

## Challenging Male Supremacy in Practice

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In her contribution to last year's Kilburn Manifesto (Rustin 2013), an online statement in twelve monthly instalments about the nature of the neoliberal system which now dominates most of the 'Western' world and the need to develop coherent alternatives to it, Beatrix Campbell (2013) made clear the extent to which "a neoliberal neo-patriarchy has emerged as the new articulation of male domination." Some of the key elements she identified as composing this "new articulation" include neoliberal retrenchments in welfare provision, the increasing double shift of productive and socially reproductive labour performed by women combined with persistent gender inequalities in pay, the growth of (para-)militarised masculinities "vital to the new modes of armed conflict that are proliferating across the flexible frontiers of globalised capitalism, between and within states," and continuing high rates of violence against women and lamentably low rates of conviction for the mostly male perpetrators. As Campbell (2013) concludes, "sexual assault is a crime that by and large escapes justice."

Less than three months later, in what the organisers described as a groundbreaking weekend, men of all ages and from many walks of life were invited to come together in London at the BAM (Being a Man) festival (Anon 2014) to "explore all facets of masculinity and male identity." These included subjects ranging from "fatherhood, heroism and the tribal nature of sport to online addictions, sex, war, race and the aspirations men have." The disjuncture between the issues discussed by Campbell and those highlighted by the organisers of BAM is striking. A preference for masculinity talk over patriarchy analysis when men are invited to discuss 'their' gender and its problematic effects is hardly new though. As Jeff Hearn (1996 p207) cautioned nearly two decades ago in his "A critique of the concept of masculinity/masculinities," the danger with this preference is that:

"While men's practices are criticised, it is masculinity that is seen to be the problem. Calls for masculinity to be 'redefined', 'reconstructed', 'dismantled' or 'transformed' become common. Instead of wondering whether they should change their behaviour, men 'wrestle with the meaning of masculinity'."

But if wrestling with "all facets of masculinity" often seems to be a way for men to avoid some of the harder questions that confront them in the struggle against "neo-patriarchy," must this always be the case? After all, we can use masculinity, as Connell (1995 p77) proposes in her definition of "hegemonic masculinity," as a way to explore and understand our relationship to "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy."

It was partly out of a desire to confront our own gender practice, and the ways in which it did and did not challenge the legitimacy of patriarchy, that a small group of us came together in 2008 to form the Challenging Male Supremacy Project (CMS). As an all-volunteer collective in New York City, we have since that time created spaces and developed tools for working with men and masculine-identified people to challenge male supremacist practices and cultures as part of a broader movement for collective liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the collective work of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project (Aazam Otero, Gaurav Jashnani, RJ Maccani and the author,) and on the contributions made by all the participants in the Study-into-Action workshops that CMS led (with Siddhartha Sanchez.) It draws on the discussion of this work presented in our chapter in *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities* (South End Press: 2011) entitled "What Does It Feel Like When Change Finally Comes?: Male Supremacy, Accountability and Transformative Justice."

The push to work together as CMS came from a range of people and experiences in our lives. All of us, at different times, have been called upon by women, whether in our intimate relationships or political communities, to do more not only to change our own sexist attitudes and behaviours but also to work more actively on supporting liberatory practices and spaces within our communities, in part by engaging and supporting other men in being accountable for their oppressive behaviour. Simply by growing up as boys and being men in societies such as the USA and UK, which remain structured by the patriarchal exploitation and violence outlined by Campbell, our lives have been constantly marked by gendered privileges. We have not only seen but also participated in the harm and injustice produced by institutionalised male supremacy.

We have also experienced, in different ways, the violence of men, whether at home, at school or in the street. At the time when we first met together to discuss forming CMS, one of us had begun to speak publicly about his own experiences of being sexually abused by a young man when he was a boy. We recognised in our own lives some of the costs of male supremacy to men as described by bell hooks (2001 p41), who writes of men that “the terrible price they pay to maintain “power over” us is the loss of their capacity to give and receive love[.]” She observes that “all visionary male thinkers challenging male domination insist that men can return to love only by repudiating the will to dominate.”

Some of us were being asked to participate in processes to hold accountable men in our activist communities who had abused or assaulted women. We saw the violence being done to women and gender non-conforming people by men within social justice movements, and how this violence was weakening movement struggles for greater justice in the world. We recognised that left unaddressed, male violence within our communities reinforces the status quo of existing oppressive systems and undermines the belief that a better world is within our collective grasp.

The joint statement “Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex” issued in 2001 by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance (INCITE! and Resistance 2001) inspired us, as when it urged:

“all men in social justice movements to take particular responsibility to address and organize around gender violence in their communities as a primary strategy for addressing violence and colonialism.”

We also saw that male supremacist behaviour within our organisational spaces often goes unchecked and even unnoticed because many of us have internalised the male supremacist notion that the “real struggle” is elsewhere, whether in the streets or the halls of government. In addition, some of its most obvious manifestations, such as male sexual violence, can feel especially difficult to address for those of us who recognise that the police and prisons not only fail to prevent this violence but are themselves institutions whose coercive authority is deeply infused with a patriarchal logic of control through violence.

It became increasingly clear as we met and talked that our everyday practices of male supremacy are the hardest to acknowledge, let alone address, because they are so thoroughly normalised. And because too often we have operated within a good/evil binary, in which “we”, the radical activists, saw ourselves as different from “them”, the sexists and patriarchs. The words of US anti-racist organiser Chris Crass resonated with us, in his account of being called upon to change by a woman in his life (Crass 2009):

“What do you mean I'm sexist?” I was shocked. I wasn't a jock, I didn't hate women, I wasn't an evil person. “But how can I be a sexist, I'm an anarchist?” I was anxious, nervous, and my defenses were up. I believed in liberation, for fighting against

capitalism and the state. There were those who defended and benefited from injustice and then there's us, right?"

But as Paul Kivel, co-founder of the Oakland Men's Project whose work continues to inspire us, never tires of emphasising, we need to get beyond these binaries of "us" and "them," the Good Men vs. Bad Men set-up. Instead we must focus on what we as men can do to challenge the male supremacist practices and ideas which privilege us and produce so much injustice and suffering in the lives of women and those whose gender identities and sexual desires reject the heteronormative, hierarchical masculine/feminine gender binary that patriarchy demands.

### **Naming and framing our work**

Our initial conversations focused on how to name and frame the work that we wanted to do. Some of us were familiar with and inspired by the work of the Challenging White Supremacy (CWS) Workshops, founded in the San Francisco Bay Area by Sharon Martinas and Mickey Ellinger in 1993, and from 2000 onwards taken forwards by the Catalyst Project as the 'Anti-Racism for Global Justice' workshop series as part of its work to mobilise grassroots anti-racist organisers working for racial justice and seeking to challenge white privilege in all their social justice work (Catalyst 2014). The CWS emphasis on consciousness raising and skills building toward transformative organising, and the focus on mobilising the people most privileged by a system of oppression to challenge that oppression in solidarity with those targeted by it, influenced us profoundly.

In articulating our work as CMS we not only sought to suggest an affinity with the strategies of CWS, but more specifically to highlight the importance of necessarily linking projects working for racial and gender justice because of the interlocking nature of white supremacy and male supremacy in US history and contemporary society. In the same way that "white supremacy" is used as the analytical and organising framework in struggles for racial justice, rather than a discourse of "racism" which can be reduced to a practice of interpersonal or inter-group discrimination, we too saw in the use of "male supremacy" a way of emphasising our commitment to understanding and addressing the systemic nature of gender oppression. In practice, this involved both the men of colour and the white men within the spaces and conversations convened by CMS looking at the ways in which the power, prestige and benefits accorded to men are affected by men's locations within the system of racial hierarchy operating in the US, and at the uses of racist representations of men of colour in maintaining this hierarchy.

From the outset, we also wanted to question the binary assumptions that still inform so much work on gender justice - that there are simply two genders, female and male, and that justice is about greater equality between them. This gender binary framework erases from view the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming people, and renders natural the social act of gender identification. Thus, we made a conscious decision to use the still somewhat unfamiliar term "cisgender" in doing our work, a term coined by transgender activists and used to describe those of us who identify with the sex and gender identity we were assigned at birth and are therefore accorded certain privileges by society. We found the explanation and discussion of "cisgender" and related terms by juliaserrano (2009) extremely useful.

### **Taking steps to challenge male supremacy**

As noted above, we took inspiration from the emphasis given by the Challenging White Supremacy workshops to consciousness raising and skills building toward transformative organising, and focused much of our energies in the first three years on developing and

running a nine-session Study-into-Action process. Over a period of nine months in 2009-2010 and six months in 2011, we ran two Study-into-Action processes for a total of 25 men, chosen through our personal and political networks on the basis of their social justice activism and their desire to transform their own and other men's gender practices. In its first iteration, we confined the group to cisgender men only, largely because we as the CMS organisers, being cisgender ourselves, did not feel skilled enough to hold the space adequately for the trans men who sought to participate in the process. However, the competence and experience we gained from the first round of the CMS Study-into-Action, together with our ongoing conversation with trans men in our lives and communities who wanted join the Study-into-Action, led us to open the second round of Study-into-Action to both cis and trans men.

A key aspect of our approach to the Study-into-Action process was to draw on the teachings and tools of Somatics, an integrative approach to healing and transformation that understands and treats human beings as a complex of mind, body, and spirit. With support from Generative Somatics (2014) co-founder Staci Haines who co-facilitated the first session of each Study-into-Action, we used Somatics as a tool to explore the ways in which privilege and power are embodied. We incorporated Somatics not as a practice of self-improvement, which is often socially decontextualised and strongly individualistic, but because we believe that we cannot just think and talk our way out of male privilege and male violence. Challenging male supremacy requires fundamental transformations in the ways we act, individually and collectively, and the Somatics exercises that we used proved to be powerful ways of getting in touch with not just the concept but also the felt experience of what such transformation could be.

In the course of preparing for the Study-into-Action, we approached some of the groups in New York City that do related work in order to formally partner with them in planning this project. We were very clear that we wanted our work as CMS to be in collaboration with and supportive of the work done primarily by cisgender women, transgender, and gender non-conforming organisers to challenge male supremacist violence in transformative ways. In the role of Accountability and Support Partners, these organisations gave us feedback on a curriculum outline several months before our first session, helped to shape its structure and content, and met with us halfway through the first nine-month program to again offer insightful feedback. The groups included the Safe OUTside the System (SOS) Collective of the Audre Lorde Project (SOS 2014), Sisterfire NYC, a collective affiliated with INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (INCITE! 2014), Third Root Community Health Center (ThirdRoot 2014), the Welfare Warriors Project of Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ 2014), CONNECT (CONNECT 2014), and individual members of the Rock Dove Collective (RockDove 2014) and an emerging queer people-of-color anti-violence group.

Incorporating our partners' suggestions, we fashioned a nine-session Study-into-Action process which opened with group-building activities and an introduction to Somatics, followed by activities mapping the history of our experiences with masculinity and how structures of privilege and oppression have shaped us as cis and trans men. From there, we focused on political education, historicising male violence, and developing a shared, intersectional analysis of male supremacy and male representations in media. The second half of the Study-into-Action moved toward a more experiential focus on what accountability, desire, and transformation felt like and (could) be like in our personal and political relationships. We all shared one or more commitments to a specific course of action that we would take to challenge how male supremacy manifests in these relationships. Over sessions six through eight, we explored how male violence manifests in our communities; how, when we observe male privilege and/or violence, to intervene as bystanders without reproducing male supremacist dynamics; what accountability for male violence can look like outside of the criminal penal system; and how to relate

differently as men, both cis and trans, to desire, connection, and intimacy. In our final session, we evaluated our process together and discussed our concrete commitments to challenging male supremacy in our intimate relationships and political work.

### **Taking our work forward**

Accountability, as a practice and a process that can truly generate transformation in harmful behaviours and oppressive systems, was a key theme throughout the Study-into-Action. Given the violence perpetrated by the police, courts and prisons of the criminal penal system against communities of colour and low income communities in the US, and especially women and gender non-conforming people within those communities, it is clear that we need to find other ways to respond to male violence. The question we still face is how to respond to the harms of male violence in ways that build solidarity and create community, whilst supporting the healing of those who have been harmed and demanding accountability from those who have caused the harm - all in the context of challenging the male supremacist climate within which the harm occurred.

Since the end of the Study-into-Action process, CMS members have continued to be active in co-facilitating or supporting accountability processes with men within our social justice networks who have sexually assaulted or abused women. One framework we have found particularly inspiring is the “Transformative Justice Collaborative” model initiated by generationFIVE (2014), a Bay Area-based organisation focused on ending child sexual abuse in five generations. This model highlights the importance of responding to individual incidents of violence and harm in ways that help to transform the conditions that generate such violence and harm. In collaboration with feminist, queer and trans justice groups throughout New York City and the Bay Area-based Creative Interventions (CreativeInterventions 2014), we are currently part of a network of over a dozen collectives, social justice and anti-violence organisations throughout New York City who are integrating transformative justice into their work.

In common with other activist groups, we still struggle with the challenge of how to sustain our work while sustaining ourselves. We have looked for different ways to push the conversation about challenging male supremacy as a contribution to the work of collective liberation - through workshops at the US Social Forum and Allied Media Conference, presentations at social justice events and informal consultations with social justice organisations in New York City. We are developing a website (CMS 2014) to make our work more widely accessible, and to share lessons that we have learned in the course of designing and running the Study-into-Action processes. And we continue to try and deepen our practice of reflection and relationship among all those who have participated in our work, through get-togethers over brunch and short workshops on specific themes (e.g. Pornography, Men of Colour and White Women in the Movement.)

But questions about where best to focus our energies persist. Living, as we do, at the heart of the neoliberal neo-patriarchy described by Campbell, we like many others face the similarly urgent tasks of creating more liberatory practices and spaces within our own communities and holding the State to account for its policy failures and abuses of power. We know that we can only do this collectively, and our commitment as CMS is to continue to offer our work on challenging male supremacy as part of the broader struggle for collective liberation.

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