

Feminism and the mythopoetic men's movement: Some shared concepts of gender

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Abstract

Feminist critics of the mythopoetic men's movement (MMM) have argued that the MMM de-politicises and reinforces gender inequalities. This paper revisits these 1990s critiques, acknowledging their value, and also identifies concepts of gender that cut across the MMM and particular feminist legacies. Specifically, it shows that the MMM and certain strands of feminist thought share binary and essentialist gender constructs, which remain broadly influential today and arguably hamper the common goals of shifting culturally dominant gender ideologies in (neo) liberal social contexts. Research is lacking in New Zealand (and elsewhere) on contemporary manifestations of the MMM, and on feminist responses to and engagements with it. This paper draws on preliminary fieldwork, including recent conflictual conversations amongst MMM participants and feminist activists in New Zealand, in order to signal and to challenge middle-class, Pākehā, and heteronormative standards that are persistently embedded in universalising assumptions about gender identity. In an 'age of difference' for both women and men, the paper also identifies alternative and diversifying concepts of gender that could support more productive dialogue. The analysis is underpinned by an international body of feminist literature supporting poly-vocal, intersectional, and multi-layered accounts of identity wherein gender is one discourse and category of experience among many.

Keywords

Mythopoetic men's movement, feminism, gender, essentialism, neoliberalism, gender binaries, deconstruction

Introduction

I first met 'Joe'¹, a key figure in the mythopoetic men's movement (MMM) in Aotearoa New Zealand, at a 2001 community gathering in Taupo. After a brief conversation with him about my work at the time in the U.S. as a gender studies scholar and cultural anthropologist, and about his work within the MMM, I posed the question: 'what is the relationship between the MMM and feminism?' We discussed the emergence of the MMM in the context of other social movements, including feminism's 'second wave'. We also identified shared goals within feminist and mythopoetic men's movements (broadly speaking): questioning and refiguring gender norms; emphasising the responsibility of men to transform masculinity (although some feminists suggest that some aspects of masculinity are relatively fixed and cannot or will not change – they can only be managed); and re-valuing what have been culturally devalued and stereotypically feminine ways of being (although some men's movement discourse comes close to a full masculinist appropriation of femininity). Joe then ventured that men need to work on men's issues on their own terms. He said a feminist perspective can take men only so far, as it is not men's own perspective. 'But,' I asked, 'is the MMM a feminist movement? Does it acknowledge a feminist legacy in its content?' Joe was very interested in these questions. After some thought, he offered that the MMM is a separate movement, existing alongside feminism. A partnership of sorts might be possible. Our conversation ended there, and I found myself quite energised about possibilities for further dialogue. I also wondered sceptically what sort of gendered partnership Joe was floating: one with presumed 'separate but equal' terms? A metaphorically heterosexual one? One that sidesteps its relational conditions of possibility? In addition, I wondered: what versions or definitions of feminism were Joe and I considering?

In this paper, I attempt to unpack and reflect critically on representations of gender that circulate within not only the MMM but also the feminist legacies that surround it. Feminist critics of the MMM have argued that it is a reactive response to feminism that de-politicises issues of gender inequality by focusing on masculine self-actualisation and homosocial bonding for men². These critiques are important to attend to. However, there is little acknowledgement in the literature that certain culturally powerful versions of feminist thought and activism contain assumptions about gender that overlap with those found in the MMM. However tempting it may be to read the MMM as blind or oppositional to feminism, such an approach neglects important continuities between the two and therefore reflects its own blindness to certain influential feminist ideas.

The MMM is a relatively progressive strand of the men's movement. In comparison with the Promise Keepers and Father's Rights groups, the MMM is (implicitly) politically left-leaning, though not as much as pro-feminist men's groups (Flood, 1998). It seeks to create communities of men that are rooted in forms of spiritual, emotional and embodied intimacy which challenge dominant Western norms of competition, isolation, hyper-rationality, and self-control for men (Magnuson, 2007). The MMM invokes a range of 'tribal' and Jungian archetypes in the context of residential, experiential, 'personal growth' workshops and retreats for groups of men. In New Zealand there are several institutions that fall within the MMM 'umbrella', such as Essentially Men (based in Auckland) and MensTrust (based in Christchurch)³. The movement is small, but arguably influential in New Zealand's relatively small-scale society. Essentially Men is New Zealand's largest such organisation, and it has engaged around 3,000 participants since its founding in the early 1990s⁴. The men involved are usually in their 30s, 40s, and 50s and are most often white, heterosexual, and middle-class (see Flood, 1998).

While the MMM both peaked and waned internationally in the 1990s, the concepts of gender underpinning it remain quite popular within New Age self-help, spiritual, and environmental movements and literatures (Smith, 2008). These concepts include the notion that masculinity and femininity are oppositional and are, at least in part, timeless qualities of personhood. These ideas have developed and remain within certain strands of feminist thought and activism as well.

A key goal of this paper is also central to much feminist theorising within the last twenty years: complicating such essentialist and binary representations of gender. Relatively fixed or naturalised ideas about women and men persist in a range of sites in spite of an extensive body of research and activism acknowledging rich diversities amongst women and amongst men, as well as complex and layered identities for any given person. Essentialist representations of gender arguably hamper the political and personal changes, and any partnerships that feminists and MMM participants may be seeking today.

Research is lacking on contemporary MMM philosophies and practices, and on current feminist responses to and engagements with them. It is my intention to play a role in a long-term research project in New Zealand that examines ideas about gender within this field⁵. Believing that constructs of femininity cannot be disarticulated from constructs of masculinity – because gender is fundamentally relational in these terms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) – I am keen to explore the interplay of these constructs within and surrounding a movement that has the potential to reconfigure gender norms at the grassroots. This paper provides some historical and conceptual background for this planned project, perhaps a form of action research, in light of ongoing sociocultural tendencies to dichotomise and naturalise gender. It presents some anecdotal evidence that certain problematic representations of gender do still circulate around the MMM. However, it remains to be seen to what extent, and in what ways, these gender concepts have shifted from the 1990s.

The 'data' offered here – drawn primarily from conversations that occurred in 2009 amongst participants in an informal workshop I convened to discuss perceptions of feminism in contemporary New Zealand – should therefore be seen as preliminary and suggestive. I am also mindful of the fact that a full account of the gender constructs at work here would, I believe, require ethnographic and 'insider' research. Notably, the feminist critiques I examine in this paper are based on analyses of influential texts rather than experiential or ethnographic accounts of MMM gatherings and rituals. In his insider study of the MMM in the United States, Magnuson (2007) shows that attention to the lived and embodied practices of MMM 'personal growth' retreats reveals more complex engagements with gender than can be represented in popular texts such as Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990) and Sam Keen's *Fire in the belly: On being a man* (1991). As an anthropologist, I am drawn to the idea that experiential and intentional encounters with gender via 'on the ground' group work may well effect novel expressions of gender; MMM micro-practices probably do not line up neatly with its rhetoric or macro-politics.

At the same time, it is important to attend to, and to unpack, Bly's and Keen's codified and widely circulated ideas – to locate them in their wider socio-political contexts, to examine their real effects, and to specify alternatives to them. This paper follows Derrida (1982, 1998) in its deconstruction of powerful norms and binaries, particularly that of man/woman, with the understanding that such representations are both highly influential and necessarily partial. It engages with this journal's special issue on *Women in the age of difference* in its aim to open up possibilities for thinking about traversing the politicised ground not only between the MMM and feminism but also amongst women and between those who identify as women and men⁶. The final section of the paper draws on Derrida's notion of 'différance' (1982) to explore non-oppositional relations of gender difference that are arguably the marginalised underbelly of the culturally dominant gender constructs I analyse. In addition to specifying important liminalities of gender and sexual identity, I explore some implications of 'différance' for identities that are unique to the New Zealand context, for example those of Māori women and Māori feminists.

This paper is written in four parts. First, I briefly review some of the history of feminist ideas that will help locate, as well as trouble, the gender binaries and gender essentialisms in question here. Second, I identify core concepts of gender within the MMM in the 1990s, and detail feminist criticisms of these concepts. Third, I explore continuities as well as conflicts between certain feminist ideas and the gender tenants of the MMM. Finally, in the concluding discussion, I suggest how alternative concepts of gender might support progressive changes in gender politics and serve as framing ideas for future research.

Essentialist and binary representations of gender in (neo)liberal contexts

Nearly three decades of feminist thought, including lesbian, indigenous, and postcolonial feminisms, has critically queried monolithic categories of gender that posit the binaries man/woman and masculinity/femininity (hooks, 1984; Johnson & Pihama, 1995; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 1991). As Ringrose (2007) notes, this body of work problematises a culturally dominant 'second wave' representation of gender as a 'stand alone variable' that is not differentiated by other forms of difference, including class, race, ethnicity, and culture (p. 480). However, as Coleman (2009) points out, the 'last two decades have been marked by an increasing divide between academic feminist theory and grass roots feminist activism...' (p. 4); while much academic feminism convincingly represents the need for poly-vocal, intersectional, and multi-layered analyses wherein gender is one discourse and category of experience among many, it remains the case that concepts of gender at the grass roots, and within popular culture, are often binary and essentialist. As I discuss below, gender concepts within the MMM and within some of the feminist discourses surrounding it are cases in point.

Contemporary feminist representations of gender binaries can be traced to 1970s cultural feminism, which articulated the notion of women's 'difference' from men as the basis for a preferred set of sociocultural norms and values (Donovan, 1992)⁷. In the 1980s and 1990s, these ideas appeared in modified form across a range of subject areas, usually emphasising an ideal of co-existing gender difference and gender parity rather than feminine 'superiority.' This ideal is posited as a preferred expression of human nature, even as it is identified as a struggle to achieve within existing political fields of gender inequality. Two international best-sellers helped to ensure the popularisation of such feminist ideas that traffic in gender binaries and notions of gender complementarity. Carol Gilligan's 1982 book *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development* generated a small revolution in educational and psychological initiatives to support girls' moral development and achievement in schools. Gilligan's ideal of gendered sociality, detailed in the final chapter of her book, is a 'marriage' of masculine individualism and feminine care for others. Riane Eisler's 1987 text *The chalice and the blade: Our history, our future* has been particularly influential within 'progressive' personal growth circles such as the MMM. A sweeping cross-cultural history of social structures and gender relations from the Paleolithic to the present, this book presents the argument that (contemporary and widespread) war-like and patriarchal, or 'dominator', cultures were preceded not by matriarchal systems but rather by peaceful and nurturing cultures of 'partnership' between 'the two halves of humanity' (p. xviii), or 'the most fundamental difference in our species, between male and female' (p. xvii). Eisler holds out hope for future iterations of the partnership model.

One might argue that essentialist constructs of gender difference and complementarity are incompatible with contemporary, dominant ideologies of neo-liberal individualism, including 'postfeminism' (see Coleman, 2009). How can these constructs hold power today? This question can be addressed through a poststructuralist feminist lens, which offers a potent critique of gender binaries as well. In an essay designed to deconstruct the 'equality-versus-difference' debate within feminist thought, Joan Scott (1994) shows how the reproduction of gender binaries can occur in ways that are perhaps unexpected and surprising, yet powerful. In her detailed analysis of a U.S. court case surrounding alleged gender discrimination in a company's hiring practices, Scott argues that feminist arguments for equality or difference are ineffective because they both can play into neo-liberal ideologies supporting gender inequality. Ideologies of sameness and equality paradoxically rest upon seemingly natural identity differences which underpin and justify continued efforts to achieve or strive for sameness. So, for instance, the notion that women should be able to achieve in the competitive paid workforce at the same level as men implicitly relies upon devalued and underpaid (or free) labour (e.g. childcare) that is actually a pre-condition for so-called autonomous and competitive economic individualism. Most often, it is women – and, increasingly, non-white women – who fill these devalued roles. In a New Zealand context, Simon-Kumar (2008) shows how seemingly logical decision-making about 'fairness' and 'discrimination' in employment opportunities for women operates covertly to reinscribe difference as (naturalised) disadvantage. Thus, beliefs and practices of (neo-liberal) equality produce women as 'other' to men: apparently unable to achieve the competitive ideal. Scott and Simon-Kumar point out that the 'other' gendered roles that women often occupy are the constitutive underside of the ideal.

In other words, gender inequality is a precondition for (neo)liberal constructs of equality, and both work to constitute binary representations of gender difference. In the absence of thoroughly contextual and political readings of gender, an absence which arguably persists in some versions of post-modern feminism (Coleman, 2009), we are liable to reproduce a dichotomous understanding of gender as a presumed substrate of human sociality without examining the

power relations embedded in this view. Notably, white or Pākehā, middle-class, and heterosexual norms are implicit in this understanding, which can be traced to nineteenth-century socio-economic, legal, medical, and anthropological codifications of gender difference as 'natural' (Haller & Haller, 1974; Tiefer, 1995; Yanagisako & Delaney, 1995). In the final section of this paper, I reflect on concepts of gender that might work to deconstruct familiar binaries of this kind.

Concepts of gender in the mythopoetic men's movement and feminist critiques

This section reviews key concepts of gender that appear in foundational texts for the mythopoetic men's movement (MMM), focusing on those ideas that have been subject to feminist critique. The MMM has been widely criticised for de-politicising and reinforcing gender inequality (Enns, 1994; Hagan, 1992; Kimmel & Kaufman, 1993; Messner, 1993; Walters, 1993). As Kimmel and Kaufman (1993) point out, typical MMM retreats involve mostly white and middle-class men taking themselves 'off to the woods... into a homosocial space where men can validate one another's masculinity' (p. 5). While such a representation is perhaps eager to stereotype, I agree that the particular version of masculinity at work within core MMM texts is notably essentialist and lacks an analysis of social privilege.

Bly (1990) argues that homosocial bonding, away from the domestic sphere, is important in the wake of feminism's second wave and protest against the Vietnam war. According to Bly, these were valuable social movements which produced men who are gentle and socially conscious (seen as positive qualities) but also inappropriately 'soft' and indecisive. Bly and Keen (1991) trace these problems to the social relations of industrialisation, through which men became distanced from their sons who, in turn – and particularly in the absence of initiation rites into manhood – became over-identified with the world of women (linked in a generalised way to the domestic sphere). Immature masculinity is the result: artificially tough, competitive, unreliable, controlling, violent, overly rational, emotionally numb, and deceitful. MMM texts draw on Jungian archetypes and a range of gendered 'tribal' (e.g. Native American) symbols and rituals to manifest a seemingly deep and ancient, mature masculinity that is at once strong and 'wild' (Keen), 'reliable, spiritual,... emotionally open, truthful, loving, cooperative, and liberational' (Magnuson, 2007, p. 18). Key archetypes are reflected in another major MMM text's title: *King, warrior, magician, lover: Rediscovering the archetypes of the mature masculine* (Moore & Gillette, 1990).

Universalised assumptions about timeless gender differences permeate MMM literature. For example, Keen (1991) posits women's goddess/mother/creation power as a strong entrapping force for men, which men must learn to identify and escape, rather than react to defensively and unconsciously. Meanwhile, Bly (1990) asserts that the deep mature structure 'at the bottom of the male psyche is still as firm as it was twenty thousand years ago' (p. 230).

Kimmel and Kaufman (1993) summarise the main themes of the MMM thus: 'essentialist assumptions about gender distinctions, a contemporary diagnosis of feminization of... manhood, the search for lost fathers (and father figures), and a vision of retrieval of heroic archetypes as models for men' (p. 3). A 1992 anthology, *Women respond to the men's movement: A feminist collection* (Hagen, 1992), brings together a range of feminist perspectives on these core themes. While several contributors note the value of a movement that engages men's responsibility to shift problematic and harmful constructs of masculinity, the bulk of this text is a feminist critique of the MMM. The lynchpin of these various critiques is the point that MMM discourse fails to acknowledge socio-political, economic, and ideological realities of privilege that accrue to hegemonic masculinity and that reproduce structural gender inequalities. Re-

uther (1992) and hooks (1992) in particular point to the de-politicising effects of the MMM's focus on the intra-psychic realm (see also Walters, 1993).

There is little doubt that MMM rhetoric contains an individualised and competitive 'me too' stance that neutralises inequalities made visible through feminist praxis. Keen (1991) writes:

Until women are willing to weep for and accept equal responsibility for the systematic violence done to the male body and spirit by the war system, it is not likely that men will lose enough of their guilt and regain enough of their sensitivity to weep and accept responsibility for women who are raped and made to suffer the indignity of economic inequality (p. 47).

Such ideas may well resonate within the MMM today. After an informal workshop I facilitated in 2009 on the topic of feminism in contemporary New Zealand, I was speaking with one participant, who is prominent in the MMM, about structural inequalities that buttress violence against women in their homes. He replied, 'Yes but women need to take responsibility for their own physical and emotional violence against men and children,' as if the levels and effects of these forms of violence are on a similar scale, and as if these issues are separable and co-exist on a level playing field⁸.

One corollary of such rhetorically neutralised relations of power is a set of dichotomised and naturalised representations of gender. As noted in the first section of this paper, (neo)liberal constructs of equality paradoxically depend upon gender binaries, which can encode inequality as a form of complimentary difference. In this context, the MMM posits, rather than problematises, the idealised position of women in industrialised social systems as domestic mother/creators. Masculinity is defined in opposition to this form of femininity (Caputi & Mackenzie, 1992; Reuther, 1992), and the social relations of inequality that have produced these binary gender constructs are re-packaged and displaced onto a representation of the feminine as inappropriately powerful in men's and boys' lives (see hooks, 1992). As Enns (1994) puts it:

Bly (1990) attributed men's lack of manliness to the lack of fathering in their lives; fathers have often been negligent, abusive, or absent. Rather than elaborating on fathers' contributions to this problem and the ongoing socialization factors that reinforce existing patterns, Bly (1990) emphasized the role of women in promoting men's 'softness.' Mothers are blamed for trying too hard, for overidentifying with their male children, stifling their independence, feminizing boys, and creating a codependent relationship with them (Doubiago, 1992). This analysis borders on... mother blaming.... (p. 130)

The prescription for men is a flight from the feminine for the necessary work of re-birthing a more mature and balanced masculine identity in a context of gender segregation⁹. The underwriting of the latter through reference to seemingly ancient and universal archetypes obscures the specific socio-political relations that have created both alienated fathers and feminised domestic spheres.

Numerous authors in *Women respond to the men's movement* (Hagen, 1992) call for fully contextualised readings of gender politics that would unpack male privilege, explore the problematic social positions that both women and men can take up or find themselves in, undermine presumed gendered divisions of labour and so-called separate spheres, and promote antiviolence work towards justice and peace for both men and women. However, there is little acknowledgement that certain feminist strands of thought may have participated in the narrower readings of gender found in MMM texts. I concur with Ringrose (2007), who argues that it is important to question the idea of 'feminist innocence, of feminism as simply open to reversal, recuperation and backlash into its "anti-feminist" form...' (p. 477). Specifically with regard to representations of gender amongst feminists and within the MMM, Richard-Allerdyce (1994) writes, 'I believe that a close reading of text and context will reveal that... there is not so much difference between us eco-feminists and those in the mythopoetic men's movement as some feminists may think' (p. 65). I now turn to explore links of this kind.

Some shared ground between feminist and mythopoetic men's movement gender constructs

In 2009, I attended the annual summer 'Heart Politics' gathering in Taupo, where approximately seventy people met for five days to explore a range of community development, political action, and personal growth projects and ideas. Workshops are organised in situ, and I offered to facilitate an informal discussion about feminism in New Zealand today. Attendees (about fifteen in total) included several MMM leaders and 'followers', as well as a number of grassroots feminist activists. All participants were middle-class Pākehā (the profile of most Heart Politics attendees), and most were in their forties, although ages ranged from the early twenties to the late fifties. We had a wide-ranging discussion, all the details of which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Although the ideas expressed were sketchy and emergent, I found them informative and took notes summarising the main points that were raised. I refer to them here as cues pointing to wider issues worthy of exploration. Two key themes that are pertinent to this essay emerged quickly: the theme of MMM participants and feminist activists talking past each other, and the theme of feminism in the New Zealand context as 'outdated'. Conversation around these themes revealed shared concepts of gender as binary, and of gender as an isolable social variable encoding middle-class Pākehā standards.

All participants who spoke acknowledged the value and importance of feminism, citing problems ranging from high rates of violence against women, to everyday references to women as 'girls'. Discussions related to the work of the MMM began when several of the women there who had worked in women's shelters spoke about their efforts aimed at stopping violence against women. They talked about burnout when trying to tackle a range of issues surrounding (some) men's exercise of power over women. One woman said, 'it is so difficult to shift those power relations.' One of the leaders of the MMM responded that the key issue for men, from their perspective, is not power but shame: 'Men are powerfully socialised to feel shame.' The women who had spoken were clearly disconcerted by this remark. One replied, 'You do not get what our work was about.' After an uncomfortable pause the conversation changed course.

This impasse resonated with numerous informal discussions I have had, since moving to New Zealand in 2008, amongst MMM participants and feminist activists about the Duluth model of power and control as a way to understand men's violence against women (see Pence, Paymer, Ritmeester, & Shepard, 1993). This model, imported from the U.S., is linked to the 'Duluth Curriculum' (men's programme), which was predominant in stopping violence programmes in New Zealand in the 1990s (see Gray, 1994; Pizzini, 1998), and is still very influential today both in New Zealand and internationally. While the Duluth approach arguably entails a complex understanding of masculine subjectivity¹⁰, it is often interpreted as ascribing to men who engage in violence against women a choice or desire to exercise power and control over them, a desire which is underwritten by social-structural gender inequalities. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) would argue, such an account equates hegemonic masculinity – a dynamic and changing set of practices, often including violence, that is culturally dominant in a given time and place – with masculine subjectivity (choice/desire). I have taken part in conversations in which proponents of the Duluth model/Curriculum have expressed ambivalence about (their interpretation of) it, considering more recent strengths-based approaches, but have also expressed appreciation for its feminist content. Charged responses from MMM participants have included the argument that men who are violent do not feel powerful: they are lashing out because they feel cornered and out of control. A typical reply has been along the lines of, 'See, you just don't get what feminism is about. A violent man is exercising power and control. It's hard to give up power, that's what the Duluth approach recognizes.' A common

response to this claim is, 'That's women's perspective. Men have a different perspective and experience.'

We can glean from these examples that while MMM rhetoric tends to equate intra-psychic reality with the 'truth' about masculinity, and fails to examine the real effects of social-structural inequalities, some feminist rhetoric can at times conflate powerful social positioning with individual motives or interests. Ironically, therefore, these two groups can sometimes talk past one another because of a shared tendency to read gendered subjectivity in an essentialist way (defined and expressed differently for each group). At the root of such a reading is a binary construct of gender difference.

The feminist views in question here are, in part, an effect of the cultural feminist and partnership models cited in the introduction to this paper, which posit generalised feminine qualities such as altruism and pacifism as keys to bettering the world (see Donovan, 1992). Often, as within MMM discourse, particular gendered qualities are naturalised via cross-cultural and trans-historical references to ancient archetypes. For cultural feminists, and some of their eco-feminist cousins, Estes (1992) provides a guide for archetypes, and goddess figures can feature as well (Bolen, 1984; Woolger & Woolger, 1989). Either implicitly or explicitly, many of these feminists claim that the world is in need of bettering because of generalised masculine qualities and their effects, which characterise 'dominator culture' (Eisler, 1987). In some feminist texts, the 'all powerful' goddess/mother/creation construct of the feminine that Keen (1991) cites is a founding principle (see Daly, 1978)¹¹. What is missing in these representations is any detailed or nuanced account of particular social-structural forces. If MMM discourses miss the ways in which gender is systematically structured and cited to buttress inequality (Scott, 1986), cultural feminist discourses miss the layered articulation of multiple positionings (e.g. gender, ethnicity/race, class, and sexuality) that constitute a range of subject positions, as well as room to manoeuvre between them (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The Taupo group's conversation about feminism in New Zealand as 'outdated' was, to me, both fascinating and disturbing for what it revealed about tendencies to represent gender as an isolable variable. Ideas about progressive gender constructs were presented in contrast to and in competition with Māori cultural struggles. Several women remarked that progress developing feminist agendas, e.g. equal pay for equal work and countering harassment, stalled when the Māori cultural renaissance took centre stage for activists. This juxtaposition of feminism and 'culture' exposes 'the race bias that occurs when power is solely conceptualized in terms of sex difference' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831). In this particular case, it misses the reality and diversity of *mana wāhine*, or Māori feminism, which often includes a critical deconstruction of the colonialist dichotomies man/woman and Māori/Pākehā (Connor, 2007; Johnson & Pihama, 1995; Smith, 1992).

Further, these concerns about cultural struggles stalling feminist ones signal an assimilative approach to feminism whereby middle-class Pākehā standards define progress. Such an approach is embedded in Pākehā cultural and 'goddess' feminist efforts to unify women through reference to a wide range of cultural symbols and icons that together define women's 'essence' (see Enns, 1994). As we have seen, culturally dominant, (neo)liberal discourse works to assimilate difference into sameness but relies on the reproduction of difference as 'othering' in the process.

The MMM – a largely white, middle-class movement – engages this kind of symbolic process as well, through its cross-cultural referencing of 'tribal' archetypes that are assimilated into a generalised construct of masculinity. Kimmel and Kaufman (1993) trace this phenomenon to nineteenth century 'blackface' performances. As Smith (2008) and Waldron (2005) point out, these racialised constructs have been kept alive more recently through modern Pagan

revivals, which 'are among the fastest growing social and religious movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (Smith, 2008, p. 3).

For me, the most interesting and inspiring part of the Taupo conversation occurred towards the end of our discussion when I began talking about concepts of gender that allowed for more than two genders (see Nanda, 2000). Several participants in the discussion expressed surprise that cross-cultural evidence revealed anything other than gender dichotomies. One woman remarked, 'that changes everything!' It is intriguing to consider what specifically might change thereby, and how this change could take place.

Discussion: Alternative concepts of gender and 'différance'

In this paper I have argued that certain strands of feminist thought, which have gained wide popularity in various forms, share constructs of gender with the MMM: namely, a tendency to represent gender as binary and to imagine gender as a stand alone variable of social life. It is helpful to identify these shared discourses, because unpacking them may be useful if participants in the MMM and feminist movements wish to engage in productive dialogue regarding shifts in gender that both are seeking. In this final section, I explore some concepts of gender that might facilitate such dialogue and also frame a future research project on contemporary discourses of gender within and around the MMM. I am keen to help design a research project¹² that is conducive to some of the shared goals of these movements. I suggest that politicised, poly-vocal, and liminal gender constructs – which may already be unfolding in some form within and around MMM practices today – open up space for pursuing these goals. Towards the end of this section I describe such articulations of identity using Johnson and Pihama's (1995) discussion around Derrida's concept of 'différance', focusing on the politics of ethnicity (as it articulates with gender) in New Zealand. The notion of *différance* provides particular meaning not only for women but also for men – and, importantly, for identities 'in between' – in an 'age of difference'.

As I noted at the start of this article, one of the questions I asked myself after my initial conversation with 'Joe' was whether his notion of a partnership between the MMM and feminism sidesteps its relational conditions of possibility. Brod (1994) argues that the field of men's studies tends to view the world of women and the world of men as separate, examining masculinities only as they are expressed by and between men. Surely men's studies has taken its cue here from the separatist strands of the feminist movement's second wave, although as I have shown, MMM separatism (as represented in its foundational texts) distinctively and strongly reinforces status quo definitions of femininity (separatism for a structurally disadvantaged group has effects that differ from separatism for a structurally advantaged group). But as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasise, 'gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity' (p. 848).

The construct of gender as a binary opposition is not 'incorrect'; rather, this construct is itself a culturally and historically specific one that implies (and masks) particular forms of (white, middle-class, heterosexual) relationship between men and women. Its roots are the nineteenth-century construction and naturalisation of the nuclear family, at a time when Social Darwinism suggested that the most 'civilised' nations of the world displayed the highest degree of gender differentiation – which was, simultaneously, seemingly under threat from within via the poor, first wave feminism, and visible homosexual enclaves (Haller & Haller, 1974; Kimmel, 1993). It is interesting to consider forms of gender expression that could unfold, or that might already be unfolding, within the MMM in light of the following questions: How do culturally dominant categories of gender come to be? What particular cultural com-

mitments and socio-political assumptions are embedded in these categories? How have diverse individual women and men been socially constituted and positioned (e.g. along axes of race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity)? A contextualised and relational concept of gender binaries, and an understanding of their histories and political effects, might produce new forms of dialogue amongst MMM and feminist movement participants.

Consider also the question: What can resistances against gender norms tell us about the constitution of these norms, and possibilities for shifting them? Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) offer the following, important concept of gender (focusing on masculinity): 'The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not equate to a model of social reproduction: we need to recognize social struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms' (p. 829). Categories of gender, while powerful, are always fractured, incomplete, and potentially open to change. Perhaps queer and transgender theorists have provided the most cogent arguments along these lines. Butler (1990, 1993) suggests that the boundaries of heteronormative gender have to be constantly produced through embodied acts, gender policing, and everyday ritual. As a result, shifts can occur with any new iteration. People who identify as transgender often resist or trouble gender binaries, offering an iteration of gender that queries the norm as 'natural'. Sanger (2008) argues that, therefore, 'working towards gender equality, or indeed recognition of gender difference, involves more than equality between men and women, as not every individual identifies within this narrow dualism' (p. 50). Sanger suggests that while it is impossible to escape altogether a discursive framework that dichotomises gender, resisting gender norms from within is an important process, and 'perhaps those who do not identify as male or female could be said to exist "beside" the gender binary, rather than beyond or outside it [Sedgwick 2003, p. 8]. This positioning indicates a more contingent relationship' (p. 49). How might a consideration of queer and transgender theory, and proactive efforts to include queer and transgender persons in discussions and gatherings, shape understandings of gender within the MMM and any dialogue about potential gender 'partnerships'? It would be interesting to see whether, and in what ways, such efforts are under way in contemporary manifestations of the MMM.

As for alternatives to understanding gender as a stand alone variable, I now consider Johnson and Pihama's (1995) use of Derrida's (1982) term 'différance' to articulate a preferred subject position for Māori women. While Johnson and Pihama's piece was written some time ago, the ideas are I believe still current, and they speak directly to the theme of this special issue on women and difference. Derrida coined the term *différance* 'to identify what he calls the "different sort of differences." *Différance*, however, is not constructed in terms of differences as oppositions, as is usually the case, but in relation to how differences are related to each other' (Johnson & Pihama, 1995, p. 76). *Différance* does not signal unstructured post-modern plurality, or individualised 'post-feminist' identities. Rather, as Johnson and Pihama explain, it allows for a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of identities that 'engage active processes of group identification' (p. 76), as opposed to the passive reception of pre-categorised notions of difference. Such efforts specify particular differences along axes of, for example, race, gender, and class. Johnson and Pihama are interested in de-centring, while still acknowledging the real effects of, dichotomies such as woman/man and Pākehā/Māori.

How do – and how might – Māori men and Māori feminists engage with the MMM? Particular challenges and opportunities exist in the New Zealand context of biculturalism when attempting to represent gender outside of culturally dominant dualist constructs. Radhika Mohanram (1998), a poststructuralist feminist and postcolonial theorist, argues that a predominant reading of biculturalism privileges Pākehā identity under the guise of co-existing and equal partnership with Māori. I have argued that powerful cultural discourses of gender as dichoto-

mous work in a similar way with regard to the neutralisation of persisting gender inequalities. On the other hand, a deconstructive reading of biculturalism – one that privileges *différance* – would foreground the cultural politics of ethnicity in New Zealand. Concretely, it would, for example, challenge any easy appropriations of Māori symbols and rituals in MMM contexts. In this way, biculturalism could help guard against the form of ‘imperialist nostalgia’ (see Rosaldo, 1989) that has been noted within MMM groups in the U.S., wherein white MMM participants ritually represent elements of marginalised cultural groups in the same locale, a process which obscures the race and class privilege that has often had a direct hand in the destruction, or attempted destruction, of the very groups that are being represented (e.g. Native American tribes). The politics of this symbolic process relies on perceived loss for the dominant group, and on ‘the Freudian axiom that what we lose in reality we recreate in fantasy’ (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1993, p. 12).

The concept of *différance* eschews such a whitewashing of power relations, allowing for politicised plurality. Gender thereby becomes one powerful strand of identity among many, a concept that would certainly alter the familiar, popularised terms of discussion for MMM and feminist movement participants. The histories and purposes of these movements, and the relationships between them, would become more visible and therefore more available for political shifts. Exactly where these shifts would go, and any new conflicts and struggles that may arise as a result, of course remain open questions. As Smith (2010) suggests, perhaps the most potent and interesting space for new identity constructions is a space ‘between’ identities: the liminal space that is the meeting ground between (at least) two parties, as encountered in a powhiri process. This in-between space is not neutral or level ground; it is politicised ground that shifts our attention away from essentialist assumptions which may inform our ideas about the extant identities on either ‘side’.

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Notes

1 ‘Joe’ is a pseudonym.

2 Note that homosocial bonding is not in itself problematic: a New Zealand counsellor and consultant in the area of masculinity and abuse notes that there are, for example, ‘many homosocial bonding initiatives specifically aimed at challenging, preventing and intervening in violence against women and rape’ (C. Murphy, personal communication, August 22, 2011).

3 The term ‘mythopoetic men’s movement’ is a widely-used gloss in academic circles; particular groups that can be said to fall within it do not necessarily claim the label or fully ‘fit’ the description.

4 This figure has been obtained from documents internal to the organisation.

5 I am hoping to organise a collaborative team project on this topic, which would include MMM ‘insiders’. Obviously defining the direction and shape of such a project would require consultation with participants.

6 I thank an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article for this formulation.

7 Note that Taylor and Rupp (1993) caution against decontextualised critical readings of cultural feminism; they assert that activists have not applied the label to themselves.

8 See Paymar and Barnes, n.d., for literature on this topic.

9 Kimmel and Kaufman (1993) point out that, tellingly, the late nineteenth century also witnessed homosocial movements for (white, middle-class, heterosexual) men who were thought to be feminised and enervated by industrialisation.

10 See Paymar and Barnes (n.d.). Note that ‘not everyone who claims they operate their men’s stopping abuse programme on the Duluth Curriculum and Model actually adheres to it... [there are] varying levels of adoption of the models and inconsistent use of the principles in practice and conceptualization’ (C. Murphy, personal communication, August 22, 2011). In addition, Duluth practitioners are ‘continually evolving... to better address nuances and complexities in men, women and “the system”’ (C. Murphy, personal communication, August 22, 2011).

11 Of course Keen's version, unlike Daly's, is decidedly domesticated. But as Tavis (1992) suggests, a 'woman-is-better' counterpoint (such as Daly's) to misogynist 'woman-as-deficient' cultural discourse provides part of the context for positions such as Keen's.

12 See Endnote 5.

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