Research

Macho men and the queer imaginary: A critique of selected gay 'colonial' representations of homomasculinity

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Abstract

The contemporary presence of images of hypermasculine aesthetics in gay visual culture results from gay men's response to being expected to *behave like men* (masculine performativity) despite being told through stereotypes and homophobia that they are *not men*. By fashioning themselves after archetypal masculine icons, like the cowboy, gay 'clones' represent a nostalgic, romantic longing for 'a man's man' that is traditionally associated with heterosexuality and does not carry the stigma associated with over-the-top, effeminate queers. Visual manifestations of the 'macho' gay body, and its accoutrements, become sites of resistance through which ideological notions of gay male inferiority and heteronormative male superiority are challenged, re-appropriated and even subverted. Yet, such representations of homomasculinity, which act as 'templates' of estimable physical qualities for gay men, are based on a stifling stereotype of gay identity that obscures the race-based power relations within which it operates. The images conceived of as gay 'colonial' representations in this article originate from the gay media, fine arts and advertising, and are investigated in order to reveal the apparent standards of masculinity in queer culture, the fetishisation and commodification of the 'frontier', gay beauty ideals, and the racist ideologies that exemplify such homoerotic visual cultures.

Introduction

In 2006, the director Ang Lee's critically acclaimed film *Brokeback Mountain* queered the silver screen by projecting images of male homosexual love and desire onto the social imagination. Lee's film recounts the romantic relationship between two ranch-hands, Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, as they struggle to express and accept their attraction to one other amidst the homophobic landscapes of rural America (Tuss 2006:244). Yet, *Brokeback Mountain* is by no means the first cinematic venture to 'queer' the myth of the frontier, and present an affront to the traditional, heteronormative agent of Western, command-and-conquer narratives, namely the cowboy (Aucamp 2007:[sp]).

The year 1969 marked the release of two such films – John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* and Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys*. Tinged with homoerotic undercurrents, these films undermine the conventional construction of 'The Western' as a filmic genre typified by honourable, heterosexual protagonists, nowhere as present as in the characters embodied by the all-American cowboy, John Wayne (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]; Aucamp 2007:[sp]). Furthermore, Schlesinger's 'counterculture Western' appeared in conjunction with the advent of civil rights movements and protests against the Vietnam War in the United States, and thus exemplifies the disillusionment with the American Dream and frontier masculinity as ideological myths underpinned by the exclusion of, and hatred toward, cultural 'others' (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]).

However, as the political tumult of the 1960s and 1970s raged on, internal strife plagued the gay rights movement as the debate over the acceptance of effeminate gay men, so-called 'fairies', became central to the movement's political agenda (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]). While *Midnight Cowboy* links the 'queerness' of its main character's tragic descent into prostitution to the fragility and eventual destruction of frontier masculinity, Warhol's film seems to be concerned with the manner in which the rise of the gay 'clone' era pitted gay men against each other in a power struggle over the definition of homomasculinity (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]; Clarkson 2006:192; Aucamp 2007:[sp]).

The gay 'clone' era refers to the historical period of the 1970s and 1980s, during which gay men adopted a hypermasculine style of dress and demeanour based on a working-class aesthetic of 'ruggedness', as a means of vigorously opposing the stereotypical depiction of homosexual men as flamboyantly effeminate (Clarkson 2006:193; Lahti 1998:193). As a result, images of blue-collar masculinity, cops, construction workers, soldiers and cowboys, for example, dominated queer urban centres like New York, and have become mainstays of gay visual culture that still appear (Clarkson 2006:193; Barrett and Pollack 2005:440; Mercer 2003:286–287; Hancock 2009:78). The significance of investigating how the

'straight' appeal of these so-called 'clones' or 'cookie-cutter' masculinities (Green 2002:534) is perpetuated, relates to the manner in which they create hierarchies *within* the male gender that signify power relations between gay men in which hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity is reiterated, together with racism and sexism.

In view of this, the camp aesthetics of Warhol's film, personified by the limp-wristed town sheriff who occasionally dabbles in transvestism, speak of 'a relationship of tolerance between the macho gay cowboy and the drag queen sheriff; a union of seeming opposites' (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]). Whereas *Midnight Cowboy* hinges on notions of alienation and dystopia, Warhol constructs a frontier utopia in which 'fairies' and 'clones' exist peacefully alongside one another; a scenario employed specifically to critique the dominance of white, hypermasculine gay men in social reality (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]).

Brokeback Mountain, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Lonesome Cowboys* are evoked here in order to foreground that the frontier myth is performative[1] by nature and can thus be appropriated in a different, even contrary, context or 'queer' setting (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]; Aucamp 2007:[sp]). Of even greater significance to this article is that 'the virility of the gay white cowboy image is intelligible culturally because it relies on previously cemented images of virile white heterosexual cowboys and frontiersmen … who conserved and shored up the white-supremacist, misogynist nation' (Nast 2002:887).

Homomasculinity, gender theory and camp aestheticism

It is necessary to first explore what exactly is meant by homomasculinity, and how this gendered construct functions at the expense of marginalising certain gay men. Feminist ideology is responsible for opening discourses on the subject of gender and how it is socially constructed, especially with regard to patriarchy and the inferiority attributed to women, but in the wake of this theoretical development, discourses of masculinism or men's studies arose to specifically address the *male* sex role (Connell 1992:735). Central to the concerns of men's studies, is the manner in which hegemonic masculinity suppresses 'other' masculinities by continually reiterating its supposed supremacy (Ouzgane and Morrell 2005:4).

As R.W. Connell (1992:737) states, it is, however, important that one does not conceive of male homosexuality as the antithesis of masculinity, because such assumptions reinscribe the supposed naturality of heterosexuality. Gay men may be oppressed, but they are surely not excluded from masculinity; it is, in fact, more vexing for gay men than effeminacy (Fritscher 2005:[sp]). Adam Green (2002:531), for example, critiques queer theory's notion that all non-heterosexual practices are always already transgressive, because both gay and straight men 'undergo the same ranges of gender socialisation' and construct their masculine identities from the same iconic embodiments of manhood given at a specific historical period.

The gay 'clone' era and the still-present images of hypermasculine aesthetics result from gay men's response to being expected to *behave like men* and from masculine performativity, despite being told through stereotypes and homophobia that they are *not men* (Clarkson 2006:193). By fashioning themselves after archetypal masculine icons, like the cowboy, gay 'clones' represent a nostalgic, romantic longing for 'a man's man' that is traditionally associated with heterosexuality and does not carry the stigma associated with over-the-top, effeminate queers: 'Homomasculinity [therefore] seeks the archetypal best that males can do, not the stereotypical worst' (Fritscher 2005:[sp]).

The 'macho' gay body, and its accoutrements, becomes a site of resistance in and of itself, through which different ideological notions of 'ability and disability [or] power and powerlessness are articulated' (Lahti 1998:187, 194). Manifestations of gay hypermasculinity are also undeniably 'camp' by definition, in terms of being created by or expressing a gay aesthetic sensibility (Babuscio 1993:20). Yet, the fact that camp hinges on 'theatricality' and therefore 'responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated' is especially significant with regard to this article's investigation of homomasculinity (Sontag 1964:279, 280).[2]

According to Susan Sontag (1964:290), the 'peculiar affinity and overlap' between the

style of camp and gay men can be attributed to the fact that camp is ultimately a gesture of 'self-legitimisation' and 'homosexuals have [therefore] pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense'. Jack Babuscio (1993:24, 25) states that since gay men do not conform to conventional, heteronormative sex-role expectations, which leads to the stigmatisation of homosexuality, camp often produces the experience of 'passing for straight' by rejecting stereotypical, effeminate gay characteristics in favour of 'highly charged' (hyper) and stylised performances of masculinity that are accompanied by 'the exaggeration of sexual characteristics' (Sontag 1964:279; Lahti 1998:195; Mercer 2003:289; Hancock 2009:79). Therefore, 'straight-acting, straight-looking' (Fritscher 2005:[sp]) hypermasculine gay men 'impersonate heterosexual citizenry' by employing camp aesthetics that express 'a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise … and the distinctions to be made between instinctive [gay] and theatrical ['straight'] behaviour' (Babuscio 1993:25; Snaith 2003:82).

What Jack Fritscher (2005:[sp]) does not account for in his overly positive definition of homomasculinity as the 'archetypal best' that gay men can do, is the manner in which queer challenges or subversions of hegemonic masculinity replace one system of oppression with another. In other words, homomasculinity reiterates hegemonic masculinity with regard to the queer constituency, considering that it excludes effeminacy, transvestism, gay blacks and less 'acceptable' forms of gay male expression from its self-definition (Clarkson 2006:196). Hypermasculine white men, and the fetishised images that accompany them, arguably internalise the gender codes of heteronormativity and therefore 'normalise' particular homosexual lifestyles by being selectively homophobic and racist (Clarkson 2006:205; McBride 1998:369).

A reflection on the reiteration of the image of the frontiersman in popular culture

An advertisement for mobile phone pornography suggestively called *The Boys from Barebum Mountain* (featuring a muscular, young, white man sporting a traditional 'cowboy hat' and not much else) from the Winter 2007 issue of the South African gay men's lifestyle magazine *Gay pages*, illustrates that the queer frontiersman appears as a 'hot' commodity available for the consumption of a fantasy that can be traced to the 'can-do erotic American cowboy image [The Marlboro Man] … reeking of homosexual fraternity … [that is] the subliminal key behind every homomasculine face/body/image' (Fritscher 2005:[sp]).[3]

According to Michael E. Starr (1984:50, 54), early American 'Western' films positioned cigarette smoking as an explicit symbol of male virility, thereby transmuting cigarettes into the preferred 'accoutrement of the masculine man', which resulted in a 'barrage of [images] showing rugged cowboys … smoking Marlboro filters astride a horse and surrounded by a Western landscape'. In fact, with regard to the apparent adoration of 'manly' men in gay culture, no 'more self-conscious expression of the appeal to … rugged masculinity … exists than the Marlboro man' (Starr 1984:54).

Furthermore, the advertising images that accompanied other cigarette brands, such as Camel, before anti-smoking legislation similarly manifested primarily in terms of hypermasculine, 'frontier' aesthetics and values: the Camel man has a 'three-day stubble', is muscular and handsome, and embodies notions of exploration, escapism and the myth of the lonesome, adventurous 'cowboy' (Erasmus 1996:25, 28). It is the combination of 'butch' queer aesthetics with the ideological structures of 'frontiersmanship' that cast the image of the white, gay 'cowboy' as the epitome of normative Western masculinity. In other words, the supposed autonomy of 'frontier' masculinity (Erasmus 1996:30), in terms of existing independently of women, shunning effeminacy and conquering feminised, 'natural' landscapes, is elevated when the man embodying this masculine identity is gay. This can be attributed to the fact that ideal gayness is not only hypermasculine, but simultaneously articulates the total absence of women in favour of male same-sex eroticism and camaraderie. Consequently, Camille Paglia (1990:14, 15) argues that:

> Male homosexuality may be the most valorous of attempts to evade the femme fatale and to defeat nature … By turning away from the Medusan mother, whether in honour or detestation of her, the male homosexual is one of the great forgers of

> absolutist western [masculine] identity … as embodied in today's boyish male hustler [who disappears] to other loves, other lands. He is a rambler, *a cowboy* and sailor. (emphasis added)

The image, therefore, does not exist as an isolated phenomenon, but points toward the manner in which colonial fantasy and the sexual magnetism of the frontiersman are constantly recycled in mainstream and gay media, such as the American cigarette advertisements of the 1950s and 1960s (Starr 1984:53, 54). Contemporary South African queer visual culture is also not exempt from the perpetual reification of the cowboy, and one only needs to briefly consider the so-called 'society pages' of local gay publications and websites to find shirtless, muscular go-go boys and pageant winners donning wide-brimmed leather hats and chaps, along with satin sashes.

Moreover, a locally produced underwear, sleepwear and swimwear label called *Bonewear* features a cowboy-esque Jay (see Figure 1) (from the popular South African 'boy-band' *Eden*) in a recent publicity campaign on the queer lifestyle, news and entertainment website *Mambaonline* (*Bonewear* gallery 2009; Jay of *Eden* 2009). This image subverts traditional gender roles and potentially disrupts heteronormativity by representing the male body as submissively erotic – a demeanour traditionally associated with the 'feminine' in heteropatriarchal, Western culture. Nonetheless, the image is problematic, because the anxiety that it creates for heteronormativity may arise at the expense of buttressing the racial prejudice that continually promotes the equation of white men and sexually desirable homomasculinity.

According to Heidi Nast (2002:887) the image of the cowboy is frequently commodified and fetishised exactly because this process eradicates the violent, racist history of colonialism and romanticises frontiersmen. Steven Kates (1999:34) argues that representations of homomasculinity that appear in such advertisements, and that act as 'templates' of estimable physical qualities for gay men, are based on a stifling stereotype of gay identity that obscures the race-based power relations within which it operates.

Advertising images, ideology and the maintenance of cultural hegemonies

Since black gay men are visibly absent from the gay press – with very few exceptions – the images featured in such publications' advertising campaigns are often biased, one-dimensional and unequivocally 'white' (Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009:82, 85). Thus, this article aligns itself with Jonathan Schroeder and Detlev Zwick (2004:28), who argue that 'representations of iterations derived from essentialist, often racist, understandings remain a crucial concern for research into advertising images'.

Michael Herbst (2005:28) argues that advertisements, as cultural forms of expression, can be conceived of as ideological because they serve to perpetuate the classed, raced and gendered identities of those who are dominant in each of these socially constructed categories. By adhering to, and not challenging, traditional, familiar and hegemonic conceptions of femininity, masculinity or gayness, for example, advertisements aim to conceal their biases by appearing to function within the easily identifiable realm of common sense (Bignell 1997:36). Schroeder and Zwick (2004:24) state that advertisements create and perpetually reiterate social norms, thereby preserving their authority. Thus, Rob Cover (2004:83) argues that because the gay press almost exclusively represents white gay men, a 'fake, public homosexual' is created and positioned at the apex of the gay male constituency (Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009:85).

With regard to the historical context within which queer advertisements started appearing, it is important to note that images explicitly depicting gayness are fairly recent. Chasin (2000a:162), for example, recalls that a television advertisement for Ikea, aired in the United States in 1990, is reputed to be the very first advertising campaign to feature a gay couple. The advertisement depicts two white men shopping for a dining-room table at the furniture supplier, Ikea; their 'gayness' emphasised by performing this familiar domestic activity together (Chasin 2000a:162).

Yet, if one were to consider that it is supposedly groundbreaking, one cannot help but notice that the norms of white, middle-class, straight-acting masculinity were already present at the very moment that queers

entered the mainstream media and public consciousness. Therefore, since its inception, advertising aimed at, depicting or suggesting allegiance with the gay community has hinged on the model of white, domesticated and sanitised homosexuality (Kates 1999:34) that still defines much of what one sees when observing the images in mainstream and gay media, like *Gay pages* (Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009:86).

According to Donna Smith (2005:188), queer visibility in South African media, despite being significantly greater than in other African countries, has followed a similar trajectory, with the local queer community attracting unprecedented media attention since the 1990s. Contemporary queer advertising is also preceded by the gay liberation movement, which has exercised significant influence on the advertising industry with regard to the representation of queer bodies. In view of this, Deana Rohlinger (2002:63) states that the gay liberation movement, accompanied by greater public visibility in the form of marches, nightclubs and queer media, for example, 'infused' mainstream media and advertising with gay sentiments. In the process of asserting queerness, these cultural developments set standards for normative male beauty (arguably for gay *and* straight men) and are therefore largely responsible for the widespread use of the white, 'buff', erotic male in a variety of contemporary advertising campaigns and branding endeavours in the fashion industry (Rohlinger 2002:61; Bordo 1999:23; Snaith 2003:81–82; Hancock 2009:67, 70).[4]

Joseph Hancock (2009:67, 70, 72) argues that while 'some may say the ideology of the hypermasculine gay clone died in the late 1970s along with the demise of the Village People, others may see references to this bygone era' in contemporary advertising campaigns and shop-fronts of internationally renowned fashion brands, such as *Abercrombie & Fitch*, *Guess?* and *Levi's*. Hancock (2009:72) also emphasises that such cultural appropriations of 'gayness' have 'manipulated the average [straight] man's worst fear by objectifying the male body and [subliminally] weaving homoeroticism' into mainstream visual culture, thereby creating standards of a 'perfect' masculine physicality across the heteronormative/queer divide (cf. Bordo 1999). Gillian Dyer (1988:115) states that one must bear in mind that the 'meaning' of an advertisement cannot merely be detected at a denotative level, but also depends on the manner in which ideology impacts on its production, circulation and reception. In other words, advertisements are not solely employed to sell commodities, but also create structures of meaning that invite people to 'participate in ideological ways of seeing [themselves] and the world' (Bignell 1997:33). Considering that stereotypes are based on simplification and singularity (Pieterse 1992:11), the ideological repercussions of many queer advertisements lie in the fact that they do not accurately depict the gay community, but represent a sole idea of gayness that only reflects a particular segment of gay culture (Herbst 2005:34).

Stereotypical representations of homomasculinity and the reverence of 'whiteness' in gay visual culture

Sheng Kuan Chung (2007:101) argues that stereotypes about gay men that appear in the media, so-called 'mediatypes', are damaging because they represent identity positions that many gay men cannot establish affinity with, resulting in the 'closeted' state that marginalised gay men often find themselves restricted to. Therefore, mediatyping 'typically diminishes the depth of human character, and [enforces] conscious definitive boundaries, such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other human characteristics, that are the bases of exclusion from the dominant cultural group' (Chung 2007:101). So, in mainstream media, for example, the still marginal representation of gay subjects re-inscribes the dominance of heterosexuality, which also appears in a stereotypical form based on the assumption that everyone, or anyone worth representing, is 'straight' (Levina, Waldo and Fitzgerald 2000:742). With regard to queer representation, though, homosexuality appears to be at its centre, which implies that qualities beyond sexual orientation, like race, form the biases that keep the dominant segment of this particular cultural group in power (Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009:88, 89).

Richard Dyer (2002:19) stresses that so-called signs of gayness, whether in terms of fashion, style or demeanour, for example, are 'designed to show what the person alone does not show: that he … is gay'. Miriam Fraser (1999:109, 110) states that race, for example,

is often thought of as a human quality that cannot be concealed, for it is always already visible on the body; conversely, sexuality is not always immediately recognisable, and therefore requires signifiers that include, but go beyond the skin (Cover 2004:86). From a semiotic point of view, the various elements or 'signs' that constitute a queer advertisement – the pose, clothing and gestures of the models, for example – are coded in such a way that they allow one to interpret the subject of the image as queer, based on previous, existing, *culturally embedded* representations of homosexuality or gay visual stereotypes (Bignell 1997:37).

Cultural texts, like advertisements, that represent gay men are recognisable *as such*, because as spectators and readers of the image 'we are drawing on our knowledge of the very notion of homosexuality … and the whole conceptual [and visual] system of sexualities that [gayness] fits into' (Dyer 2002:23). Visual representations are never completely autonomous, but are produced by means of intertextuality, which implies that advertisements, for example, are always in the process of appropriating images, notions and concepts that already exist in culture (Dyer 1988:129; Dyer 2002:2). Cover (2004:87) argues that the cultural imperative of creating and maintaining stereotypical, coherent queer identities does not begin and end with the sexualised body, but also encapsulates clothing, grooming, accessories (such as the 'cowboy hat') and self-presentation as extensions *of* that body. The supposed ubiquity of the chic, well-preserved and fashion-obsessed gay man therefore comes into being as a result of what Cover (2004:87) refers to as the 'requirements of narrative flow in [visual media, which depend] on the speed and encapsulation of stereotypic data'.

These advertisements are selling commodities, which are supposedly linked to the expression of gay identity, and illustrate that together with the rise of the commercial gay press and queer advertising, the political bases of the gay movement shifted toward a consumerist ethos (Chasin 2000a:151, 152). As Robert Bocock (1993:3) states, it seems to be the acquisition of 'things' that aids social subjects in the process of becoming 'a certain type of person', or embodying a particular lifestyle. Furthermore, John Berger (1972:144) claims that the representation or suggestion of sex, and *sexuality*, is one of the mainstays of modern advertising, and is employed to create continuity between one's ability to consume and one's 'sex-appeal'.

For the purposes of this study, Berger's (1972:144) notion that 'if one can afford a particular product, one will be more desirable', can be conceived of as also suggesting that by consuming particular commodities, one becomes either more or less 'gay'. Group affiliation and identity construction in the gay community occur in and through consumption, the markets and the media, more so than through political, socially conscious endeavours (Sender 2001:95; Chasin 2000b:142, 143). In view of this, the critique of advertising images with which this article aligns itself, concerns the homogeneity that results from mass media and the representations that claim to embody 'gayness', but merely depict superficial stereotypes that particularise male homosexuality (Chasin 2000a:148; Hennessy 1994:65).

The 'built' white bodies featured in the advertisement *The Boys From Barebum Mountain* and in the *Bonewear* publicity campaign **(1)**, for example, possibly reflect the norms of ideological and aesthetic contingencies such as traditional Western art history, which revere the white male physique at the expense of denying Other, black men their claims to authentic homomasculinity (Mercer 1991:192; McBride 1998:369, 371). Investigating queer images that are typically 'white' is important to the article, exactly because they reveal that images of 'blackness' appear anomalously in gay visual culture. In other words, the article employs the advertisements not as a means of reiterating the primacy of 'whiteness' in queer representation, but to illustrate the manner in which stereotypes about gay masculinity are structures of degree, which typecast white men as exclusively representative of ideal, normative or 'narcissistic' gayness (Dyer 2002:15).

Evidently, gay men are not exclusively white and middle-class, yet advertising images rarely stray from this stereotypical view of gay masculinity and therefore constantly position white gay masculinity as that which is ideally desirable. Also, since gay identity has become something that is increasingly achieved through consumption (Sears 2005:104), one must not neglect to acknowledge that the commodities advertised in queer magazines, like *Gay pages*, function as signifiers of the ideal gay man's

way of life (Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009:82, 86). Although it is absurd to suggest that each and every gay man desires, or possesses, the exact same body, race, class or lifestyle, the gay press and other forms of queer visual culture ultimately erase the complexities of gay societies and tend to revere a single, homogenised notion of gay masculinity (Chasin 2000b:58).

According to Herbst (2005:20), advertising functions by means of creating an ideal – an ideal that is achieved through selective discrimination and exclusion. This is, for example, evident with regard to advertising targeting or depicting gay men, which discriminates not against 'gayness' in general, but rather seeks to exclude forms of queer life that are conceived of as deviant, or too far removed from the norm of 'good' homosexuality (cf. Smith 1994). Yet, what is also important is that one realises that although gay consumers are internally diverse and do not necessarily desire the same commodities, they are expected to react in the *same way* to the *same images*.

The ideal of gayness is, therefore, perpetuated at the expense of discrimination, and appears to create feelings of inadequacy in many black gay men (Herbst 2005:20). Ultimately, one can conclude that 'not everyone benefits from the identity possibilities opened up by advertising' (Herbst 2005:34). Moreover, the social implications of primarily representing gay men in a commodified form are characteristically damaging. Consider, for example, that since many gay men cannot consume as fervently as the privileged few, nor do they always fit the mould of white aesthetic beauty, they tend to embody 'gayness' to a lesser degree and are alienated from the gay community.

The selling of cowboy paraphernalia, as well as performing frontiersmanship, manifests as harmless queer trends, but in actual fact 'skim over' the historical reality of the frontier as a project characterised by exploitation and racist exclusion (Nast 2002:887). Similarly, the fetishisation of *The Boys From Barebum Mountain* erases the fact that 'cowhands in the nineteenth century were a group of diverse races and ethnicities' (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]), thereby white-washing the image of the cowboy and subsequently 'colonising' the gay media by perpetuating representations of homomasculinity that many gay men, owing to their racial disposition, cannot identify with.

1 Grant Viljoen, *Jay of Eden* (2008). Colour photograph, measurements unavailable. Reproduced with kind permission of the photographer.

Cowboys and crooks: 'Real' men versus racial 'Others'

This article is also concerned with moving beyond the images of homomasculinity in order to investigate the manner in which representations of this nature reflect and shape the lives of actual gay men (Sothern 2004:185). Martin Erasmus (1996:25) states that one must not lose sight of the fact that our 'behaviour and images of the self are informed by the discourses [that permeate visual culture, for example] to which we are exposed'. A significant example of the manner in which the distance between the images of homomasculinity and the social interactions of gay men collapse (Sothern 2004:185) is the 'enormous gay demand for straight-acting, straight-looking' men (Fritscher 2005:[sp]).

The privately funded website StraightActing.com (Clarkson 2006:191, 192), for instance, exists as a forum where gay men who identify as 'straight-acting' discuss their own 'performances' of masculinity, and what they find sexually appealing about men

who construct themselves in a similar way. However, Jay Clarkson's (2006:199) analysis of the website and the comments of its patrons reveals that the aesthetics of 'straight-acting' appear to be 'conflated with the cultural archetype of primitive, uneducated, and crude … working-class' men who are imagined as 'more masculine than white-collar men due to their physicality and the image of action linked to that bodily presence' (Lahti 1998:189). Furthermore, Clarkson (2006:199) states that some men even equate masculinity, yet again, with the image of the cowboy and its present-day version, the outdoorsman. Clarkson's (2006:199) analyses of homomasculinity effectively illustrate that the imagistic power of the gay 'clones' of the past still govern standards of masculinity in queer cultures of the present. The *Mother City Queer Project* (*MCQP*), a costume party celebrated annually in Cape Town during December, has announced *The Toolbox Project* as its theme for 2009 and invites partygoers to 'dress up as' construction workers, handymen and other macho, industrious male archetypes who embody blue-collar hypermasculinity (*MCQP* 2009).

What is troubling about 'straight-acting' gay men and the archetypal images that they valorise, is the hierarchy of gender performances that result from positioning homomasculinity at the apex of Western male identity constructs (Clarkson 2006:202; Paglia 1990:14, 15). The admiration of masculine forms of sexual expression may in fact embrace traditional white, patriarchal disdain for, and oppression of, the feminine 'Other' (Clarkson 2006:202). In a pair of decisive essays, *Geisha of a different kind: Gay Asian men and the gendering of sexuality* (2006) and *They don't want to cruise your type: Gay men of colour and the racial politics of exclusion* (2007), Chong-suk Han explores the primacy of white, masculine-identified men in queer cultures, along with the marginalisation of gay blacks[5] in those same constituencies.

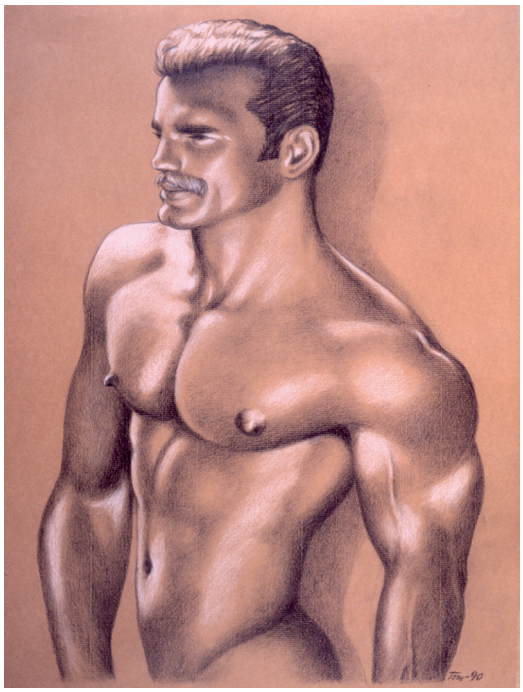
In engaging with Han, it appears that the 'colonial' aspect in gay culture is at its most explicit with regard to the manner in which gay blacks are conceived of, and represented. Han (2006:9, 10), in following Edward Said, states that the processes of 'othering' by which 'the Orient' was created in the Western imagination, hinged not only on notions of mystique and romanticism, but were also politically driven in terms of establishing the superiority of the West against all that is represented by the East. Moreover, the supposed dominance of Western powers 'took on a distinctively gendered tone' in which the male Asian body figured prominently as 'feminine' – a feature common amongst the emasculating, colonial images of African men as well (Han 2006:10; Pieterse 1992:128).

Han (2006:13, 17) therefore argues that the historical 'feminisation' of the East is rearticulated in the construction of the gendered identities of gay Asian men as the 'feminine' counterparts of 'masculine' gay white men. Since images of white gay men are privileged in mainstream gay visual cultures, while images of gay blacks are practically non-existent (Reddy 1998:68; Sonnekus and Van Eeden 2009:92), the domain in which the gender divides between black and white subjects are the most visible is pornography (Han 2007:52). This evidently points toward the problem of the conditional acceptance and inclusion of blacks in gay culture and media: gay blacks seemingly appear solely as fetishised objects for the pleasure of white gay men, but are practically 'invisible' beyond the realms of sexual commodification (Han 2006:25; Chasin 2000a:158).

The manner in which gay blacks are differently represented from white men in hardcore pornography also reveals that the gender hierarchy present in gay culture is apparently inescapable. Han (2006:16, 17), for example, observes that in print pornography 'white men are often shown full-frontal, while Asian men are shown mostly from the back … it is the white male cock (manhood) that is desireable as opposed to the Asian male, whose most desireable attribute is his ass (womanhood)'. Consequently, it is again the white man who epitomises homomasculinity, in a traditionally patriarchal, colonial vocabulary, by performing his sexual prowess as active and dominant through the penetration and 'conquering' of the passive, inferior and feminised, but not necessarily *female*, 'Other' (Boone 1995:92; Radel 2001:54; Lahti 1998:198).

The coloniser/colonised dichotomy is reinstated in gay culture through the images and practices that attribute gendered and racial identities to black 'Others', because those same identity positions, as applied to white men, are mostly propagated as hierarchically superior. Thus, whereas the image of the cowboy, for example, represents a romantic, masculine ideal that may improve the self-image of white

2 Tom of Finland, *Perfection* (1990). Pastel on paper, 48.2 x 34.7 cm. Reproduced with kind permission of *The Tom of Finland Foundation*.



3 Tom of Finland, *Untitled* (1962). Graphite on paper, 29.8 x 20.9 cm. Reproduced with kind permission of *The Tom of Finland Foundation*.

gay men, the image of the submissive, frail 'geisha' devalues the gay Asian male body (Han 2006:21). From a psychosocial point of view, Han (2006:22) shares Frantz Fanon's notion that stereotypes of 'otherness', produced by white cultures, are internalised and performed by blacks themselves (Hall 1996:16). Han (2006:18) observes that in contemporary queer communities and interactions amongst gay men, the feminisation of gay Asian men appears to be so ingrained that relationships between them are contemptuously defined as 'lesbianism' by other gay Asians who prefer white partners. In view of this, Han (2007:62) argues that some gay blacks also internalise the supposed primacy of white masculinity and the aesthetics or physical 'ideals' that accompany it, since they are more likely to explicitly exclude 'blacks', even more so than gay white men, when seeking out companionship.

The ubiquity and veneration of images of white men in the gay media therefore have further detrimental effects for gay blacks who also value race-biased, Westernised notions of 'beauty' or desirability (Han 2006:22). This is evident in the manner in which gay blacks prefer white partners, and are selectively racist with regard to the notion of blacks as unbefitting sexual partners (Han 2007:60). By placing white masculinity on a pedestal, gay blacks are not only re-inscribing white supremacy, but are also left with feelings of inadequacy because of not measuring up to the Eurocentric standards of physical beauty that manifest in gay visual cultures (Han 2006:23).

Five o'clock shadows, bulging biceps and ivory skin: A brief critique of selected works by Delmas Howe and Tom of Finland

The image by Tom of Finland (Touko Laaksonen) **(2)** is appropriately entitled *Perfection* and illustrates how the artist chose to construct the gay male body as 'square-jawed, snub-nosed, clean cut, with short

hair, immaculate sideburns and sometimes a moustache … always well-built … broad shouldered, slim-waisted, with massive upper body muscularity' (Snaith 2003:78). According to Guy Snaith (2003:77–79), Tom of Finland achieved iconic status in gay culture by circulating his intensely homoerotic, hypermasculine drawings that are created in line with the equally popular gay 'clones' of the 1970s and 1980s (Aucamp 2007:[sp]): Finland's repertoire therefore comprises depictions of sexual desire between conventionally masculine men, most of whom are bikers, cowboys, soldiers, sailors and policemen **(3)**, that arguably 'defined homomasculinity … for the [twenty-first] century' and still provide 'gay men with a style to follow, and a model for building their bodies and adapting their body languages and wardrobes' (Fritscher 2005:[sp]; Lahti 1998:192).

In fact, the contemporary South African gay men's lifestyle magazine *Wrapped* features a pictorial of selected drawings by Finland in its latest edition (at the time of writing). The launch of the artist's eponymous cologne in 2009, apparently 'capturing the essence of what a "Tom-man" should smell like' (Myhre 2009:[sp]), has received widespread publicity in gay media such as the popular South African website *Mambaonline*, which confirms that Finland's cultural influence 'continues to flourish today in pornography, fashion, international Leather Pride events and even our own Johannesburg-based [SA Leathermen] organisation' (Myhre 2009:[sp]). Finland's unwavering presence in queer culture cannot be denied in view of the influence that his iconography and associated ideals of homomasculinity still have on modern consumerist, media-generated identity-based communities.

What becomes clear when critically viewing these so-called 'defining' images within the gender-race matrix is that Finland's ideal 'masculine' aesthetics are predicated not only on musculature and facial hair, but also on 'whiteness'. This does not suggest that Tom of Finland did not represent black men at all, but that the *ways in which* black men are depicted in relation to white men in his drawings 'tend to serve the stabilisation of white gay male identity by taking part in boundary establishment and maintenance of racially differentiated identity':

> Consider Tom's 1962 drawing [not shown], the pleasures of which are predicated on the racial differences in power: Two shirtless white men in jeans are looking, with an air of superiority, at an apprehensive-looking African American, wearing only briefs, bound in-between two pillars. The picture apparently draws on the images of slavery and white power over the black body. This impression is reinforced by the binding of the black male body, which makes it obedient, submissive, and powerless in front of the white male gaze, and by the fact the black man apparently enjoys his role, confirmed by his visible hard-on. (Lahti 1998:198)

Some discourse has been generated on the manner in which Finland's images also reinforce patriarchy and notions of feminine 'inferiority', because the 'muscular male body [has significant associations with] dominant representations of men's sexuality [, which] have traditionally been associated with power; men's power is sexual power' (Lahti 1998:196). Also, the ostensibly fascist undertones of some of the artist's drawings (that manifest in terms of aesthetics such as Nazi uniforms, for example) have come under scrutiny from authors like Lahti (1998:200, 201) who argue that Finland is possibly reinvigorating and recycling violent, multi-prejudiced ideologies under the guise of playful 'erotica'. This article is not afforded the scope to deal with these issues in detail, but one must bear in mind that racism, sexism and fascism possibly buttress each other in Finland's art. [6]

Mirzoeff (1995:2, 3) states that the ideal human form is a 'principal subject of Western art [history]', and adds that the visual representation of immaculate bodies functions by 'promoting certain physical characteristics [such as complexion] *at the expense of others*':

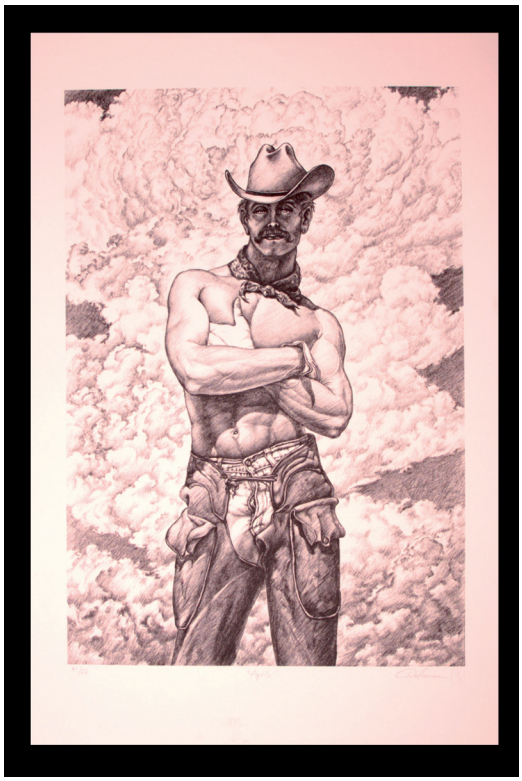
> The process [of representing the ideal male body] has been extended so that *certain* bodies have become the subject of a discursive inscription [of beauty and excellence, for example] so thorough that they are invisible in any other way. This overwriting has [therefore] rendered the [black body] as 'visibly' different [and therefore inferior], confirming the perfection of the Western [white] subject by this 'self-evident' difference of race. (emphasis added)

4 Delmas Howe, *Atlas* (1981). Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 154.9 cm. Artist's private collection. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

The ideals of beauty signified in contemporary homomasculine imagery can therefore be viewed as resonating with traditional, possibly racist, Western art-historical discourses surrounding that which is considered aesthetically appealing in visual representations of the male physique. According to Whitney Davis (2001:247, 272), most of the major homoerotic art collections in existence consist of a combination of contemporary and pre-modern artefacts that set 'canonically beautiful', homoerotic reference points in relation to one another – thereby perpetuating a homosexual ideal in visual culture. In these anthologies, the prevalence of works dating from classical antiquity is definitely not unexpected if one considers the appreciation and glorification of same-sex relations that characterised Greece and Ancient Rome (Davis 2001:247; Saslow 1999:14).

During these pre-Christian periods homosexual love was celebrated, not condemned, in mythology and art depicting the supposed bisexuality of both gods and mortals. Vases and pots were adorned with images of men's sexual advances toward male youths, while Zeus' pursuit of Ganymede, and the 'queerness' of Apollo and the demigod Hercules, for example, were often depicted in literature, philosophy and visual culture (Saslow 1999:14, 15, 23). These sexual virtues were also 'visualised' in ancient societies across different genres of artistic expression and became deeply embedded in the cultural fibre of classical antiquity (Saslow 1999:15).

Amongst these cultural icons, it is the male nude that 'emerges … as the paradigm of the classical style' and that is predominantly adopted by modern gay visual cultures as a template from which to create, or re-create, the perfect male body (Saslow 1999:31). Tom of Finland's fetishised male figures are, for example, consistent with the ideals of virile masculine beauty that constitute the classical male nude: James Saslow's (1999:22) list of qualities regarding the male body in antiquity, which include 'broad shoulders, well-defined muscles in the chest and above the hips … a narrow waist [and] prominent buttocks and massive thighs', is almost synonymous with Snaith (2003:78) and Martti Lahti's (1998:190) description of Finland's homoerotic drawings. Along this genealogy of homomasculine images that follow from classical antiquity, it is the works of the contemporary American artist Delmas Howe that most explicitly link gay 'clone' aesthetics



5 Delmas Howe, *Apollo* (1990). Lithograph, 55.8 x 40.6 cm. Artist's private collection. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

with ancient mythology and art, as well as with colonialism.

Howe's depictions of *Atlas* **(4)** and *Apollo* **(5)**, from a major series of paintings entitled *Rodeo Pantheon*, are isolated here in order to address the issues of race that arise from endowing the cowboy-figure with mythic qualities. Howe elevates the statuses of these frontiersmen by naming the works, and therefore presumably the individuals that are depicted, after god-like beings that feature in ancient mythology; invoking Apollo is especially significant considering that his sexual conquests were infused with homoeroticism (Saslow 1999:14). Furthermore, the physical 'perfection' of the men depicted evidently follows the aesthetic guidelines that are embodied by the male nude, whether it be Michelangelo or Finland's. In agreement with the art historian and curator Edward Lucie-Smith, Lester Strong (1998:148) states that Howe 'is taking two Western cultural heritages [Greek myths, and the myth of the cowboy] and assimilating them into the gay male perspective, saying that gay men relate to them in their own way'.

Yet, Strong's statement is rather vexing if one were to consider exactly *which* gay men relate, or can relate more effectively, to these images and the traditions that they exemplify. First, despite the fact that traditional cowboy cultures were not exclusively made up of white men (Le Coney and Trodd 2006:[sp]), the images discussed in this article are testament to the unequivocal linking of 'whiteness' to the myth of the frontier. Second, Kobena Mercer (1991:192) argues that the canonical status of the male nude in Western art history is intrinsically racist, since 'the model of physical perfection embodied in classical … sculpture serves as the mythological origin of the ethnocentric fantasy that there is only one "race" of human beings who represented what was … beautiful'.

Strong's (1998:148) 'Western cultural heritages' appear to be interchangeable with '*white* cultural heritages' *or* traditional, modernist art-historical discourses, which are based in Western cultural imperialism, aesthetics and academic powers that have largely ignored the presence of blacks, as both objects and subjects, in visual culture (Doy 2000:24). Consequently, Howe is actually fusing two aesthetic cultural phenomena that historically exclude blacks from conceptions of masculine and, for that matter, *gay* masculine beauty. The exclusion of black bodies from the homomasculine ideal becomes quite perceptible when viewing Howe's *Black Male* **(6)** in relation to his depictions of *Apollo* and *Atlas*. This image devalues the 'black male' by concealing his identity while, in turn, the white cowboys are explicitly not anonymous, but endowed with titles loaded with grandeur.

Furthermore, the black male does not share the dignified poses of the cowboys, but is depicted from behind, his eyes not meeting the spectator's gaze in the confident, almost defiant way that Apollo's does. Similarly, his 'nakedness', in comparison to the semi-*nudity* of Howe's cowboys, adds to his vulnerability, positions him as 'closer to nature', and therefore ultimately subjects him to the colonial notion of primitivism. Kenneth Clark (1956:1) argues that to 'be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment [or diminution] which most of us feel in that condition … [nudity] projects into the mind … not [an image] of a huddled

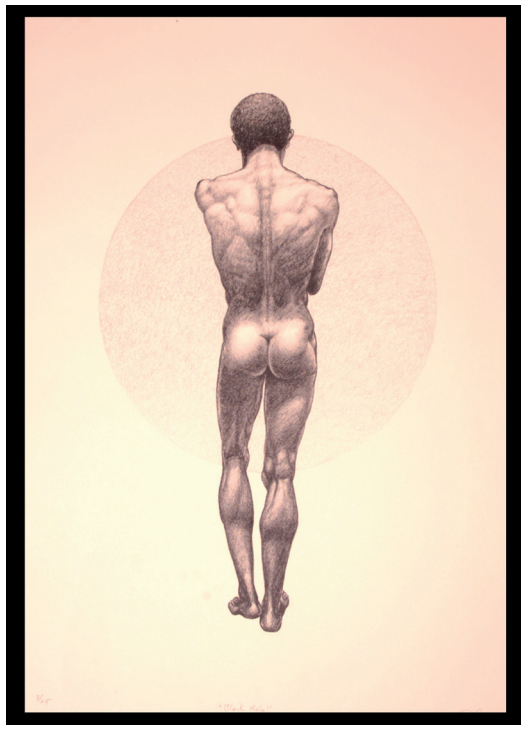
and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body'. Yet, the 'nude' white male body is used 'as a point of final explanation of social difference [and racial superiority, because it] presents itself not as typical but as ideal' (Dyer 1997:146, 147, 151).

The 'nakedness' of Howe's *Black Male* is a far cry from the Western paradigm of the male nude, since the power relations that underlie the image constantly oscillate between 'negrophobia', which diminishes the black body, and 'negrophilia', which overvalues the black male physique to such an extent that it eventually signifies nothing but sexuality (Mercer 1991:187). One can argue that Howe and Finland's imaginings of this

> ambivalence, anxiety and excess of meanings require continuous reiteration of colonial discourse and its 'major discursive strategy', a stereotype, which works as 'a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. (Lahti 1998:198)

Black men appear only because they *are* black, and their occasional 'nakedness' serves only to exaggerate their 'blackness', because to 'be naked is to be oneself [in other words, "black"]' (Berger 1972:54). Conversely, nudity 'is placed on display' (Berger 1972:54), and white men therefore appear not *because* they are white, but because they express or 'exhibit' the values of (homomasculine) beauty (Clark 1956:6): the men in Finland's *Untitled* (see Figure 3) ostensibly desire one another since they epitomise the homomasculine 'prototype', which is evident in their physicality and dress, while their 'whiteness' is invisible exactly because it is taken for granted (Dyer 1997:146, 147, 151), but the black 'slave's' allure (as discussed by Lahti (1998:198) regarding another image from 1962) is derived purely from a trope that centres on 'blackness'. These values can be conceived of as being historically and ideologically tied to 'whiteness' within dominant Western aesthetic discourses of which the male nude is evidently an example (Dyer 1997:151; Saslow 1999:31; Mirzoeff 1995:3).

Apollo, Atlas and other queer white 'cowboys' appear frequently, and therefore 'naturally', in gay visual culture, while the black male's appearance is conditional, since it either reinforces the superiority of homomasculine white men, or serves to fulfil colonial fantasies regarding black, male sexuality (Han 2007:57; Lahti 1998:198, 199). In other words, Western conceptions of idyllic homomasculine beauty are sustained and made possible by the 'imperfect body of the racial Other', since 'the divine drive towards perfection is as much marked by the inferiority of the [black body] as by the perfection of the white' (Mirzoeff 1995:135, 136). Ultimately, colonial ideology is re-figured in gay visual culture on several fronts, which include the objectification and 'othering' of blacks; the deification of white masculinity; the 'colonisation' of the gay media through the conditional acceptance of blacks; Western cultural imperialism; racist aesthetics; and the commodification of frontiersmanship.



6 Delmas Howe, *Black Male* (1994). Lithograph, 55.8 x 40.6 cm. Artist's private collection. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

It seems that Fritscher (2005:[sp]), Snaith (2003:77–79) and Strong (1998:148) are applauding the supposed advent and present proliferation of homomasculine imagery, despite acknowledging that most of these

representations exclude gay blacks from the gay rhetoric of the 'body beautiful'. The 'perfection' represented in homomasculine, erotic visual images is unattainable for most gay men; *especially* gay blacks, because their very racial identities remove them even further from the ideal of archetypal beauty that functions as 'a machine of desire [that] has a regularising and normative role' and occupies a prime position in gay culture, art and social consciousness (Mercer 2003:284, 289; Han 2006:23). Furthermore, Han (2007:60) motivates that whereas the self-esteem of gay blacks suffers because of the majority of images in the gay media that make them 'invisible' and therefore 'un-desirable', 'white men have no reason to hate themselves in a society that [constantly] reinforces their privilege'.

Conclusion

The repertoire of images discussed in this article is what I have termed gay 'colonial' representations. These visual representations were explored as a means of delineating the manner in which the apparent cultural synonymy of male homosexuality and 'whiteness', which marginalises *black* gay men, is buttressed by the re-appropriation of traditional images of frontier masculinity in a gay vernacular. The image of the queer cowboy which pervades popular gay visual culture, was analysed as somehow re-writing or 'queering' the colonial narrative of romantic, male, possibly homoerotic, camaraderie. The critique of the images, however, was concerned with challenging the possibly racist undertones that cast blacks as hopelessly distant from the ideals of desirable and admirable homomasculine beauty, as manifest in the images of gay frontiersmanship that appear in modern publicity and art (Clarkson 2006:205).

Selected artworks by Delmas Howe and Tom of Finland were also discussed in order to illuminate the way in which gay aesthetic sensibilities position white, 'straight-acting, straight-looking' gay men as the ultimate expression of normative homomasculinity. The conditional and rare appearance of black gay men in gay visual culture was explored with regard to the re-articulation of the coloniser/colonised dichotomy in gay 'colonial' representations, which appears to propel the marginalisation and subjugation of 'blackness' in terms of its total absence, fetishisation or apparent hierarchical inferiority to 'whiteness' (Mercer 1991:187). Furthermore, the race-biased nature of representing the ideal male body in Western art, and the respective feminisation and hypersexualisation of gay Asian men and gay black men in gay visual culture were also critiqued in light of the queer construction of white homomasculine bodies as supposedly 'perfect'.

Ultimately, the notion that homomasculinity or 'straight-acting' performances are liberating constructs, because they supposedly subvert hegemonic masculinity (Clarkson 2006:204), can be refuted by considering that in attempting to replace stereotypical, effeminate images of gay men, new stereotypes centred on 'whiteness' emerge (Han 2007:52). Han (2007:53) argues that 'whiteness' in the gay community retains its naturality by appearing incessantly and upholding the stereotypical images from which it benefits. In other words, while feminised images of gay Asian men and hypersexualised images of gay African men are sometimes resisted by gay blacks at the margins of gay communities, 'straight-acting' white men forge stronger masculine identities by consuming, and defining themselves in opposition to, feminine or threatening 'Others' (Green 2002:536).

Notes

1 The term 'performativity' is closely associated with Judith Butler's theories of the incongruities between sex, biology, sexual orientation and gender identity, which are explored in her seminal text *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990). At the core of Butler's theory of performativity lies the notion that instead of being pre-existing, biologically determined constructs, gender and sexuality are continually constituted and re-constituted through cultural and social relations, practices and 'performances', such as dress and demeanour (Kates 1999:26, 27, 28).

2 'Theatricality' is but one of the more than 50 features of camp discussed by Susan Sontag in her seminal text *Notes on 'camp'* (1964). The emphasis that camp places on performance, style and role-playing, is purposely isolated in this article as a means of delineating the manner in which gay men fashion their sexual identities after 'amplified' versions of masculinity.

3 Presumably, this advertisement forms part of a larger and ever-present fetish in gay visual culture surrounding the commodification of homomasculine cowboys. Considering that a

(possibly closely related) 'hardcore' pornographic website called *Barebum Mountain* (http://www.barebummountain.com) endorses itself as the 'best gay cowboy site on the internet', suggests that a number of similar websites centred on gay 'colonial' representations exist and comparably propagate queer frontiersmanship.

4 It is also important for the purposes of this article to note that inflections of racism are again present in such publicity images: the African-American scholar Dwight McBride has, in fact, published a book entitled *Why I hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on race and sexuality* (2005) that critiques the race-biased nature of such representations which perpetuate the exclusive cultural synonymy of 'whiteness' and ideal masculinity in contemporary commodity-based visual cultures.

5 With regard to the colonial representations of 'blackness', the term 'black' is employed to refer primarily to Africans. Han (2007:51) explores a variety of ethnicities – Asian American, Latin American and African American, for example – subsumed under the phrase 'people of colour'. For the purposes of this article the term 'black' is preferred, and points toward all gay men who stand in opposition to normative 'whiteness'; except where it is necessary to explicitly distinguish between different ethnic identities – as Han (2007:57) does with regard to the manner in which gay Asian men occupy a different position in gay 'colonial' representations than black (African) men.

6 It is not the intent of this article to completely detract from the buoyancy of Finland's images in gay male culture, since they have undeniably played an important role in liberating gay men through uninhibited expressions of sexuality, and have (to some degree) assisted in challenging the emasculating stereotypes of gay men that are generated from within heteronormative hegemony (cf. Snaith 2003): the actual concern of this article is to explore exactly *which* gay men, along the lines of race, for example, benefit from and are portrayed affirmatively in Finland's images, thereby reifying them and creating hierarchical structures of inferiority and superiority.

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