

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Peter Hennen, *Fairies, Bears and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 240 pp \$US 20.00 paper (978-0-226-32728-0), \$US 50.00 hardcover (978-0-226-32727-3)

Historically, gay male cultures throughout the Western world have possessed subcultural elements that revolve around gender, be it the valorization and eroticization of masculinity or, conversely, the rejection of masculinity in the form of affective and representational effeminacy. In this regard, one could imagine an ethnographic exploration of gay male cultures as a study of the “project” of gender in which gay collectivities build upon, struggle against and dismantle the norms and institutions that underpin masculinity. In Peter Hennen’s *Fairies, Bears and Leathermen*, one finds precisely such an exploration. Through fieldwork in the diverse sexual communities of fairies, bears and leathermen, Hennen provides a focused analytic tour of how these groups construct gender and sexual identities, the relationship of these communities to the larger field of political struggle, and a consideration of how these particular gender projects relate to the gender literature, including in particular queer theory and the politics of subversion.

Hennen begins with a sociohistorical analysis of effeminacy, wherein he coins the concept of “the effeminacy effect,” by which he means a discursive “force” designed to discipline male gender by locating it in opposition to the gender of women and effeminate homosexual men. If homosexuality under the reign of the effeminacy effect is equated to effeminacy, then gay men, Hennen reasons, are faced with a particular dilemma: how can one be a man, on the one hand, but gay (i.e., effeminate) on the other? Fairies, bears and leathermen each represent distinct collective responses to this conundrum.

Fairies are gay men who embrace a markedly effeminate, often flamboyant affect and self-presentation. On the whole, the fairy subculture represents a self-conscious challenge to hegemonic masculinity. Fairies typically believe that they are born with a “fae spirit” defined by a feminine essence. They choose new names with feminine connotations, eschew competitive masculinity and organizational hierarchy, and seek to transform sexuality from the patriarchal paradigm of “subject-object” relations to “subject-subject” consciousness.

Nevertheless, according to Hennen, the degree to which this community subverts gender is unclear. For instance, rather than constituting a third gender, the gendered practices of the fairy are closer to a “gender pastiche” whereby fairies draw from both masculine and feminine characteristics, thereby sustaining the gender binary. Moreover, despite the equalitarian discourse characteristic of fairydom, Hennen finds evidence of sexual competition whereby fairies are distinguished by what I in my own work have referred to as “erotic capital.” Fairies deemed unattractive face repeated rejection, which can be particularly disheartening for members already doubly marginalized within the broader gay world and the heterosexual society. And finally, while some fairy drag is wholly parodic, others aspire to represent “real femininity” in a form of serious drag anchored to essentialist notions of female beauty and identity.

In sharp contrast, bears — archetypically husky, hirsute and bearded — eschew effeminacy, regarding themselves as “normal” every-day guys who happen to be sexually attracted to other men. These men worship at the shrine of masculinity, embody manliness through the sign vehicles of working-class clothes, facial hair and corpulent bodies, and seek out an “authentic,” “natural” masculinity pitted against the false, hyper-masculinity of the gay clone and the effeminate affect and skinny body of the gay twink. And yet, the bears are not only or simply gender conservators. In fact, Hennen finds an ethic of care among them — for instance in the institutionalized “bear hug” and bear cuddling practices — that seems to defy the regulation of homosocial intercourse mandated by hegemonic masculinity.

Closer to the bears than the fairies, the leathermen nevertheless represent yet another distinct gendered subculture. In many respects, leathermen regard themselves not only equally masculine as heterosexual men, but more. Organized around the eroticization of leather, masculinity, and in many cases BDSM, leathermen create a sexual subculture with its own particular sexual pedagogy and socialization. Here, “tops” learn through focused training how to push “bottoms” to their maximum threshold of pain, domination and humiliation, while at the same time allowing the bottom to establish the limits of the interaction. The art of BDSM eroticism is complex and subtle as bottoms learn over time to convert perceptions of pain to pleasure. But this is precisely wherein Hennen finds the subversive potential of the gay leather subculture. Leathermen appear to conceive of anal sex as just another fetish, no more or less central to erotic pleasure than tit torture, fisting, or flagellation. Hence the phallic, penetration-centered sexuality of heterosexuality is displaced, or at least exists alongside of alternative forms of pleasure.

In his study of each of these subcultures, Hennen provides rich historical background regarding the social and political roots of these groups. Moreover, using the conceptual tools of a Bourdieusian theory of practice, a Butlerian analysis of gender performativity, and the more recent work of Brekhus on identity, among others, Hennen masterfully weaves together data and theory, pressing against the limits of the gender and sexuality literature. Rejecting theoretical orthodoxy, Hennen is free to use his data to speak back to, expand upon and reject the current reigning ideas that constitute gender and sexuality studies.

These strengths aside, there are a few places where the analysis could be stronger. First, much of the discussion throughout the chapters concerns the problem of subversion — i.e., to what extent do the fairies, bears and leathermen subvert or consolidate hegemonic masculinity? The question itself, while admittedly a preoccupation within certain gender literatures, is by now a bit tiresome, and here, leads to the predictable conclusion that in fact these communities do both. As well, while Hennen is clear on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, its invocation in this book is rather odd since Hennen's data include very little content related to hierarchies of masculinity, be they racial or other. In this sense it's not clear what is gained by use of the concept. Instead, what Hennen seems to find are simple semiotic constructions of masculinity pitted against fairly rudimentary constructions of femininity in post World War II white, middle-class America. But perhaps most regretfully, throughout much of the book, Hennen does not define subversion, leaving it up to the reader to decide what he intends. The problem with the term is that it is implicitly sociologically ambiguous. At minimum, subversion can operate at four levels of analysis: at the level of an individual actor's subjectivity, at the level of a face-to-face encounter with others, at the institutional and organizational level, and through macro-level norms and discourse. The matter is complicated further by the fact that subversion at one level of analysis tells us nothing about the effects of a given community/identity/practice/representation at any other level of analysis. As a consequence, Hennen's discussion on this topic is at times a bit muddy, much more so than the otherwise cogent and penetrating analysis that runs through the book. Only in the concluding chapter does Hennen offer a typology of subversion used by Taylor and Rupp which, although helpful, is by this point simply too little and too late to redeem this major stream of discussion. Finally, I found Hennen's discussion concerning the political viability of the three subcultures he studied to be a bit overly-academic, leading to some rather silly inquiries, such as whether the sexual culture of the leathermen will ever gain political ground (huh?), or why heterosexuals have yet to regard the gay

bear as a “distinct social type” (maybe they have other things to think about than the occasional random encounter on the street with a husky gay man sporting a beard?). By his own account, Hennen notes that these are sexual subcultures that are generally insular and without political ambition. Hence, questions regarding the viability of a bear or leatherman social movement feel oddly out of touch.

These criticisms aside, Hennen’s book is a winner. It is both empirically and conceptually rich, and at every turn informative, probing, analytically rigorous and provocative. It is also well written, free from the jargon-heavy, obstructionist writing style that characterizes much of the prose of the theorists with whom he engages. Hats off to Hennen.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ADAM ISAIAH GREEN

Adam Isaiah Green is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Toronto. His most recent publications are “The social organization of desire: The sexual fields approach” in *Sociological Theory* 26, 1 (2008): 25-50, and “Erotic habitus: Toward a sociology of desire” in *Theory & Society* 37 (2008): 597-626. adamisaiah.green@utoronto.ca