

power

and the promise of

innocent places

This article briefly and densely touches on one idea that has been expanded in the work that currently excites me, in contexts of counselling, and, teaching and writing about counselling. This is the idea that practices of power work effectively because they promise us something: a productive 'alternative' space in life.

One example is the 'alternative' space of male/female 'love' promised within practices of 'romance'; this is a promise (an 'alternative' space of love) that effectively achieves practices of dominance by rendering invisible the sexism and heterosexism of male/female romance practices.

Another example is the 'alternative' space (of justice) that stands against social practices of sexism and heterosexism; this may also offer a promise (an 'alternative' space of justice) that effectively achieves practices of dominance, by rendering invisible my own reconstitutions of dominance within my 'alternative' social justice practices.

For ten years, I have worked within the shelter (or refuge) grassroots feminist movement in Canada, as a men's counsellor and program coordinator, responding to men's violence against women. My work is shaped by an integration of learnings from a lot of teachers, within contexts of: political art, feminism, gay activism, deconstruction, anti-

oppressive practices, domestic violence intervention discourse, invitational work with men, and, Narrative therapy.

I came to this work not through social work training but rather through a personal and academic background in theatre, political art, feminist philosophy and pro-feminist gay men's community activism. I also came to this work through a background of intimate relationship experiences, of sometimes being hurt by the very men who I thought were going to love me.

I am forty-five years old and I finally feel like I care for myself enough to write about this larger journey. Writing has often been both a joy and a difficulty in my life. Joy comes through writing because I love the slow, reflexive unpacking that can happen in writing, where the complexities of ideas and lived experience can be deconstructed, and, possibilities for new ways of being can be imagined and lived. Difficulty comes in writing because I often struggle with long-standing self-deprecating thoughts, which lead me to believe others deserve social change but I don't, and that others have something of value to say but there's not much point in me writing.

This is a way dominance works internally in my life: by silencing me in the very contexts, like writing, where I am most likely to unpack practices of power. It also works externally in many ways, sometimes

in the acts of heterosexual colleagues, where their participation in practices of dominance may be invisible to them.

One of the ways I have been trying to unpack dominance is by being cautious about the complexities of practices of power, complexities that I raise at the beginning of this paper. I am influenced by what Foucault said about power. He argued that practices of power get a grip on us not merely through offering repression and pain, but rather because power also promises us 'productivity, knowledge and discourse' (1976/2003). I like this thought about the promise of power. I like to think it is helpful in my life to be suspicious about power operating through promise. A way to make meaning of this promise of power is to think of it as offering a road map, for reaching 'alternative' sites of safety, security, purity and 'innocence' (Chapman, 2005).

As I touched on at the beginning, social ideas about romantic love promise women and men such an 'alternative' and 'innocent' site of productivity. Romance discourse dichotomizes love away from abuse; love is rendered as 'innocent' and abuse 'guilty'. This sexist 'feminine' gender coding of 'romance' has mystified the social politics and abusive consequences of 'male/female' romantic love, and, has largely removed the topic of love from the social justice work realm (Fraser, in press). What I particularly want to argue is that this sexist gender coding of 'love', as a site of 'innocence', mystifies one of the complex ways that power may operate in men's lives, through rendering invisible the complexities of men's participation in the productive and 'innocent' promises of romantic love.

Attention to complexities of power has implications for practices of discerning love from abuse: Love cannot be considered merely a naturalistic, 'innocent' opposite of abuse. Rather, to paraphrase Foucault (1976/2003), love, like abuse, must be investigated as an 'effect' of social practices of power (p.30). This investigation of love - as an effect of power - is particularly restrained within my experience of men's domestic violence counselling by this sexist gender-coding of love. In resisting this restraint by inviting talk about romance discourse and love in conversations with men about practices of abuse to women, I have come to realize that discerning abuse involves facing the complex intentions and effects of men's practices of love to women.

Talk of popular ideas about romantic love is policed and discouraged among men and, at the same time, these ideas are connected with so many 'productive' promises of power in men's lives: promises of 'normal' heterosexual masculine identity through the achievement of male/female love relationship, promises of nurturance, support, 'finding true love', the 'right' woman and so on. These promises of power inform men's gender-coded social and

emotional expectations of women, and when the promises are not fulfilled, this informs men's blame laden stories about their female partners (Jenkins, 1990): stories about the partner's identity (White, 2004) that precede actions of abuse. This is why I believe in a politic of naming, and speaking of, romance and violence all at the same time. I want to invite a discernment of love from abuse in a political, social justice context in which I refuse to naturalize love as a site of 'innocence'.

Romance discourse interests me because it is a practice of power that leads to actions and effects of dominance through the promise of achieving an 'alternative' site. This complexity through which dominance is achieved in romance, through the promise of the 'alternative' site, makes me suspicious about the other 'alternative' sites in my life (White, 2004), particularly 'alternative' social justice sites (e.g., those sites represented by identities such as 'gay', feminist', 'anti-violent', 'post-structuralist', 'Narrative therapist' and so on). This is a concern about the assumptions of 'innocence' that may be dichotomously cultivated within these alternative sites, if these sites are perceived in binary opposition to sites of 'guilt-laden' dominance.

This is a concern about the practices of dominance within 'alternative' sites which shape the ongoing resuscitation of 'orthodoxy' (Bird, 2003). I am particularly concerned about this dominance within the 'alternative' social justice movement because the promises of 'productivity, knowledge and discourse' within these 'alternative' spaces may be so intensely and rightly longed for, so in need of being claimed, and, so fearfully protected.

This concern connects with my 1970's journey as a gay man, where I experienced gay men's culture to be often constructed as an 'innocent' space of safety, security, and 'victim-only' oppression. In other places (Fisher, 2004, November) I have argued that this 'innocence' renders invisible gay men's agency and participation as 'perpetrators' of the larger culture. In my life, this construction of gay men's victim-only 'innocence' did not prepare me for gay men's participation in social practices of power, including my own (eg, gay men's participation in sexism, ageism, homophobia and so on). It did not permit me to view myself as having (albeit painful) agency.

This concern also connects with my 1980's journey as a philosophy student: I was both very excited by second wave feminist challenges to 'patriarchal' ideas and culture, and, very fascinated by how these challenges also re-created patriarchy in feminist practices (e.g., how second wave feminists, naming and making visible women's experience, often replicated 'patriarchal' definitions of 'experience' itself, universalizing 'woman' and rendering issues of class and race invisible). Since that time, there has



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emerged a third wave feminist critique of dominance within second wave feminist practices. There has also emerged a critique of how these second wave practices shaped domestic violence intervention practices in North America and recreated orthodoxy in this context of addressing men's violence to women (e.g., Lipchik, 1991; Pence, 1999).

I now believe there may be a great unfairness if I critique practices of 'innocence' and dominance within one realm alone (e.g., gay men's community practices, feminist informed domestic violence intervention, etc.). I am concerned that a focus on re-created 'innocence' and dominance within one realm of discourse may be conducted with an unacknowledged masculinist zeal for linear historical criticism and 'productive' masculinist desire to 'get it right'. Could this very critique of 'innocence' replicate unacknowledged, un-reflexive 'innocence', by situating itself as a critique of 'other people's' discourses? Could this very critique of dominance replicate dominance by silencing the contributions of the discourse being critiqued?

So in my work of responding to men's violence against women, I have become engaged with the same reflexive study regarding the complexities of practices of power that I invite of men. In other words, this means on-going care and attention to how power may offer up promises of 'productivity, knowledge and discourse' within all of the practices I bring into conversations with men, including second and third wave feminist practices, post-structuralist practices, Narrative practices, and reflexivity itself. This means on-going attention to, and dialogue about, ways in which power's promise of 'productivity' has shaped, rather than merely existed in opposition to, the compelling 'innocence' of alternative social spaces. This includes facing the complexity of how power may shape a 'productive' romantic promise and moral 'innocence' in the lives of men who participate in practices of abuse. And it includes facing the complexity of how power may shape a 'productive' social justice promise and moral 'innocence' in the lives of the men, like me, who speak with them.

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