quite another thing to think about what this means, and how it works affectively. What is so striking is how *affective* the men’s rights movement has become, how it has co-opted the language of affect, emotion, feeling, and the personal being political to meet its own ends. The men’s rights movement, we might say, has appropriated the language of feminist consciousness-raising. The men’s rights movement may well be a post-feminist “strange stirring” (Friedan 2001, 15; Coontz 2010) in which men desperately want to speak about their anxieties over masculinity but can find no way to do so. These activists hold that rights have been taken away from them, and they believe that men have become victims of feminism and/or feminizing processes. Indeed, we might go so far as to argue that the men’s rights movement capitalizes on what Warren Farrell (1993, 16) has called “victim power,” which for Farrell was a feminist ploy that worked to convince “the world that we lived in a sexist, male-dominated, and patriarchal world,” which is now being recast for men who apparently still live in a sexist world, but a world that is now “gynocentric” or a kind of “gynotopia,” as Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young insist (2001, 5; 2006, x; 2010, 249–56).

The men’s rights movement is not new, though it seemingly has become more prevalent in recent years.² Some might say some of the popularity of the movement, at least within North American culture, begins with Robert Bly’s best-selling *Iron John* and the mythopoetic movement; however, this is not the case. Read today and in light of the men’s rights movement, Bly’s *Iron John* seems tame in relation to the kinds of arguments we see about men from the men’s rights movement. Indeed, it is imperative that we recognize that Bly and the men’s rights movement would seemingly have very little in common today. Bly (1990, 14) believed that “the boys in our culture have a continuing need for initiation into male spirit” and more particularly *Iron John* is a meditation on homosocial community and bonding. It is important to note that Bly’s work is markedly different from the ascendant men’s rights movement.

E. Anthony Rotundo (1993, 288) writes that “the writing of Robert Bly explicitly rejects middle-class machismo and the disdain for all things feminine. Nor does Bly condemn feminism or feminists,” which is a stark contrast from the men’s rights movement, which is fundamentally informed by and committed to an antifeminism and a renunciation of all things “feminine.” The men’s rights movement is framed as a “‘backlash’ strand of the men’s movement” (Maddison 1999, 40), that is, it is but a part of the movement that turned attention to men and masculinity of which Bly was a part. Instead, men’s rights activists hold “that the women’s movement has ‘gone too far’ and has harmed men in profound and fundamental ways” (Maddison

1999, 40). Accordingly, a writer like Robert Bly is quickly dismissed because he does not denounce or renounce feminist thinking. Indeed, in a critique of Robert Bly, Nathanson and Young (2001, 344) write, “for some men, especially those in the ‘mythopoetic’ movement associated with Robert Bly, gynocentrism has highlighted qualities that could benefit men no less than women. They have tried to feminize themselves to emphasize their ‘feminine side.’” Bly becomes, for Nathanson and Young, an “honorary woman,” their term for all men who refuse to be male, which is to say, not pro-feminist and committed to a biological determinism that affords the male access to being male.

The curiousness of this is that the men’s rights movement will make essential homosociality its central and governing claim; and as a corollary, all men who are not standing in lockstep with the men’s rights movement are misandric, and thus, pro-feminist, honorary women, and women lovers. But, though the men’s rights movement is fundamentally and constitutionally homosocial, the movement itself is not homosexual, but indeed, seemingly rabidly homophobic. None of this, of course, makes sense, which is precisely the point. In developing an ideology, the movement has failed to account for and consider even its most basic of principles. The men’s rights movement is about a certain type of man who desires homosocial community and bonding but not homosexuality (even though the movement flirts with the very limits of orientation when advocating for intimacy between men); and though he does not desire men, his relations with women are fundamentally problematic since women, particularly feminists, are the source of all of his anxieties.

How then do scholars of masculinity studies approach, think about, and theorize the men’s rights movement even if it has yet to declare its own intentions, theories, and methodologies (outside of antifeminism)? I want to be very careful here for I am not interested in advancing their politics, but rather I am interested in exploring how affect informs these movements and what our responses to these affects might be. That is, I want to take seriously their claims of *feeling*, and why someone like Warren Farrell (1993) would want men to speak of their feelings. Andrew Kimbrell (1995, xii–xiii, my emphasis), for example, in *The Masculine Mystique*, writes, “whatever age, political persuasion, race, or creed, these men share a common condition. They *feel* bewildered, out of control, numbed, angered, and under attack.” I am explicitly interested in how affect is being used. How do we think about men’s feelings, feelings these men feel are questioned, lamented, dismissed?

Simon O’Sullivan notes that “there is no denying, or deferring affects” and that affects are “the stuff that goes beneath, beyond, and even parallel to signification” and further that “you cannot read affects, you can only experience them” (in Hemmings 2005, 549). If we admit that this is the case, then the declaring of affect is a remarkably powerful declaration precisely because it cannot be denied, that is, by turning to affect the men’s rights activists do not need to prove the truth of their claims because their affects—the feeling that it is true—trump the veracity of the thing causing the feeling. I want to offer a brief caveat here: I am drawing on affect theory, but I am not making a specific argument about given affects. Instead, my

work is interested in the use of affective language, emotions, and feelings. I do not believe it is an accident that White men are turning to affective utterances to mark their claims; indeed, there is something remarkably political about these claims. These claims become indisputable precisely because affects cannot be read, one can only experience them; and in this regard, the men's rights activists become essentially phenomenological, "my experiences are my experiences and you cannot deny them because I believe them to be true." That is, even if quantitative, qualitative, and factual research demonstrates that the apparent cause of these affects is incorrect, wrong, misguided, we can still not deny the veracity of the affect.

Indeed, I am going to accept the premise that we cannot deny affect—though, I am willing to imagine that some would certainly be willing to mount this argument, and I'd imagine would be successful, say, faking it, crocodile tears, and so on. But, then, how do we think about affect in this very particular and very gendered scenario of the men's rights movement? For one, I think the answer is to position affect, feeling, and emotion alongside phallicism. That is, I will argue here that affect becomes phallic, insofar as it will carry on the symbolic role of the phallus, which stands "in and up for the man" (Potts 2000, 85). More particularly, I will demonstrate that the turn to affect is provoked by a castration anxiety that has become central to men's rights and the turn to affect thus returns the phallus to male subjectivity. That is, castration is a loss that needs to be recuperated, and affective language and utterances will fill this void. Affect thus is a way to recuperate the castrated patriarchy in a way that cannot be denied. The turn to affect thus is practical, political, and phallic.

Since patriarchal and hegemonic masculinity's goal is "to become larger, to take up more space, and yield less of it," we can turn our attention to, the correlation between the "transformation of the limp penis into the large, hard phallus" (Pronger 1998, 72) and, as I will argue, the question of affect and masculine privilege. Affect, in the men's rights movement, is phallic insofar as it aims to make issues "larger," hoping that their claims will somehow "take up more space" in our political, legal, cultural, and academic discourse, and ultimately will "yield less" room to competing discourses precisely because one's claim to affect, or feeling a given way, cannot be denied. Just as the phallus cannot, however much we might try, be denied—it can be denied access, but its power and symbolism remain essential to a variety of discourses, either as a site of resistance or as a site of power and celebration, such is the case of the men's rights movement.

The central claim of the men's rights movement is that something has gone horribly wrong, society has failed boys, and men are lacking. Even scholars outside of the men's rights movement have commented on the shifting dynamics surrounding boys, men, and masculinity. Many of the young men in Michael Kimmel's *Guyland* (2008, 3) "feel anxious and uncertain" about their futures, about the shifting ideas about gender and sexuality, and about claims to masculinity. These feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are often located in the fear that "those bitches have taken over" as Patrick, one of Kimmel's "angry White men" (or at least, angry White guy). Patrick, while certainly a fascinating case study, is also, in many ways, merely an

archetype, “a typical or recurring image” (Frye 1957, 99) or example of the aggrieved angry White man that Kimmel imagines and thinks about in his work. We can find numerous examples of these kinds of affective utterances, for instance, even the most cursory review of *A Voice for Men's* forums, web pages, and Facebook group. This feeling of failure, this feeling of being castrated or that the “bitches have taken over,” is found in Hanna Rosin’s *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*, she provides a similar example, “As Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary recently asked, ‘What does it mean for large sectors of our society to become virtual matriarchies?’” and Mohler concludes, “the real issue here is not the end of men, but the disappearance of manhood” (p. 97). Indeed, Helen Smith has gone so far as to say, not only have women, in essence, “taken over,” as Patrick would have it, but they are now “on strike,” and they are boycotting marriage, fatherhood, and the American dream, as the subtitle to her book *Men on Strike* reads. Throughout my study, while I focus on Patrick, he is but an archetype of any number of men on strike, on men who have gone their own way, and of men who have bought into the idea that women have, once and for all, taken over.

Patrick further explains, “They’re everywhere. You know that ad, ‘it’s everywhere you want to be.’ That’s like women! *They’re* everywhere *they* want to be! There’s nowhere you can go anymore—factories, beer joints, military, even the god-damned firehouse! We working guys are just fucked” (M. Kimmel 2008, 12; 2010, 19; 2013, 115). While we do not see the language of affective utterance, we certainly recognize the way anger is working here; and moreover, how the phallus, now a feminine phallus since men have lost all power so the argument of men’s rights activists would go, rears its head, “working guys are just fucked.”

This feeling of being “just fucked,” a not entirely uncommon sentiment among men and especially in the men’s rights movement, is enmeshed in castration and phallicism, and there is a great deal of work to be done surrounding the phallic nature of affective declarations. If it is not women in general who are “fucking” men, it is their failed mothers, who turned them into soft men lacking in masculinity and virility and turned them against their fathers, and if it is not women in general and mothers in particular, then it is the education system that has privileged girls and feminized education and so on (M. Kimmel 2006, 2010). I am not interested in attending to the veracity of these claims, because it is less about the *realness* of these claims and more about *feeling* that motivates these claims. “Guys are just fucked” becomes the mantra of a movement that declares that there is a war against boys or that masculinity is in crisis. The movement, as a political agenda demanding that we pay attention to its claims, it concerns, its anxieties, seeks to return masculinity and virility to men, to their rightful position on top.

The issue, however, is not about being “fucked” but rather about the shameful and humiliating position in which being fucked has put men. For a man to be fucked, he must submit, place himself beneath, and become the bottom in the hierarchical structure of the language of fucking. As a range of scholars have noted, for a man to be penetrated, which is to say fucked, is to surrender his masculinity, “to abdicate

power” (Bersani 2010, 19). When M. Kimmel’s (2008, 12) subject, Patrick, suggests, guys are just fucked, his language is fully intentional, especially since, “‘fucking’ [...] is not merely expressive, *it is an argument*” (Tomlinson 2010, 76–7). When Patrick uses the word he is making a very real argument, especially since the word itself is not “neutral” or without value. To be fucked and to fuck are not the same as to make love, to have sex, to engage in coitus, we must admit that fucking contains “the politically fraught complications of sexual violence” (Tomlinson 2010, 81), a violence that is equally found in the language which speaks of the “war on boys.” Whatever is happening or not happening, men feel that they are getting fucked, they have been fucked, and this is, of course, a fundamentally problematic use of language in a culture that seemingly cannot escape the sway of rape culture and slut shaming.

What is at stake for these men who feel fucked is, of course, their masculinity, which is conferred to them by the phallus that guarantees and confirms masculinity, and also, and perhaps most importantly, their exclusion and alienation from an increasingly feminized society and their right to claim a victimized identity. But, perhaps, I have arrived too quickly at a conclusion; and thus, I want to work through this language of violence and victimhood, which is intimately connected to and embodied in phallic affect. At bottom, the affective utterances are less about being angry and more about being castrated.

Ken Corbett (2009, 191) argues that when we insist upon ideas of “boys will be boys” to explain away sexual harassment or rape culture or slut shaming that we are, in effect, “mask[ing] the masculine dilemma regarding the threat of losing.” My contention is that this fear of loss is fundamentally about castration and its remedy is the turn to affect, which cannot be denied, cannot be taken away from the subject. “Boys’ aggression,” for Corbett (2009, 194), “often conceals their anxiety about losing,” and thus, boys will find a way to compensate for any potential loss. The ultimate goal, of course, is to find a way to express something that cannot and will not ever be lost, the ultimate signifier, which is, above all, the phallic. When guys speak of getting fucked, they are not, of course, castrated, but their claims to masculinity seem to be in doubt or the right to masculinity might well be lost. The penis had previously guaranteed men’s ability to, right to, and entitlement to *fuck*, but the roles have reversed and they are now being fucked because “those bitches have taken over” (M. Kimmel 2008, 12).

Castration becomes, thus, an important model for thinking about “men’s feelings,” precisely because the feelings are governed by a sense of loss and moreover this sense of loss is fundamentally out of control. Jane Gallop (2002, 132), for instance, suggests that castration occurs when a subject “find[s] himself inscribed in a symbolic order he does not control,” which is what we find in the men’s rights movement that positions feminism, for example, as controlling power and gender paradigms. The greater fear, however, I will contend is in the phrasing of “being fucked” and what this reveals about power and dominance. The fear is as much about losing the phallus as it is about submitting to a power that should not have

phallic power, the female body, and the feminist agenda, which have usurped patriarchal normativity.

Nevertheless, I do think we need to think deeply about what just fucked means. Without wishing to put too fine a point on this, how and more particularly where are these men getting fucked? I admit from the outset that this is a loaded question, but the language of these activists is what is at stake in this article. Leo Bersani (2010), Michel Foucault (1985), and David Halperin (1995) have all noted that to be fucked, is to submit, to surrender, and “to abdicate power” (Bersani 2010, 19); in other words, to be fucked is to be sexually feminized because “the passive role is in some way demeaning” (Foucault in Bersani 2010, 19). Indeed, in what follows, I argue that we need to think carefully about how this argument could and would unfold if we shifted our attention and began to think about what’s “behind” the men’s rights movement.

In his article, “*On Your Knees: Carnal Knowledge, Masculine Dissolution, Doing Feminism*,” Brian Pronger has provided useful, if not brilliant, ideas about anality and masculinity that fold well into the discussion of men’s feelings and the men’s rights movement. If being fucked feminizes the subject and causes him to surrender power, then surely we must attend to what is being fucked and how that affects one’s claim to power and gender. The phallus is the symbol par excellence of masculinity precisely because its goal is “to become larger, to take up more space, and yield less of it” (Pronger 1998, 72) as I’ve already noted, but we need to think carefully about what “the transformation of the limp penis into the large, hard phallus” means precisely because “the expanding phallus is protected by the other side of desire: the closed anus,” and more particularly, “the tight anus protects masculine space by repelling invasion” (Pronger 1998, 72). The anus becomes important precisely because it is “impenetrable” whereas the male body and the phallus attached to it “is conquering and inviolable” (Pronger 1998, 72). My contention here is that what is happening in the men’s rights movement is that the feelings that are expressed are located in the fact the body has suddenly become penetrable and it is seemingly being conquered, or at least the men feel that their body, their right to the phallus, and patriarchy are being conquered by a particularly powerful branch of feminism.

Indeed, the problem with the men’s rights movement, or one of many of its problems, is its fundamental commitment to homophobia as essential to its definition of what it means to be a man. Consider for example an anecdote that Kimmel provides in his article, “Who’s Afraid of Men Doing Feminism?” After giving a lecture on men and feminism, M. S. Kimmel (1998, 59–60) notes sources of criticism of his lecture, for example, “there are what I’ve come to call angry-white-men-in-training. These young men are defensive, angry, and fully resistant to anything that remotely hints of feminism.” He explains, “in about one in five lectures, I experience something like the following”:

A burly white male student, sitting in the back row, arms folded across his chest, the brim of his baseball hat turned around, raised his hand as the moderator for the

evening's lecture announce there was time for one more question. "What make you such an expert on men?" he began with a challenge masquerading as a question. "The way you talk about listening to women, and supporting feminism, you must be a faggot or something. You sure aren't a real man." (1998, 60)

While Kimmel's article was published in 1998 (though republished in Kimmel's [2010] *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinity*), I regret that it does not seem as if things have changed much for Kimmel, especially if one reads his recent *Guyland*. Incidentally, this is precisely Miles Groth, editor of *New Male Studies*, critique of Stony Brook University's Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities. Groth dismisses Kimmel as "a prolific anthologizer of pro-feminist apologetics for undergraduate consumption" (in Bawer 2013, online) and the Center itself becomes questionable because it involves feminism and feminist theorists. To study masculinity from a pro-feminist position is to surrender or to limit one's claim to masculinity, one becomes "a faggot or something" (M. S. Kimmel 1998, 60).

But outside of these examples, consider how quickly Glover (2013, 64) laments any mention of gay and/or queer identity in his article, "*Males, Melville, and Moby Dick: A New Male Studies Approach to Teaching Literature to College Men*," which begins with a misguided and erroneous one-sentence critique of Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* and concludes with a sweeping generalization that "in our time the emphasis is still on Melville's sexuality, most notably his *supposed* homosexuality. Any questioning of this has led some to say, like Rictor Norton, that any attempt to dissuade others of Melville's homosexuality is homophobia." While Glover's analysis of *Moby Dick*, Melville, Fiedler, and Rictor are easily critiqued (and Fiedler [1966, 349] himself lamented his use of "homoerotic" which was read as "homosexual," as indicated in a note), my point here is to stress how homosexuality haunts any claims to being "male." Indeed, Glover's argument is paranoid (Sedgwick 2003) insofar as he preempts the criticism of being accused of homophobia by noting that a critic like Rictor will accuse him of homophobia. I am not so much suggesting the argument is homophobic, in the sense of gay bashing, but I am suggesting that homosexuality and homophobia fundamentally haunts and informs the men's rights movement and the *New Male Studies*, the apparent academic offshoot of the movement.

This homophobia is guided by a question of who can declare himself as a "real man," and a persistent attempt to establish oneself as a real man, committed to the fight against the so-called misandry. A man like Michael Kimmel, then, for men's rights activists, authors, and intellectuals, is not real man because he advocates a politics of misandry. Indeed, in the index to their volumes on misandry, Nathanson and Young (2001, 359; 2006, 631) render "male feminists" or "pro-feminist males" as "honorary women." More to the point, we need to think carefully about what is really being said when Kimmel is called a "faggot" or when Glover insists that Melville was not gay. In both instances, homophobia is what is motivating the discussion. To call Kimmel a faggot is to discredit his claim to "real manhood" and to

argue that Melville was not “gay” is to argue that since he was not gay, he must therefore be endowed with real manhood. What is certain is that the “unreal man,” must surely be a gay man; and as with so much homophobia, we must then turn our attention to how masculinity, or one’s claim to masculinity, is lost. It is lost precisely because when he is “on his knees” (Pronger 1998, 69), he surrenders his claim to masculinity.

Pronger’s argument regarding on his knees is anally focused, and I am inclined to follow his lead (though I cautiously note that the phrase itself is ambiguous). Pronger argues that “masculine desire is essentially homophobic” (1998, 75) and that “homophobia is the reluctance to give up masculine space; it is the fear men have of the inversion of the expanding phallus and the closed anus into a deferential phallus and open anus” (1998, 76). I am sufficiently convinced that when men use the epitaph that Kimmel is a faggot and not a real man that the question is about how he uses his masculinity, and perhaps more important, how he does not use his masculinity. Nevertheless, I do want to caution that this position of being on his knees is quite ambiguous, for what it is worth, it could be orally focused. After all, “the anus is the end of a tube; the mouth its beginning” (Miller 1997, 98); and in both scenarios, the phallus’s power is limited and other zones of eroticism have been called upon, both of which render the phallus subject passive. As Pronger (1998, 76) notes, “homophobia finds its deepest and perhaps most intractable expression in the reluctance of many men to open their mouths and anuses to other men” and that above all, “homophobia is the fear of giving up control, the fear of becoming an open vessel that can be freely filled by the desire of others, especially men”. Indeed, this is precisely my point here, that what is at stake for the men’s rights activists, is, at bottom, a “fear of giving up control,” or even more particularly, that control is being taken from men. Men have—at least metaphorically speaking—become the victims of the rape culture that they perpetuate.

To be “taken on his knees” is to be denied claims to masculinity and most notably to be denied the power of the phallus. When power is taken from men, the specter of castration cannot loom far behind. This castration is not necessarily about the physical act, though undoubtedly that is part of the fear, but rather about the displacement of the phallus’s power. So much of culture is dependent upon the phallus as a guarantor of life, as a symbol of power, and as central to how we differentiate humans. Castration—physical or psychic—is:

a spectre that has haunted men for centuries: the fear that manhood will become, or has already become, obsolete, superfluous, ridiculous, at best quaint, at worst disgusting. Nowadays, you can buy a vibrating dildo (discreetly labelled a ‘muscle massager’) in a novelty shop in your local mall. After the invention of the portable electric penis—even before the coming of the clone—who needs men anymore? (Taylor 2000, 9)

Of course, there is an irony that needs to be noted here, the invention of the vibrating dildo is largely in part to the male-dominated field of sexology and psychoanalysis,

wherein a vibrator cured hysteria. But the larger fear is about the loss of control and power. If the phallus has no power, where then is male power? What then affords men access to patriarchy?

When Patrick explains that guys “are just fucked” (M. Kimmel 2008, 9), he is perhaps right insofar as these young men feel displaced, alienated, and so on, but his understanding of its implications are fundamentally informed by a belief that the phallus is power; and moreover, that the loss of the phallus means men have now power, have been castrated, and have been rendered into an unenviable position of being like women. Instead of being in the dominant position, men, again following the arguments of the men’s rights activists and even those men unaffiliated with the movement like some of those found in Kimmel’s *Guyland*, have been forced “on their knees,” by the powerful and domineering feminist successes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. More particularly, we need to think seriously about what it means when the closed anus is threatened. The anus, when opened, reveals a secret about masculinity and that secret the anus becomes “the grave in which the masculine idea [. . .] of proud subjectivity is buried” (Bersani 2010, 29). All masculinity and claims to it are surrendered once one is fucked, particularly in a scenario that has been so richly informed by castration anxieties, even if, at this point, only minor cuts from the top. In a psychoanalytical tradition, we might speak of the tension between circumcision and castration here, if anything, these men’s rights activists have been—against their will—circumcised, which might be seen as a foreboding of their eventual castration.

While I do not want to advance a large argument about Jewishness, anti-Semitism, and men’s rights activists, I do believe it is prudent to note how quickly Nathanson and Young (2001, 4) position “men” as being like the “Jews.” In the opening pages of their first volume, *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*, they write, after discussing Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*: “Why begin this book about men with these words about Jews? Because in our time, surprising though it may sound, belief in the full humanity of *men* has been dangerously undermined by stereotypes based on ignorance and prejudice, just as that of the Jews was.” While Nathanson and Young are not advancing a “Jewish” argument or an “anti-Semitic” politic, one cannot help but note how often the Jew becomes an example of the trials and tribulations of the common man who they seek to represent. Moreover, there has certainly been a great deal of discussion about circumcision and masculinity that could unfold in this argument, particularly by way of castration anxiety. We will recall, for instance, Freud remarked that castration was a punishment that was “later softened [. . .] down into circumcision” (1958, 17:86) and repeated in *Moses and Monotheism* (1958, 23:91).³

Returning to the task at hand, we have, I believe, established that castration anxiety is central to the men’s rights movement. Indeed this anxiety is literalized most famously in the case of John Bobbitt who became a cause célèbre for men’s rights activists, as is the case in, *Legalizing Misandry* by Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young. When accounting for the trial and the “unusually bitter” jury

deliberations, Nathanson and Young suggest that what motivated the discussions of the jury was “compassion for Lorena Bobbitt and other women who do the same thing,” and they argue that “it was clear to everyone that the underlying topic was ideological feminism” (2006, 22) and not, say the fact, that Lorena Bobbitt had been a victim of intimate partner violence. It is important to note that after Lorena Bobbitt “sliced off the penis of her husband John” (2006, 21), she was labeled “insane” and underwent a forced psychiatric evaluation, and that John Bobbitt went on to have a brief career in pornography, wherein he was able to celebrate his phallic power in a film like *John Bobbitt: Uncut*. Castration becomes, for men’s rights activists, a persistent fear that finds its cause célèbre in the figure of John Bobbitt, and Lorena Bobbitt becomes the icon of this fear. For Nathanson and Young (2006, 29), the Bobbitt trial becomes a linchpin in discussions of spousal abuse and how men are just as often victims of this abuse because “ideological feminists have denied, trivialized or excused the abuse of men by women.” Nathanson and Young (2006, 23) are explicit on this point, “Men who injure women are always evil, it would seem, no matter what their state of mental health” but, they argue, “women who injure men are always out of control, on the other hand, no matter what their state of moral awareness.”

So, if the fear of the future loss of the phallus, or a persistent circumcising that reminds the male again and again of his first phallic loss (the foreskin), potential loss (the wound of other males), and how that loss still allows for the phallus to function, there must be recourse to another phallic possibility. While one solution would be to speak about how “an enthusiastic bottom opens his anus, welcome other forces” (Pronger 1998, 75), the solution for men’s rights activists is to find another phallus that is equally present, visible, assertive, and capable of transformation from meek and mild to wild and excessive. The solution, I contend, is found in “men’s affective utterances,” the ways in which feelings have become essential to the discourse of men’s rights activists. Moreover, these feelings cannot be denied, however much I might try, I cannot deny the legitimacy of someone else’s feelings.

Consider, for instance, how Nathanson and Young (2006, 77) co-opt the language of affect and religiosity in their discussion of Marc Lépine as a martyr. In one of their most perverse arguments, they ask about the “to what extent have ideological feminists contributed to the general climate of hostility between men and women?” They are asking this question after discussing Marc Lépine, a man who entered a classroom at École Polytechnique de Montréal on December 6, 1989, and screamed “You’re all a bunch of feminists, and I hate feminists” (in Nathanson and Young 2006, 54) and subsequently killed fourteen women before killing himself. For Nathanson and Young (2006, 77), Lépine becomes akin to a martyr, or at the very least, a figure in need of a more nuanced argument that highlights how he was a victim of feminism. “Some men feel threatened” by the so-called “ideological feminism,” and they suggest, “it is at least conceivable that this partly explains the fact that male suicides have increased dramatically over the past twenty years.” In other words, we need not focus on the women that Lépine killed, but rather on his own suicide, which was apparently caused by “feel[ing] threatened.” Indeed, Nathanson

and Young (2006, 58) stress the need to think carefully about Lépine's suicide, "Not one but two events took place," they write "on 6 December 1989: a massacre and a suicide." And Nathanson and Young (2006, 59) adamantly argue that, "the only way to prove himself might have been to kill the enemy" at least for Lépine and that "In doing so, however, he defied society. Killing himself was the last act of self-loathing, his last act of defiance, or both." Indeed, as we have seen previously, Nathanson and Young (2006, 59) will once more draw allusions to the exile of Jews in relation to men; and in this particular case, feminists become akin to Nazis, quite clearly reminding us of the all too common term "femiNazi." While I am reluctant to quote extensively from these works, it is important to see how often Nathanson and Young turn to affective and nearly sentimental language to wax poetic about the sufferings of men.

The problem with these feelings is that they are expressed in the form of anger and violence and what they are about, I believe, is loss, a loss of control, a threat not caused by feminism, but by the apparent loss of entitled masculinity, a masculinity that affords power for no apparent reason other than "biology as destiny." The men's rights movement is largely interested in "preserving those arenas of all-male havens" (M. Kimmel 2010, 18) and "that sense of entitlement—and entitlement thwarted—is what lies beneath the surface of much of men's resistance to women's equality" (2010, 19). But, by attending to questions of affect, we shift the perspective away from mere ideas of loss toward feelings of loss. Feelings are important precisely because they cannot be denied and they are inherently enmeshed in ideas of entitlement. Men feel as if they have been robbed of something to which they are naturally entitled, at least so the argument goes for men's rights activists. Indeed, if we are to provide critiques of the men's rights movement and its activists, we may well have to focus explicitly on *how* they are expressing their ideas rather than on *what* they are expressing. The ideas and claims of the men's rights movement are already widely dismissed, and it is for this very reason, I argue, that men's rights activists have turned explicitly to questions of emotion, feeling, and affect.

Men's rights activists are in a state of crisis of their own making, they feel disenfranchised, and as such seek out an oppressor who will always be feminists and feminism. And since feminism has been successful, these men have co-opted and appropriated some of feminism's most potent arguments, for instance, against victim blaming and the use of affect. Thus, by positioning themselves as "feeling like victims," we are confronted by a scenario where, they believe, we have to renounce some of feminism's most important lessons. If men are victims and if men feel bad, we cannot deny the state of victimhood nor the negative affect, so they believe. It is for *this* reason that men's rights activists have "feelings."

In thinking about feelings and affect, it is important to remember how often men have seemingly been taught to repress and keep small their feelings (of course, this is not true across cultures and across time); however, the men's rights movement has reclaimed feelings, or at least some feelings—masculine feelings—in a gesture that functions quite similarly to the transformation of the limp penis into its phallic

totality. These men are overwhelmed by affective responses to the apparent crisis they are forced to endure at the hands of feminists. Each of these feelings becomes a way to reassert dominance precisely because of the inviolable character of feelings, emotions, and affect, and more particularly because they are about creating a sense of “victimhood,” which renders the cause worthy of consideration. So what then are these feelings doing?

I believe it is fair to see that the turn to feeling is about reasserting phallic dominance—a dominance that has never been all that devalued—or even, more particularly, about making the phallus even bigger than it already was. Phallicism is now coupled with affect and neither can be denied. But there is, of course, something else happening here. Men’s rights activists use affect not to express genuine anxieties or fears (outside of homophobia, which I believe is fully genuine) but rather to manufacture a crisis and a state in victimhood in which men are victims of women’s violence and feminist tyranny.

M. Kimmel (2010, 8) speaks of a new “false compassion for men as the new victims” and that “those who shed the biggest crocodile tears for these men are less concerned with their actual lives and more concerned with scoring points against some fantasy of feminism,” the logic behind this “false compassion” is motivated by a “sort of tit-for-tat equivalence, as if girls and women have made enormous strides in achieving equality, but only at the expense of men.” Although the men’s rights movement has certainly advanced an interesting narrative, it is a narrative that cannot, in fact, be demonstrated. Indeed, one of the greatest weaknesses of the men’s rights movement is that it simply lacks any claim to method or theory. The *New Male Studies*, the academic offshoot of the movement, renders the study of the male down to his biological essence which would have it that all males are equal, unless, of course, they are pro-feminist, converts, gay, or minority men, then they become, as Nathanson and Young (2001, 2006) argue, “honorary women.”

The turn to affect is about the manufacturing of a state of victimhood that can only be confirmed by “hurt feelings,” because there is no sound scholarship available to demonstrate that indeed men have a legitimate claim to victimhood—some men absolutely do, but the claim that all men are victims is fallacious. None of this is proven in fact and it is a seemingly impossible task because the activists and scholars alike simply do not seem interested in advancing a scholarly sound project (despite vast amounts of funding) that would provide longitudinal, qualitative, and quantitative studies of men and their claims to victimhood. Instead, the solution is one in which affect is deployed as proof enough. The turn to affect is, like the phallus itself, a declaration of unearned power and dominance. I argue that future research on men’s rights movements will have to negotiate how affect, feelings, and emotions are deployed and what this means for critiques of these movements and for scholars of men and masculinities. As much as we have been uncomfortable with denying affect, perhaps it is now time to think seriously about how affect can be misused and abused for political and ideological ends that seemingly have very few intellectual claims that can be certifiably proven.

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Notes

1. For a larger discussion of the Canadian climate, the university campus, and men's rights activism, see Rollman (2013).
2. For a historical study on Men's Movements, see Flood (1998), which delineates between four types of men's movements, that is, antisexist or pro-feminist, men's liberation, spiritual or mythopoetic, and Men's rights and fathers' rights. Various studies have looked at "men's movements" in specific geographic locations, for instance, Australia (Maddison 1999); Russia (Ruzankina 2010); and Québec, Canada (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012); or how participants of men's movements view one another (Fox 2004); as well as particular men's movements (Eldén 2002; Magnuson 2007; Gelfer 2008).
3. It should not be lost on us that men's rights activists and intellectual are often very interested in discussions around "intactivism" or "anti-circumcision" (Farrell 2012; Geisheker 2013; Svoboda 2010). Admittedly, however, a great deal of work needs to be done in untangling the complexity of circumcision, particularly in light of men's rights activism, which has once more called attention to circumcision and the rights of boys and men, while not yet account for the religious, cultural, and historical significance of circumcision. Anxiously, one might imagine that these arguments against circumcision are a kind of anti-Semitism or flirt with this possibility. In his philosophical critique of circumcision, David Benatar (2012, 46) concludes, "Circumcision has sometimes caused men to be disadvantaged in other ways. Consider, for example, those Jewish males attempting to pass as Christians during the Holocaust. Given that circumcision was practiced exclusively by Jews in the relevant countries at that time, any Jewish man could readily be exposed as a Jew in a way that a Jewess could not." The discussion of disadvantage concludes and hinges upon the example of the disadvantaged Jewish male, but there is also an implicit argument here that seemingly lays blame on the victim (i.e., had he not been circumcised, he would have survived—like the Jewess).

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