

MAN-BOY LOVE AND FEMINISM

By David Thorstad

[The following paper was drafted by Thorstad as a contribution to a discussion within the North American Man/Boy Love Association.]

Feminists should be allies of boy-lovers and children. But unfortunately, many are not. Boy-lovers should listen to what feminists have to say about man/boy love, and should not draw hasty conclusions about the freedom potential of the entire women's movement from the pronouncements of reactionary, antisex elements within it. Boy lovers should try to understand what seems to be hostility and bigotry emanating from feminists, both straight and lesbian. We should not forget that a lot of men, too, oppose man/boy love and children's liberation. Most judges who sentence boy-lovers to jail are men.

But one thing must be clear. We who defend man/boy love and relationships across the generations will continue to press our cause — with or without the support of the feminist movement. As we continue to explore and explain what it is to be boy-loving men, and men-loving boys, more feminists can be expected to recognize us as friend rather than foe, potential ally rather than adversary. Many straight feminists and lesbian feminists do support NAMBLA and man/boy love. We welcome their support.

We seek to encourage not only an understanding of man/boy love, but also a rational, sex-positive outlook among both women and men. Unless women *per se* are held to be biologically antisexual (in which case they could never become allies in the struggle for sexual freedom), there is no reason for them to oppose man/boy love or arguments in favor of a sex-positive outlook.

Males have always had secrets they alone shared. Males need and seek out each other in a thousand different ways. Sexuality, whether overt or repressed, is frequently an element in their interrelationships. The socialization of boys is in many ways "man's work." In man/boy love con-

texts, the relationship they share is often tied together by bonds stronger than that of mother and child, or father and son. This is true not only in the case of "street boys," or boys whose parents have thrown them out of the house for being gay, or boys who have fled the family hearth because it denies their deep-felt needs, but also when the boy involved in such a relationship is your next-door neighbor's son, as he often is. The attraction of males for each other is a phenomenon that goes back as long as there were men and boys. Although it is socially conditioned, and takes various forms, it may also reflect a biological need among the male of the species.

Whether or not such speculation is valid, it cannot be disputed that sexual relationships between men and boys occur widely in American society. These relationships can be, and often are, as consensual, joyful, mutually rewarding, and long-lasting as any other human relationship. Men and boys who are involved in cross-generational relationships know that there is nothing wrong with, or harmful in, reaching out for mutual support and enjoyment of each other's bodies and lives. Such friendships should not be against the law, nor should they be made the scapegoat for society's tensions and failings. Men and boys must explain what our friendships are like, for we are the only ones who really know. We are a kind of vanguard for sexual freedom, both in our advocacy of freedom of sexual expression, and in our support for children's rights and liberation.

In view of such noble goals, the hostility some feminists express to our relationships may appear puzzling. As of now, not much enlightenment on this has emerged from the lesbian or feminist movement. At its October 1980 convention, the National Organization for Women actually adopted a reactionary resolution put forward by the Lesbian Rights Committee condemning pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism, and

public sex. Nevertheless, articles and letters in the gay press reveal that there are women who share with NAMBLA a libertarian view of sexual freedom, and a suspicion of the state as the gendarme of sexual banality and conformity. (See especially the fine two-part feature on the age of consent by Pat Califia in the Oct. 16 and Oct. 30, 1980, issues of *The Advocate*.)

Other feminists, however, express a blanket hostility to man/boy love. Their views include the following:

- NAMBLA is only interested in maximizing the sexual availability of boys for men.
- All that sexual freedom will mean is greater accessibility of men to women.
- Children under the age of sexual consent (which varies widely), and especially prepubescent children, are incapable of consenting to a pleasurable act like sex.
- Sex between an adult and a minor (at least when the adult is a male) amounts to rape.
- The power relationship in man/boy friendships is overwhelmingly in the favor of the man. Being a man, he can usually be expected to misuse this alleged power. The temptation to "exploit" the boy is too great for society to run the risk of condoning such friendships, even when they are consensual.
- By drawing attention to man/boy love, which after all involves only the male of the species directly, NAMBLA is "objectively" doing the work of the political right wing. The entire organization may be the dupe of some diabolically clever police agent. By focusing on male love, NAMBLA detracts attention from the special oppression of women, and the efforts of lesbian-feminists to fight sexism within the gay liberation movement.

Rather than respond to each of these arguments, let us examine briefly some of the areas of conflict that appear to have arisen

between man/boy lovers and certain feminists — areas and perceptions that should be examined by feminists too. This exercise may help us to answer some objections, as well as to shed light upon some differences that have emerged.

1. Sex. Males need sex, even at a young age in many cases. Given the chance they often satisfy sexual urges with each other. Males reach their sexual prime in their teenage years, whereas evidence suggests that females tend to reach theirs in their late twenties. The boy's sexual desires and needs are in conflict with society and its laws, not merely because the young person is considered too young to have sex — at a time when he needs it and, more often than not, gets it (often with an older man) — but also because of the infantilization of children in our society. Indeed, in a country where more than half the states still punish consensual sex between same-sex partners of any age, who is to say that the goal of social policy is not the infantilization of everybody?

Females may need sex at an early age too. Some of them find it in relationships with older women. But their sexual socialization is generally quite different from that of boys. The point is, however that children of any age ought to be able to enjoy sex with the partner of their choice. Unless there is something inherently evil in same-sex relationships, how is the young person harmed by an act that he or she finds pleasurable? Perhaps it is for that very reason that the state steps in with its proscriptions: It does not want to accept or allow the sexual pleasure of its children. But children find ways to circumvent these prohibitions. The ones who cannot be forced to knuckle under to pressures against their own sexual pleasure often grow up to be rebels.

As with any other relationship, sex is only a part — often an important part, sometimes the only part — of interaction between men and boys. The boy-lover offers a boy many things, including an opportunity to discover and enjoy his own body and the man's, and to learn about the world. He may also help a boy to accept his gay identity, to come out to his family, to wrest a measure of freedom that would otherwise be denied him. The boy offers the man, among other things, a chance to participate in the sexual discovery and liberation of another male, a heightened sense of life through interaction with another generation, a special window on the joys and mysteries of male sexuality.

Feminists sometimes fall into the error of transferring their experience of adult male sexuality onto their attitudes toward man/boy love. They resist seeing how men could treat boys

any more gently than they might little girls, or women. But since rape has nothing to do with consensual sexual relationships between men and boys (or anyone else, for that matter), feminists would do well to recognize where stressing this theme could lead. It leads not only into the arms of the political right wing and "moral crusaders," but also in the direction of fascistic arguments to the effect that all men are rapists, love is rape, sex is bad, only females can be nurturing toward the young, male sexuality is violent, and so forth. Such arguments reflect a hostility to male sexuality that borders on the pathological.

NAMBLA takes the view that sex is good, that homosexuality is good, and that this is so not only for adults, but for young people as well. We support all consensual sexual relationships, regardless of age. As long as the relationship is mutually pleasurable, and no one's rights are violated, sex should be no one else's business.

2. *Children's liberation.* Sexual liberation cannot be achieved without the liberation of children. This means many things: Children need to gain control over their lives, a control which they are denied on all sides. They need to break the yoke of "protection" which alienates them from themselves, a "protection" imposed on them by adults — their family, the schools, the state, and prevailing sexual and social mores. No segment of society is as deprived of rights as are children. They have no money, the *sine qua non* of freedom in this society. They have no choice over whom they live with. (Only Sweden has recognized the right of children to divorce their parents.) They are confronted at every turn by adults — well-meaning or otherwise — who arrogate to themselves the right to make the vital decisions that affect children's lives.

Children by the millions refuse this slave status. They do so by their many rebellions, by their defiance of received morality, by running away by the hundreds of thousands every year, by their efforts to free themselves from their stifling environments. The real crime of boy-lovers is that they encourage young people in these rebellions; they serve as a link between generations of rebels against irrational and inhuman limitations on human experience and discovery.

No struggle for liberation will reach very far so long as it ignores the needs of children, so long as it accepts artificial barriers to sexual desire that seek to stifle it in compartments whose boundaries are fixed by age. Such efforts inevitably wind up as props of a system grounded in antisexuality and superstition, not science and humanism.

They'd Rather Not Talk About It

LESBIAN & GAY RIGHTS

Whereas, The National Organization for Women's commitment to equality, freedom, justice and dignity for all women is singularly affirmed in NOW's advocacy of Lesbian rights; and

Whereas, NOW defines Lesbian rights issues to be those in which the issue is discrimination based on affectional/sexual preference orientation; and

Whereas, there are other issues (i.e. pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism and public sex) which have been mistakenly correlated with Lesbian/Gay rights by some gay organizations and by opponents of Lesbian/Gay rights who seek to confuse the issue; and

Whereas, Pederasty is an issue of exploitation or violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

Whereas, Pornography is an issue of exploitation and violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

Whereas, Sadomasochism is an issue of violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

Whereas, Public sex, when practised by heterosexuals or homosexuals, is an issue of the violation of the privacy rights of non-participants, not an issue of affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

Whereas, NOW does not support the inclusion of pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism and public sex as Lesbian rights issues, since to do so would violate the feminist principles upon which this organization was founded; now therefore

Be it resolved, That the National Organization for Women adopt the preceding delineation of Lesbian rights issues and non-Lesbian rights issues as the official position of NOW; and

Be it further resolved that NOW disseminate this resolution and the resolution concept paper on Lesbian rights issues 1980 attached hereto throughout the National, State and Local levels of the organization; and

Be it further resolved that NOW will work in cooperation with groups and organizations which advocate Lesbian Rights as issues as defined above.

3. *Motherhood.* Our society has fostered a myth according to which mere reproduction suffices as a qualification for parenthood. Yet many parents do not do what is best for their children — and not only those who abuse, maim, or murder their own offspring. Parents often fear the sexuality of their children, because once the child begins to have sex, they feel they have lost an important measure of control over the child. The best mother (or father) for a boy is one who gives him the freedom he needs to explore himself and the world around him. It is difficult for many, perhaps most, parents to avoid conflicts with their sons over this. Surely, parents wish to protect their children from the dangers lurking outside the womb of the family — though many don't really care about their children, especially when they discover that their child is gay. But even vigilance, and an elaborate system of state and private agencies, laws, and customs designed to enforce the boy's dependency on his parents, cannot prevent deep human drives from surfacing and finding fulfillment.

The lesbian and gay movement has made as one of its central demands the right of lesbian mothers to have custody of their children. In view of the double standard society applies to determine the worthiness of parents (straights are OK, gays are not), this is a demand that can be supported. But it is a demand that obscures the wishes and needs of the child. The child himself should have the right to decide whom to live with, whether a lesbian mother or a gay father, the "natural" parents, a boy-lover, or someone else. Children should be the private property of no one, not even of the individuals who by the accident of birth find themselves in the role of parent. The demand for lesbian custody of children does not go very far precisely because it leaves intact the entire system whereby children are denied their rights to make decisions that affect their lives.

Mothering the young is a role imposed on women, frequently against their will. This role can have a profoundly negative character when it is internalized, as it often has been, by feminists and even by lesbians who are not themselves mothers. It is destructive of the interests of boys when it is invoked as a way of restricting their freedom of action. Insofar as it manifests a belief in the biological abilities of the female to nurture the

young — abilities allegedly absent in the male of the species — the family, and religion oppress young people.

4. *Age of consent.* There is no age at which a person becomes capable of consenting to sex. The age of sexual consent is just one of many ways in which adults impose their system of control on children. Despite the pretensions of lawmakers to fix an age at which certain kinds of sexual acts become acceptable, the huge disparity in legal ages of consent (and for statutory rape) itself proves the futility of the task. Those feminists who join in this charade of antisex, antichild regulation unavoidably tailor their pleas for "protection" of children from allegedly predatory adult males to reactionary efforts to increase state interference in private matters. The state is the enemy of freedom, not its guarantor. The best evidence against the argument that children cannot consent to sex, including with adults, is the fact that millions of them do it anyway.

5. *The First Amendment.* Some feminists have become involved in campaigns whose immediate goal is to curtail freedom of speech. Such campaigns, primarily against the right to produce, disseminate, and consume pornography, feed a Carrie Nation mentality and appeal to the state (an institution controlled, ironically, by men) to act as the protector of women and outlaw material certain feminists find offensive. The effects of this campaign have been disastrous for freedom of speech, and can only work against the feminist movement itself in the long run. Although ostensibly intended to protect females from porn, the targets and victims of the anti-porno hysteria have often been boy-lovers, whose only "crime" may be to take pictures of their young friends for purely private purposes. The consumption of pornography (whether hetero or homo, whether private or commercial) should be the business of those who participate in it voluntarily, not of the state, moral crusaders, preachers, and politicians.

Feminists and lesbians have jeopardized free speech within the lesbian and gay movement by slandering and attempting to expel NAMBLA and its supporters from some movement events. This intolerance for male lifestyles and sexuality has greatly heightened tensions between people who support sexual freedom and people who don't. Opponents of man/boy love within the gay move-



This photo is from A CERTAIN FREEDOM, a collection of photos of boys in Portugal by George Jacobs. Published by Perception Press, 1968. Jacobs, in 1979, was set up on kid-porn charges by LAPD Det. Lloyd Martin, the U.S. Postal Investigators and Mass. State Police. He pleaded guilty to a number of offenses in Jan. 1980. He received a 39-year sentence, most of which the Judge waived. Jacobs, now incarcerated in the Mass. penal system, is eligible for release in Feb. 1981.

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ment object to the fact that NAMBLA has broken the taboo of silence about cross-generational sexual relationships, thereby demonstrating that gay liberation involves young people as well as "consenting adults." The efforts to ostracize NAMBLA have not succeeded, and have come under much criticism, including from some feminists. A tactical retreat may be under way, since our opponents have recently begun to suggest that they are not against sex between men and teenage boys, but only where prepubescent boys are involved. But such a retreat could also represent a concession to antisex crusaders, who have stressed the alleged victimization of children by adult males. An effort is under way to divided homosexuals into "good" and "bad," to sanitize the struggle for sexual liberation along lines that have less to do with liberation, and more to do with piecemeal reform of the antisex apparatus (the law, state policy, and religious repression). If boy-lovers are under attack now, it will be leathermen, sadomasochists, and others next — anyone who cannot easily be served up to the powers that be as "respectable." Such efforts are dangerous, and will succeed only at the expense of the gay movement's abilities to defend itself.

6. *Male sexuality.* Man/boy love reflects not only the rebellion of youth, and its irrepressible search for self-discovery, but also a deep attraction of men and boys for each other. The experiences of females at the hands of adult males have made many of them skeptical about man/boy relationships. Rather than learn about those relationships from men and boys who are involved in them, some feminists adopt the outlook that whenever a man is involved, a situation of exploitation automatically exists. Among certain lesbians, separatist attitudes may also get mixed up in this. For them, a rejection of men implies a rejection of the ability of men to be "nurturing" toward the young. Yet "nurturing" rapport does exist in relationships between men and boys, and not only in sexual contexts. Without boy-lovers, institutions like the Boy Scouts, Big Brothers, the Boys' Clubs, and the teaching profession would wither to mere shadows of themselves. Furthermore, hostility to man/boy love by lesbians and feminists patently calls into question their own nurturing capabilities toward young boys.

Just as homosexuals are the best qualified to interpret and explain what homosexuality is like, so man/boy lovers are the most qualified to explain what our relationships are like. Ours is a struggle to speak the truth. There will be some who do not wish to be confused by the facts. But others will refuse to put on the blinders offered in the name of traditional morality, respectability, or feminism.



Behind the opposition to man/boy love — whether from the political right or from feminists — is fear. Fear of upsetting neatly arranged apple-carts, fear of the power of sexuality and the desire for freedom of sexual expression, fear of vulnerability in the face of mounting right-wing and religious fanaticism, fear of changing social and sexual mores, fear of the unknown. But fear is not a reliable guide to developing a strategy for the liberation of the oppressed.

As a group that favors sexual freedom, NAMBLA should support women in their desire for freedom from male domination. The liberation of sex, and the liberation of children, are inconceivable without the liberation of women from centuries of oppression and male domination. The fact that boy-love is regarded by many people as a "disorganizing" factor in traditional social arrangements should not blind us to the fact that women themselves cannot be free until children are free, until boy-love is free. NAMBLA opposes all forms of adult domination of young people, and champions their right to be treated as full human beings, not as mere chattel to be disposed of as the family and the state see fit.

We do not support freedom for some, but freedom for all. Freedom is indivisible. So long as some human beings are in chains, no human being can be free. An injury to one is an injury to all!

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