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# “I’m Man Enough; Are You?”:

## The Queer (Im)possibilities of Walk a Mile in Her Shoes



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Often labeled a “women’s issue,” males have increasingly begun to recognize their roles and become active in sexual violence prevention (Atherton-Zeman, 2013; Schafer, 2013). As early as 1984, the Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1984, 2000) asserted: After hundreds of years of anti-racist struggle, more than ever before non-white people are currently calling attention to the primary role white people must play in anti-racist struggle. The same is true of the struggle to eradicate sexism— [males] have a primary role to play. (p. 83)

Answering this call to action, male social activists such as Paul Kivel (1992), Jackson Katz (2006) and Byron Hurt (Hurt, Nelson, & Gordon, 2006) have worked to engage other males in sexual violence prevention.

Similarly, the Walk a Mile in Her Shoes (WMHS) program is a national program designed primarily to encourage males to fundraise for and build awareness of sexual assault and domestic violence prevention. However, I assert that WMHS events may perpetuate harm toward non-normative bodies and identities, specifically trans\* students and students with disabilities.

There is a distinct lack of scholarly literature on WMHS, particularly regarding their inclusion as programmatic interventions to address sexual violence on college campuses. Therefore, this scholarly essay attempts to address this gap by analyzing the purpose, intent, and enactment of WMHS through two queer theoretical frameworks to explore both the positive outcomes and tensions inherent in the production and implementation of this event. These tensions underscore

the impossibilities of the event to deconstruct hegemonic—and harmful—understandings of the dynamics between who is “being supported” (e.g., White temporarily able-bodied females) and who is “doing the supporting” (e.g., males seeking to reify their masculinity through their participation in the event).

### **A Quick Note on (Sexed/Gendered) Language**

Before embarking upon my queer critique of WMHS, I highlight a vast oversight in the dialogue on engaging males in sexual violence prevention. In the quotations in the previous section, I replaced the word “male” where the word “men” had been. My rationale for this substitution is to acknowledge that sex and gender—terms often conflated throughout literature and the public sphere (Renn, 2010) — are distinct categories through which one can understand personal identity. In this case, the term “male” signifies one’s sex, a designation that is assigned at birth, whereas the terms “man” and “men” refer to one’s gender identity and the term “masculine” refers to one’s gender expression, or the embodiment of a particular gender identity.

Although many presume sex to be biological and/or immutable, several scholars have persuasively argued otherwise. As Fausto-Sterling (1985) stated, “Sex ... is no simple matter” (p. 88). She went on to detail the complexities of sex, gender, and the variability between and among these categories of identity, suggesting the male/female and masculine/feminine binaries are far from adequate to explain the diversity of people’s bodies, experiences, and presentations. Additionally, Butler (2006) coined the term “gender performativity,” or the idea that how one expresses their gender—in relation to the sex they were assigned at birth—produces effects in the world, to which others respond. Butler further suggested these responses, whether positive, negative, indifferent, or otherwise, create an environment whereby certain sexed bodies (e.g., intersex individuals) and gender presentations (e.g., trans\* people) are culturally unintelligible (Detloff, 2012), or the notion that any sex/gender combination that does not fall along normative and dichotomous lines (e.g., male/masculine and female/feminine) is culturally incomprehensible. Therefore, one is able to see that although sex and gender are discrete categories of identity, they also have a relationship whereby their cultural (dis)continuity influences everyone. Due to this, the concepts of sex and gender—and the links between the two—form an entangled relationship in which one cannot replace or consume the other. In this sense, biology—evoked in conversations about sex—serves as a site of contestation, complexity, and diversity much in the same way theoretical discussions about gender have done (Wilson, 2010).

**These tensions underscore the impossibilities of the event to deconstruct hegemonic—and harmful—understandings of the dynamics between who is “being supported” (e.g., White temporarily able-bodied females) and who is “doing the supporting” (e.g., males seeking to reify their masculinity through their participation in the event).**

Culturally unintelligible gender presentations are those forms of expression that transgress “normative sex/gender relations” (Namaste, 2006, p. 585), or when one’s gender expression does not mirror cultural assumptions of “normalcy” based on the sex one is assigned at birth. The conflation of sex and gender terminology furthers the cultural unintelligibility of trans\* people by rendering their gender identities and expressions invisible, impossible, and unreal. Furthermore, this conflation lacks specificity, as the category of “men,” a marker of gender, is much larger than that of “males.” Discussions of “men” by definition include trans\* men (e.g., Green, 2004) and females who identify as masculine (e.g., Halberstam, 1998; Pascoe, 2007). This is not the group of people hooks (1984, 2000), Kivel (1992), Katz (2006), Hurt (Hurt, Nelson, & Gordon, 2006), or WMHS organizers are referencing in their work on sexual violence prevention. Instead, they mean to discuss the role cisgender—or non-trans\*—men must play in ending sexual violence. Therefore, my disentangling of sexed and gendered terminology is a way to be clear of who the main—but not the only—perpetrators of sexual violence are (i.e., males) and, thus, why this population is being targeted for involvement in prevention efforts. It is also a reminder of how the language one uses has the potential to mar-

<sup>1</sup> Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals whose assigned sex at birth aligns with their gender identity (e.g., someone who is assigned a female sex at birth and self-identifies as a woman).



ginalize further culturally unintelligible populations despite one's intention of promoting anti-oppressive work, which is the case for WMHS.

### My Own Positionality

There are three distinct reasons why the present analysis of WMHS is important to me. First, as a gender non-conforming individual myself, I have experienced the asymmetrical nature of gender policing and enforcement. Furthermore, my previous work as a college-based sexual violence prevention educator and my current work attempting to bridge the fields of transgender and disability studies, have made writing this manuscript all the more pressing to me. As a former sexual violence prevention educator, I was—and still am—deeply conflicted about the ongoing use of WMHS events to raise awareness of sexual violence on college campuses. While I appreciated the centering of sexual violence as an important phenomenon around which to coalesce and resist, I was saddened that promoting a community free from sexual violence had to come at the expense of multiple marginalized communities (e.g., trans\* women). Moreover, as my own understanding of the intersections between disability, gender identity, and sex have deepened over the past few years, and as I began work exploring the significant overlaps between the disability and transgender communities, my concerns with WMHS only increased.

### Queer and Crip Theory

Although scholars are quick to highlight there is no one canonical way of understanding or representing queer theory (e.g., Denton, 2014), there are several common threads present throughout these postmodern theoretical interventions. The first common-

ality across theories discussed as “queer theory” is an insistence on challenging notions of normativity (Warner, 1999). As a result of this challenge, a second commonality is, to use the phrasing of the postmodern scholar Alexander G. Weheliye (2014), the (re)articulation of who counts as human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman. In this sense, queer theory provides fertile theoretical space in which to reorient who is/should be included—and by extension, who is/should not be included—as participants in social institu-

tions, such as (higher) education. The third commonality amongst queer theoretical interventions is their capaciousness. For example, although queer theory first began in the early 1990's as a way to redress heteronormativity (Butler, 2006; Sedgwick, 2008), the field has grown quickly to address disability and compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006), race and racialization (Weheliye, 2014), and trans\* oppression (Spade, 2011). In fact, the expansiveness of queer theory's evolution is perhaps one of its greatest strengths in that it has provided a myriad of perspectives through which to reorient oneself to what is assumed to be the taken for granted (Ahmed, 2006).

### WMHS Explained

The main component of WMHS is cisgender men walking a mile in a pair of high heels. Additionally, those who organize WMHS events are encouraged to facilitate educational experiences designed to increase awareness about sexual assault and domestic violence. For example, the WMHS website suggested using two passive programs, the Silent Witness National Initiative—a program where life-sized silhouettes are made with plaques in recognition of females who have been killed as a result of domestic abuse—and the Clothesline Project—a program where individuals design t-shirts about experiences of sexual assault and domestic violence that are then hung on a clothesline for public display—to promote education about sexual violence (Collateral Experiences, n.d.). WMHS organizers are also encouraged to debrief the event with all participants after the walk portion concluded, however, the main WMHS website does not provide resources for what this debrief may entail.

## A Queered Critique of WMHS

*"It's not fashionable; it sure isn't graceful; it's definitely not pretty. But somehow it is a beautiful sight."  
~Segment of a news broadcast covering a WMHS event in Tacoma, Washington*

The promotional video for WMHS on the main organization's website features males wearing bright red heels. They have their pant legs rolled up so the viewer can see their heels, and as the camera pans from their feet to their head, all the men repeat the same question, "I'm man enough; are you?" (Connie Carson, 2012). All the males in the promotional video are working in highly masculine fields such as law enforcement, construction and public works, and firefighting, giving the impression that if these males are "man enough" to wear heels, all males should be willing to do so. The message throughout the video is clear: it takes a "real man" to wear heels.

However, this is a paradoxical message: the act of people assigned a male sex at birth wearing heels is not exclusive to those desiring for others to view them as "real men." For example, as someone who was assigned a male sex at birth but does not identify as a man, let alone a "real man," I have noticed the social panic and anxiety I cause by walking into a room wearing heels. My shoes cause people to stare, gawk, and gasp. My heels have also caused people to wonder what I am "trying to prove" by wearing them—to which the answer is nothing—as well as question my ability to teach effectively. Additionally, multiple male-to-different-gender (MTDG) students (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011), or those students who were assigned male at birth but identify as a gender other than masculine, have shared with me their fear of wearing heels due to feelings of fear and vulnerability. Rather than being rewarded for our desire to wear heels, like the males in the WMHS promotional video, gender non-conforming individuals, including myself, have been ostracized, harassed, and have feared for our safety and wellbeing due to our gender expression. Furthermore, as many have pointed out, trans\* women, particularly trans\* women of color, continue to be murdered at increasingly high rates (e.g., Lee, 2015; Molloy, 2015), which is itself an example of how systemic racism, sexism, and transphobia intersect to make the lives of trans\* wom-

en and feminine-of-center gender non-conforming people intensely precarious.

Namaste (2006) called this type of policing and enforcement of culturally intelligible expressions of sex and gender (e.g., those assigned male at birth must present a masculine gender) "genderbashing." Therefore, if wearing heels is not something only "real men" do, then how do the men in the WMHS promotional video mark themselves as sufficiently "man enough?" Additionally, how does the WMHS event further incite genderbashing by proposing gender non-conforming individuals who wear heels as an expression of their gender are unintelligible, deviant, invisible, or impossible people? The answers to these questions signal problematic aspects to the otherwise positive intentions of WMHS events.

Additionally, a queer critique of WMHS events would suggest the wearing of heels by cisgender men is used to signal this behavior is abnormal, and thus, participants must be strong, or "man enough," to participate. Addressing the issue of normalcy, Warner (1999) stated: Nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all. (p. 53)

Here, Warner highlighted the culturally unintelligibility of certain bodies, sexualities, and (gender) expressions. Warner also articulated the way normalcy does not allow for choice, but instead regulates one's life through the imposition of codes by which one must present and express oneself. Thus, the drive for normalcy mirrors Foucault's (1990) notion of biopower, or the constellations of power that regulate the lives of people. For example, if trans\* people transgress "normal" gender expressions, we run the risk of violence (e.g., Namaste's genderbashing) as well as having

our gender expression recast within a normalizing discourse. Trans\* people who identify as MTDG may be understood as being gay and/or effeminate males, effectively erasing our trans\* identity; a phenomenon I have termed compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2015). Although this recasting still marks trans\* people as being abnormal or deviant, cisgender people, or those who do not identify as trans\*, are able to safely categorize us within the masculine/

**'In this sense, biology—evoked in conversations about sex—serves as a site of contestation, complexity, and diversity much in the same way theoretical discussions about gender have done (Wilson, 2010).'**

feminine binary, albeit as failed men. The perpetuation of male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine binaries are naturalized and normal throughout WMHS events and leaves little room for trans\* individuals, specifically people who are MTDG, to be understood as something other than imposters, deceivers, or pathetic individuals (Serano, 2007). Thus, WMHS events have a high potential for furthering an understanding of any non-normative performance of gender as either abnormal or unnatural people, whether or not the individual is trans\*.

### **A Crippled Critique of WMHS**

WMHS events also perpetuate compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006), or the privileging of the lives, experiences, and narratives of people who are temporarily able-bodied. McRuer (2006) elucidated the insidiousness and constancy of compulsory able-bodiedness by stating that it “demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, ‘Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?’” (p. 9). WMHS events comply with compulsory able-bodiedness through their insistence that cisgender males walk a mile in ‘her’ shoes. The process of walking in heels, and of that walking to cause pain and discomfort, marginalizes people who are unable to walk in a way where they would feel similar discomfort. Although people with disabilities that affect their mobility (e.g., quadriplegic people who use wheelchairs) assert their ability to walk (Kotake Yellow, 2010), such walking, viewed through compulsory able-bodiedness, is abnormal. WMHS also ostracizes people with disabilities who cannot wear heels for various reasons (e.g., people who have certain prosthetics, wear leg braces, or have conditions that would be aggravated by wearing heels) (H. Gibbons, personal communication, 18 April 2013). Thus, WMHS events marginalize people with disabilities who do not walk normally, with normal walking equating to what

people who are temporarily able-bodied do (i.e., walking upright on their legs without the assistance of a wheelchair, crutches, braces, or other assistive devices). It is also worth noting that cisgender men with disabilities are always already emasculated (Ostrander, 2008) due to their having a disability in a compulsory able-bodied society. This is due largely to the link between culturally intelligible notions of masculinity and one’s being temporarily able-bodied (Gerschick, 2000). Thus, masculinity as an identity that requires individuals to be temporarily able-bodied is perceived as “normal,” whereas cisgender men with disabilities—who do not fit this mold—are immediately deemed “abnormal” or “less than” their temporarily able-bodied peers. Therefore, even if cisgender men with disabilities participated in WMHS, they would be unable to attain the label of “man enough” due to their being seen as deficiently masculine because of their disability. This critique connects with the aforementioned point about WMHS promoting an essentialized notion of masculinity, which assumes all males—and by extension men—are temporarily able-bodied. In fact, the WMHS website complies with compulsory able-bodiedness by not displaying any pictures or video of cisgender men with disabilities participating in WMHS events.

### **Discussion: A Call for Educators to Consider the (Im)possibilities of WMHS**

One important lesson educators can pick up from queer theory is that “people are different from each other” (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 22). This statement is deceptively simple, but serves as a basis upon which educators can engage in critical reflection with students about the assumptions made about individuals based on social identity categories. For example, educators can use the trope of WMHS to ask critical questions about the event’s assumptions and effects, such as, what is the impact of associating the wearing of heels as a marker of femininity and womanhood? How could the assumption of cultural intelligibility, as expressed in WMHS, render certain populations invisible? What does it mean to be “man enough”? How could the insistence that cisgender males who participate in WMHS are “man enough” do harm to students with disabilities by reifying compulsory able-bodiedness? These questions can serve as a basis for conversations about reimagining events that recognize the plurality of human experiences and identities. They will also help educators and students engage in dialogue about the multiple ways in which all individuals fail to “pass,” or live up the dominant expectations of the social identity groups with which we may identify (e.g., Mattilda, 2006).

The concerns with WMHS as an event are multiple and require immediate attention for the event not to reinforce genderism or compulsory able-bodiedness. Therefore, I propose educators re-imagine new events that achieve the same ends as WMHS, but do so in ways that are liberatory rather than repressive.

**Leveraging a coalitional strategy for creating, organizing, and holding events on campus may have the effect of extending rights and privileges to those most on the margins.**

In doing so, I call on the queer theorist Cathy Cohen (1997), who stated, "It is my contention that queer activists who evoke a single-oppression framework misrepresent the distribution of power within and outside of ... communities, and therefore limit the comprehensive and transformational character of queer politics" (p. 441). WMHS positions itself within a single-oppression framework (i.e., it seeks to address male violence against females), which limits one's understanding of WMHS as an event that reifies power and oppression across multiple groups and populations. For example, viewing WMHS through a single-oppression framework overlooks people from subordinated racial identities and/or LGBTQ populations, as well as disabled people and trans\* people of all genders, all of whom experience varying heightened levels of sexual violence and domestic violence.

### Reimagining Possibilities for WMHS

Taking Cohen's suggestion of organizing events aimed at promoting social justice and equity around non-normative and marginal subjects would encourage coalitional approaches to organizing events, which would encourage educators and students alike to embrace the differences between and among individuals on campus. For example, if a group wants to host a WMHS event, educators could propose a coalitional approach with student groups and populations ostracized by WMHS and find ways to weave awareness about the program's oversight as a central component of the program. This could mean featuring an LGBTQ speaker during the WMHS event, partnerships with students, faculty, and staff with disabilities on campus to promote participation, and not requiring participants to walk in heels during the event. It could also mean hosting a teach-in during a WMHS event to discuss its limitations and the way it reifies essentialized notions of sex, gender, and those bodies and presentations deemed culturally "normal." WMHS could also be one in a series of events that addressed sexual violence prevention, allowing the campus community to gather a number of times to engage in critical conversations related to sexual violence prevention.

Leveraging a coalitional strategy for creating, organizing, and holding events on campus may have the



*Photo courtesy of photos.bypeople.com*

effect of extending rights and privileges to those most on the margins. For example, individuals who transgress the gender binary have much politically in common with people with disabilities, which could prompt positive coalition building. Issues such as workplace discrimination, the inability to access single-sex spaces like restrooms and locker rooms, and the persistent inability for events such as WMHS to address the deleterious ways sexual violence impacts those with non-normative bodies and gender presentations are all places around which these two groups can coalesce. Organizing programming on college campuses that recognize the intersections between and among different populations, as well as the impact of individuals who identify with multiple subordinated identities, will not only allow for a more accurate understanding of phenomena like sexual violence, but it will also lead to a better understanding of how to work toward prevention. In this way, coalition building could enhance events like WMHS greatly.

As Spade (2011) stated, "Social justice trickles up, not down" (p. 223), meaning if educators and students work toward equity for those most on the margins, all other marginalized groups will also reap the benefits of such efforts. Thus, educators and students working in broad-based, coalitional ways could help ensure that events meant to promote liberatory values, such as WMHS, would be organized in such a way that all people are recognized, validated, and embraced for who they are and how they express themselves. Although this work may not be easy, it is essential to the furthering of campus environments and events dedicated to equity and justice.