

## Intact or Cut? Castration and the Phallus in the New Gender Politics

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This moment of the cut is haunted by the form of a bloody scrap—the pound of flesh that life pays in order to turn it into the signifier of the signifiers, which it is impossible to restore, as such, to the imaginary body; it is the lost phallus of the embalmed Osiris.<sup>1</sup>

—Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*

### THE NEW GENDER POLITICS

In 1999, Edward Bodkin was arrested in the state of Indiana for castrating men in his living room. As the videotapes he made of the procedures show, Bodkin was far from a trained physician. Nevertheless, all of the men he castrated came to him willingly, many leaving their excised testicles behind at Bodkin's request, where they floated in jars on his kitchen table.<sup>2</sup> According to anecdotal evidence collected by *Body Modification Ezine*, Bodkin was not kind to these men. Never highly skilled, he presided over several botched surgeries that ended with sudden trips to the hospital; furthermore, a number of men claim that he sold mail-order videos of their castrations without their consent.<sup>3</sup>

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In 2002, Shuo-Shan Wang was arrested in Michigan, also for being a “cutter”; that is, for performing castrations without a medical license.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Bodkin, however, Wang had a stellar reputation. He had castrated over fifty men without a hitch (charging only for supplies) and was flown around the US and even to other countries by men who valued his services.<sup>5</sup> When Wang couldn’t control the bleeding during his final castration, the patient was reluctant to give his name to the authorities, and only did so because Wang was so distraught he feared the cutter might be suicidal.<sup>6</sup>

Like much of the material I analyze in this article, the story of these two cases was pieced together from a variety of sources: some more reliable, in the sense of being verifiable or objective, than others. Instead of pursuing the quantifiable truth of, for example, messages posted to the internet, I use them to explore certain issues at stake in identity formation. For instance, though a mere three years separates the cases of Bodkin and Wang, much changed during that time. Instead of answering Bodkin’s classified ads in hard-to-find underground newsletters such as “Ball Club Quarterly” (circulation: 1,000), Wang’s patients made online queries about his success rate in internet chat rooms. Thanks to the internet, not only could cutters find clients, and vice versa, but men interested in castration found each other. And so a community was born: a community of eunuchs.<sup>7</sup> These are non-transsexual men who, through elective surgery by underground cutters or—rarely—legitimate doctors, remove their testicles to become self-declared eunuchs. Though these men renounce masculinity (in the form of testes or testosterone), they still retain a male identity.

In her recent book *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler argues for remaking the concept of the human being: not merely to celebrate difference, but also to make life livable for those whose bodies or desires resist models of assimilation into prevailing social norms. “I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live,” she writes, “But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable.”<sup>8</sup> Transsexual or transgendered people who resist pathologization, and intersexed people who resist involuntary and invasive surgery that often impairs their bodies’ function in the name of a more “normal” appearance, are two examples of a constellation of movements that Butler terms “the new gender politics,” which demands that the world be reorganized to make room for people to live as they are and as they want to be.

The new gender politics seeks power in the private sphere when it demands from the medical establishment the right to self-determination in its most literal sense: that is, access to surgeries to effect permanent alterations to the body. It seeks power in the social sphere by demanding new categories of identity based on deeply held desires that are often not seen as “normal,” nor recognized as legitimate. Butler identifies an ethical obligation to recognize, on their own terms, new communities organized around an emergent gender or sexual identity; an obligation that subsequently demands the reexamination of the set of social norms that refuses to acknowledge, or outright forbids, such identities. While I am in full support of such efforts by, and on behalf of, transsexuals and the intersexed, we must also realize that their successes will inevitably result in more and more types of people emerging to claim the same rights for their bodies, their desires, their lives.

This gives rise to another question: are we ethically compelled to grant all such groups recognition of their identity on their own terms? Clearly, the answer is no: we need not grant legitimacy to, for example, identities formed around racist or violent ideologies, or groups (such as some religious cults) that are overly coercive or immoderately self-destructive.<sup>9</sup> Herein lies a conundrum: how should we define the limits of our ethical obligation to recognize difference? Butler never addresses this contentious issue, but I believe it will increasingly take center stage as a crucial issue in the new gender politics.

This article examines a selection of limit cases on the outer boundaries of the new gender politics; in other words, groups whose demand for recognition poses an ethical challenge for the rest of us. After a brief section outlining the importance of the Lacanian concepts of the phallus and *jouissance* to my project, I move on to the first limit case: men against circumcision. Next, I embark upon an extended analysis of the contemporary eunuch identity; not only to ascertain whether or not there is any legitimate (that is, non-pathological) reason that might justify these men’s desire to be castrated and live as eunuchs, but also to outline a litmus test for the acknowledgement and recognition of radical difference. In order to do so, I examine the ways that self-declared eunuchs state, build and enact their identity. This requires analysis of the discourse generated by the eunuch community—for example, of the popular discussion thread on the *Eunuch Archive* website entitled: “Is castration a fetish or a necessity?”—as well as an application of psychoanalytic theory to

the individual choice that faces the would-be eunuch: a choice that I believe hinges on a crucial distinction between the drive to undergo castration and the desire to live as a eunuch.<sup>10</sup> The article concludes by returning to men like Bodkin and Wang in order to ascertain the challenge that underground cutters pose to the establishment of the eunuch community and its demand to be recognized.

Judith Halberstam's well-known work *Female Masculinity* describes women who reject femininity and embrace masculinity, yet still retain a female identity.<sup>11</sup> Eunuchs, on the other hand, are men who reject masculinity and do *not* embrace femininity, yet still retain a male identity. This leads us to ask: what precisely is the essence of gender identity once all of its discernable attributes are stripped away? What remains is a negative quality: an empty, albeit haunted, space. Psychoanalysis defines sex difference—the discrete subject positions of “male” and “female”—as different orbits taken around this negative quality, which Lacan terms “the phallus.” However, this term has caused much consternation in the field of gender studies. While Lacan insists upon distinguishing between the penis (the physical organ) and the phallus (a symbolic structure, as I explain below), others strongly reject this separation. According to Judith Butler:

I understand that progressive Lacanians are quick to distinguish between the phallus and the penis and claim that the ‘paternal’ is a metaphor only. What they do not explain is the way the very distinction that is said to make ‘phallus’ and ‘paternal’ safe for use continues to rely upon and reinstitute the correspondences, penis/phallus and paternal/maternal that the distinctions are said to overcome.<sup>12</sup>

I'll explain why this distinction between penis and phallus—as well as the correspondence paternal/maternal—is crucial to my analysis. As a child develops from early infancy, it inevitably becomes aware that its mother desires something that it cannot provide: in other words, every child realizes that its mother has a life outside the child's ken. This mysterious, unknown Thing that the mother desires Lacan terms the phallus. The classic, Freudian Oedipal construction locates the phallus in the person of the father, in the form of the penis. This correspondence has been justifiably dismissed by feminist scholars.

Yet the same tale retold makes possible a much wider application. All human infants require caregivers: therefore, “mother” should be understood more as a primary caregiver who could be female or male, and who

may or may not be genetically linked to the child. All caregivers, as human beings themselves, have a life outside the child: rather than a housewife's devotion to her husband, it could just as easily be a single mother's need/desire to earn a living that takes her attention away from the child. The father need not literally exist at all; and it is in this sense that the paternal becomes a metaphor, as Butler observes. My point is that the caregiver's desire inevitably flows not only towards the child, but also away, and at some point the child realizes this and perceives this latter flow as a gulf in the caregiver that the child is unable to fill. Hitherto, the child has always tried to fill lack in the caregiver—in other words, to be the phallus for the caregiver. Realizing the impossibility of this dream, the child gives up attempting to *be* the phallus, and instead realizes that it will always lack this mysterious object.

This is the Lacanian castration complex, and how the child deals with this realization becomes the determining factor in its assuming a subject position as male or female. Sex difference accrues from two different ways of "having" the phallus. On the male side is the taking on of the phallus as lack; on the female side, the awareness of not having the phallus is lack redoubled: thus women are characterized by the lack of lack. But all human subjects are constituted around this central dilemma that forces them to deal with their inability to be everything the mother (caregiver) desires. In this way, we can say that in Lacanian terms, the castration complex is pre-Oedipal, and therefore that everyone—men and women—is always already castrated. All human subjects are incomplete: wholeness is but a prelapsarian dream of perfect unity with the mother in the womb. We are all cut; no one is intact.

The phallus is a signifier of something to which the child does not have access, but which (the child presumes) satisfies the mother. Lacan's term for this mysterious satisfaction is *jouissance*. Because the phallus is lack, an entirely negative structure, it cuts us off from *jouissance* at the same time it points us towards it. As we can see from the example of the child and the caregiver, *jouissance* is always located outside the subject. Therefore, though we are always driven towards this mystical substance that would fill our lack and make us whole, it is impossible to attain. In fact, since taking on lack (the phallus) is a precondition of subjectivity, unmediated access to *jouissance* would undo subjectivity: make it impossible to sustain.

Consider Lacan's famous triad of imaginary, symbolic, and Real.

*Jouissance* fills the inaccessible Real, while the symbolic order is home to the maternal and paternal forces, in addition to radical difference, or the Other. The imaginary is the realm of the Cartesian cogito: the ego, or what we think of as reality. This three point structure is crucial to the ethical dimension of the new gender politics, because both the symbolic and imaginary offer different forms of protection against the lethal power of *jouissance* in the Real. First, I will address the issue of fantasy. Though we think of ourselves as wanting *jouissance*, wanting to be whole, we really act to prevent ourselves from accessing it. The primary means of doing so is through fantasy in the imaginary realm. Fantasy protects us from *jouissance*.

Male subjectivity is formed around the central contradiction that having the phallus means being aware that the phallus lacks, and any attempt to make the penis fill that lack (that is, to attempt to access *jouissance* with or through the penis) is naught but fantasy. Therefore, far from denying the existence of any (fantasy) correspondence between phallus and penis, “progressive Lacanians,” to use Butler’s term, invoke the phallus specifically to break down this imagined relationship and reveal the frightening power of *jouissance* to shape human desire. To invert another of her formulations, I would say that the phallus is never “safe for use,” and to illustrate this concept, my analysis of men who desire castration will show that *jouissance* continually threatens to break through any fantasy scenario designed to protect the subject from it. Finally, lest we get too wrapped up in this debate over phallus vs. penis, I want to make clear that my goal is to show that the true importance of the former in the new gender politics lies in the particular way that it signifies *jouissance* to the subject. As we will see, our ethical obligation to other people hinges on the way that they organize their relationship to *jouissance*.

#### “A RELATIVELY UNRESPONSIVE STICK”

Freudian castration anxiety—which, in its most basic sense, is the realization that to have a penis is to accept that one might someday suffer its loss—entirely misses universal castration as a constitutive element of human subjectivity. Furthermore, this Lacanian formulation continues to be a bone of contention in gender studies, where a lamentable—and atavistically Freudian—tendency remains to conflate the penis with the phallus. I insist on the proper use of this term because misreading the

phallus as belonging to the penis enables the belief that male genitals have something to say about male subjectivity. They do not.

Genitalia are extraneous to sex difference because “male” and “female” describe not physical bodies, but different ways of organizing the psyche around the phallus, an unsymbolizable object. Female to male transsexuals, by their very existence, bear witness to the fact that the penis does not make the man, as do the many thousands of men who have undergone chemical or surgical castration as a treatment for cancer.<sup>13</sup> Yet the fetishistic association of male genitals to male subjectivity continues to circulate, and the wish for the penis to be the key to understanding male identity generates endless fantasies. In this section, I examine two of these fantasies to see where they go wrong, which will help me to set the ground for my argument that the phallus as signifier of *jouissance* is crucial to the issue of ethical obligation within the new gender politics.

In the United States, a small but vocal number of men have convinced themselves that their circumcision as infants, still a routine practice in American hospitals, scarred them for life. These men have organized in order to share their pain and publicly call for an end to what they see as a barbaric practice that traumatizes infants and robs men of their masculinity. On websites such as the *Circumcision Resource Center (CRC)*, anti-circumcision activists present their lack of a foreskin as the central organizing principle of their existence. Since statistical evidence supporting their position is scanty, the *CRC* relies largely on testimonial narratives in order to buttress their position that circumcision results in permanent trauma. “The single most traumatic event of my life with the greatest psychological damage was my circumcision as an infant,” writes one anonymous poster to the *CRC* website. He continues by relating two childhood experiences of viewing other boys’ penises, concluding: “I had no idea at the time of how traumatic it was. I only knew that there was something different, and I was thinking about it every day.”<sup>14</sup>

The trauma proclaimed at the onset of this passage is never fully explained by the subsequent narrative. This man doesn’t remember his actual circumcision, which took place in infancy, and he specifically states that the memories he does have of realizing he was different from other boys were *not* traumatic. What he does remember is how he obsessed upon this difference: how it stuck in his mind and how often he thought about it. He never mentions it troubling him when he was a child, which is not surprising: in the United States, there are plenty of

both sorts of boys around. But for this particular man, the difference between not having a foreskin and having one attains a singular importance when suddenly, as an adult, he realizes retroactively that he has been cut from the herd, and it is only at this point that his circumcision appears as a horrible trauma. The obsession now finds a purpose: it bears witness to the mark left by the desire of an uncaring Other who demanded a piece of his body, never to be returned, as an obscure sacrifice. For this man and the others like him, circumcision is castration.

When I write Other with a capital “O,” it does not represent other people, it represents the big Other of the symbolic order. In my reading, anti-circumcision activists apprehend this distinction to the extent that they reserve a special horror for the fact that circumcisions take place because of traditions—religious or secular, it matters not which—that do not necessarily involve the wishes of any particular person. Evil doctors or rabbis do not circumcise infants for their own pleasure, or because they accede to the dark desires of unfit parents. They are only instruments of a regime that demands this sacrifice without—according to men against circumcision—satisfactorily explaining why.

In psychoanalytic terms, however, the explanation is clear. As I said earlier, castration is universal. The men of the *CRC* are attempting to map the cut of circumcision onto the trauma that occasions the assumption of subjectivity (which I explained previously as the child becoming aware it lacks that which would bring full satisfaction to its caregiver). In refusing to *have* the phallus—that is, to admit that every human being, and thus every penis, is incomplete in a way that has nothing to do with circumcision—they take refuge in a fantasy of *being* the phallus, and therefore are able to imagine a state in which not just their penis but their whole being is uncut and complete, lacking nothing. But why should this fantasy of wholeness hold such allure; furthermore, what are they avoiding by clinging to it so strongly?

Beyond the imagined psychic trauma of the knife, the men of the *CRC* extend their claim that circumcision has made them incomplete into the world of the sensate when they maintain that the loss of the foreskin’s nerve endings has barred them from the degree of sexual pleasure to which an intact penis would entitle them. When spread out, the anti-circumcision men announce bitterly, the foreskin of an adult male “is about 12 square inches of highly erogenous tissue.”<sup>15</sup> Since it is impossible to measure and compare the subjective intensity of each individual’s sexual pleasure, the *CRC* attempts to prove its claim that circumcision

decreases sensitivity by citing a survey that reports: “Circumcised men were more likely to engage in masturbation, heterosexual oral sex and anal sex than intact men.” They conclude: “the result suggests that circumcised men seek alternative forms of stimulation to compensate for reduced sensitivity.”<sup>16</sup> Here the anti-circumcision men expose a very interesting aspect of the fantasy that informs their fetishization of the foreskin. It seems that cutting away these generous twelve square inches of sensitive flesh unleashes desire, dooming the circumcised man to a panoply of perversion because his attainment of sexual pleasure now requires unnatural exertions. Uncircumcised men, by default, are presumed to be entirely happy to confine sexual pleasure to “normal”—that is, penetrative, heterosexual and reproductive—sex. Their claim, therefore, is that the foreskin performs a regulatory function, channeling sexual desire into socially approved areas, and thus has a crucial role in producing male subjects who function within heteronormative codes.

By projecting the psychic cut that produces the subject-who-lacks onto the physical body, the anti-circumcision activists make a fetish of the uncircumcised man. Possession of a foreskin appears as the brass ring on the merry-go-round, a ticket into a paradise forever lost to them. It’s easy to see that the prelapsarian state of wholeness to which anti-circumcision men aspire is impossible to attain: after all, most people have no trouble realizing that the foreskin is not a magic ticket to a (sex) life of fulfillment and happiness. The anti-circumcision men are able to sidestep this obvious point because their gaze is fixed obsessively on the moment of the cut, and—crucially—on the retrospectively produced emotions through which they attempt to make the resultant lack meaningful. The other anonymous quotations cited on the *CRC* website attest to this: “I feel violated and abused”; “I have felt a deep rage for a long time about this”; “Circumcision has given my life a much diminished and shameful flavor”; “My penis feels incomplete, deformed, maimed.”<sup>17</sup> As I said previously, the lack that is a precondition of subjectivity is signified by the phallus. The phallus is a power that can never be represented by the penis, because it signifies the very desire of the Other that intervened, incomprehensibly, to forbid the subject that wholeness that it never really had as such, but can only retroactively infer. Regretting, railing against, and bemoaning the missing part of their penis allows the anti-circumcision men to ignore the fact that the assumption of lack is inevitable: part and parcel of the human condition.

“Unprotected . . . it has become callused,” says one man circumcised

as an adult. “I seem to have a relatively unresponsive stick where once I had a sexual organ.”<sup>18</sup> Again, circumcision appears as castration. Without the safe haven of the foreskin, the penis is insensate, inanimate, ruined, and the men of the *CRC* long for the lost protection offered by that fleshy sleeve: a safe distance from raw desire, from perversion in its polymorphous forms. In reality, however, it is their fantasy of the virile intact man who they can never be that actually guarantees their protection. We circumcised men are not whole, says this fantasy, but a group of whole men with intact penises does exist, and they have access to the enjoyment (the *jouissance*) that we lack. Yet this is precisely the fundamental error that anti-circumcision men make. Other people do not enjoy the *jouissance* that we lack, because as I said earlier, unmediated access to *jouissance* is expressly forbidden to the subject-who-lacks (that is, to everybody). Moreover, their fetishization of this *jouissance*, in which intact men are presumed to enjoy a penis of such exaggerated sensitivity that it enables orgasms off the scale, also makes a completely interior world, in which sex entails seamless transferal from the moist protection of the foreskin into—invariably—the moist protection of the vagina. Again, the fantasy of returning to the womb appears, in which *being* the phallus fills lack in the mother and provides access to *jouissance* without limits: an impossible wholeness without lack. Calluses, in contrast, are a signifier not only of wear and of work, but of relation: of skin in contact with the world.

To be a man is to lack: this is the realization that anti-circumcision men cannot face. Instead, they make a fetish object of the foreskin in order to manifest their rage over a lost paradise of wholeness that never was. These men look at their circumcised penises and see something lacking, and bemoan the fact that they were never given a choice. By fixating on this missing part, they don’t have to admit that no penis is intact: that the phallus lies not between the legs of the boy under the next shower in the locker room, but always already elsewhere.

My next example involves the cut not of circumcision, but of castration. In an article called “Third Sex” for *OUT* magazine, Dr. Richard Wassersug, castrated as a treatment for his prostate cancer, declares himself to be a eunuch and describes his new identity as an ideal blend of male and female: “Now, with a brain free from the tyranny of testosterone, I can, for the first time in my life, begin to see the world more the way women see it.” He also announces a newfound bisexuality, which he again attributes to his new ability to “see beyond the corporal exteri-

or, far further, far deeper than before.” This declaration that castration has propelled him into a third sex with a unique perspective helps Dr. Wassersug avoid seeing himself the way testosterone-deprived prostate cancer patients tend to: namely, as a “damaged male.” He concludes: “If men are from Mars and women are from Venus, then eunuchs can tour the whole solar system.”<sup>19</sup> While I would never deny Dr. Wassersug the ability to rebuild his self-esteem by embracing a eunuch identity, I want to stress that the wish to become a “third sex” should not be considered a viable justification for voluntary castration. First, while the elimination of testosterone surely gives one a new perspective on the male condition, it does not confer special knowledge of being a woman. Furthermore, Dr. Wassersug’s narrative describes a being detached from gender altogether, with a mobility that can be naught but imaginary.

This is not rare in the world of eunuchs. Some men who desire castration speak wistfully of “the eunuch calm”: a monk-like detachment supposedly brought about by the elimination of testosterone from the body. According to Jeff, the eunuch assistant to Dr. Spector, who runs the only medical clinic in the United States that provides castration on demand: “You will develop the ‘eunuch calm,’ an indescribable feeling of peace and calm.”<sup>20</sup> However, there is no mention of such a phenomenon in the medical literature. Furthermore, the eunuch calm is not a release from a sexed identity—as I said before, eunuchs still consider themselves to be men—but rather from the pressures of the libido, from sex itself. This presents a problem. A man who wishes to be released, not just from the libidinous pressure, hormonal or otherwise, of male identity, but from desire itself, is doomed to disappointment. Castration does not deliver the instant nirvana of Buddha or a monk-like detachment from the world.

If this were the case, then eunuchs would be closer to angels than humans: sexless beings floating outside the mundane world of desire with a privileged relationship to *jouissance*. But to imagine oneself as removed from desire all together, looking down on the antics of hormone-driven sexed beings from Olympian heights, is an impossible subject position. The “eunuch calm,” in other words, is another fantasy of being the phallus, in that considering oneself “a third sex” involves imagining oneself as embodying the primary signifier around which each sex must position itself.

It is ironic that the opposition “intact or cut” can refer to both circumcision and castration: for, while the anti-circumcision men’s fantasy

of being the phallus is dependent upon an intact penis (that is, one with a foreskin), the men who indulge in the same fantasy by aspiring to the eunuch calm require a cut penis (one without testicles). In both cases, these very different groups of men deploy fantasy to avoid the realization that male subjectivity is dependent not upon having a complete, or incomplete, penis, but rather upon having the phallus: in other words, acknowledging lack as an unavoidable aspect of the human condition.

“A MALE WITH UNCONTROLLABLE LIBIDO”

The fantasy that underlies patriarchy denies universal castration by attempting to construct women as lacking (that is, castrated) and men as whole, with the penis being the primary signifier that sutures this imaginary relation together. At the most basic level, a would-be eunuch is a man who is unable to participate in this fantasy. Looking at his penis—or, more precisely, his testicles—this man sees something attached to his body, yet not of his body, that presses upon him with unbearable intensity, threatening to overwhelm him at every turn. In other words, his testicles—those two scraps of flesh that (stereotypically) make him a man—appear to him as pure *jouissance*. Therefore, looking at his penis, the would-be eunuch sees an unbearable excess: he is struck by the knowledge that he is *not* castrated, and this ongoing disaster fills him with anxiety.

In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud initially links anxiety to castration in its most general sense, as the anticipation of the loss of an object dear to the subject. But when he attempts to locate the root cause of anxiety, he runs into a problem. The first traumatic experience of anxiety that a subject undergoes is birth, or separation from the mother. Yet at this moment, the newly-born infant has no awareness of itself as a subject, and thus no way to experience the loss of an object. For this reason, anxiety cannot be definitively linked to any particular originary experience or anticipation of loss. Though it signals danger, anxiety itself has no locatable cause.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, having a penis, or not having one, or having one and fearing its loss, does not cause anxiety.

As Joan Copjec points out, since anxiety is without cause, its appearance cannot be doubted. This in turn connects anxiety to certainty: in other words, what anxiety signals is Real.<sup>22</sup> As I said earlier, the Lacanian Real is home to *jouissance*, unmediated access to which would prove

unendurable to the subject. The phallus is the signifier of *jouissance*: not a *jouissance* that belongs to us, but the *jouissance* of the Other, access to which is both forbidden and impossible. Would-be eunuchs often have fantasies in which sacrificing their testicles gives them a new relationship to this *jouissance*—the eunuch calm is one example—but the point I'm trying to make here is that, beyond any imagined benefits, what defines men who desire castration is the strength of their certainty that castration is for them, even if they cannot (as is often the case) imagine why this should be so. According to one man, whose fervor is echoed by many others: "All I know for sure is about ten years ago, I knew . . . KNEW that I had to become a eunuch!"<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason, and with this certainty, that men who desire castration dream constantly of ridding themselves of the unwanted presence of their testicles, and thereby escaping from the crushing burden posed by their own libido.

Before his castration, a eunuch who calls himself Talula says, "I had a real problem with sexual urges and would often masturbate three or four times a day. It was very inconvenient and even affected my job performance. Now I feel much more in control."<sup>24</sup> I'm certainly not going to argue how much masturbation or sex is too much; rather, my point is that the issue of control is very often stressed in the eunuch community. According to prospective eunuch Nolo, sex "is consuming my every thought and messing with my progress as a human [. . .] I still want to have sex but I don't want my balls in control anymore. I want to control my own life."<sup>25</sup> The stereotype of the insatiable male libido—in other words, the fantasy that men are constantly driven towards attaining the satisfaction of *jouissance*—is a constitutive element in the patriarchal construction of masculinity. In contrast, I maintain that in their rebellion against this idea, men who desire castration reflect a fundamental truth of human existence: that we are drawn not towards *jouissance*, but away from it; and furthermore, that it is precisely this flight from the Real that creates us as desiring subjects.

Testosterone figures to would-be eunuchs as it does to the culture at large: as the engine behind male desire. Men who want to be castrated feel that testosterone rages out of control in their bodies, forcing them into an unhealthy fixation on sex that is so unlike their internal image of themselves that it appears to come from without, making their testicles seem like alien growths pumping poison into their system:

I want to be castrated because my balls represent all of the maleness in me that I'm uncomfortable with [ . . . ] The symbolic aspect of removing my balls is important to me for what it represents to my psyche, and the chemical consequences in terms of both mindset and appearance are desirable to me . . . [plus], they look damn silly just hanging there like that.<sup>26</sup>

To men like Frankie, the loss of their testicles comes as more than just a relief: the cut of the knife literally propels them into the symbolic realm. Freed of their manhood, eunuchs are finally able to construct their identity as “whole” the way the rest of us do: by taking the distance from *jouissance* that makes desire possible. Thus one newly-made eunuch called Riverwind is able to say, after his castration at Dr. Spector’s medical clinic in Philadelphia, “I remember walking down the hall after surgery to meet my friends and thinking, ‘I am finally complete.’”<sup>27</sup>

At present, the aforementioned clinic is the only one in the United States that is willing to perform bilateral orchiectomy (removal of both testicles) on healthy patients, and it will do so without psychiatric evaluation. On his website registration form, Dr. Felix Spector includes just one category for non-transsexual men to describe their desire for castration: namely, “a male with uncontrollable libido.” All a man needs to do is check this box, schedule an appointment, arrive with a check for two thousand dollars, and sign a release form. Outpatient surgical castration will be completed the same day.

Although there is a complex of reasons for desiring castration posted on the websites I analyze, an insatiable libido is the most common reason cited. An uncontrollable sex drive is structurally connected to the key element that the medical establishment looks for before it will approve sex reassignment surgery: namely, the feeling of having been born into the wrong body. In both cases, the subject feels a radical separation between a deeply felt self-image and the physical body. However, there is a crucial difference between the post-surgery fate of transsexuals and that of eunuchs: while the former begin new lives as men or women, there is no such pre-prepared, socially sanctioned category for eunuchs. Castration appears to these men as an imperative: they feel that they cannot exist as “intact” men, so they remove their testicles in order to renegotiate their symbolic identity. Then they face a dilemma: what identity awaits them once the knife has made its cut?

I consider this issue of building the eunuch identity in tandem with another paradox, one that lies buried in the odd formulation: “an uncontrollable libido.” While we might think that would-be eunuchs are sex addicts who close out the singles bars every night of the week, it’s more

accurate to say that their unbearable libido causes them to focus obsessively on the one thing that promises relief: the act of castration. Yet, castration can only occur once. What happens to a man when the realization of his deepest fantasy, around which his entire psychic life has been organized, would seem to foreclose the possibility of ever indulging in that fantasy again? Answering this question will require a close analysis not only of the community that eunuchs have formed, but also of the nature and place that fantasy holds for men who desire castration. It will set up my final consideration of the legitimacy of the eunuch identity, which I will articulate through a reading of *jouissance* and the desiring eunuch.

#### A PLACE FOR EUNUCHS

The online eunuch community had its start in the unmoderated Usenet jungle, with groups like <alt.eunuchs.questions>. However, in the mid 1990s some men interested in castration found their way to *Body Modification Ezine (BME)*. They founded a section of *BME* called “male nullification,” which currently features over sixteen hundred graphic pictures of castration surgery and over one hundred eighty descriptions of this procedure.<sup>28</sup> In 1997, a spin-off website to *BME* called the *Eunuch Archive (EA)* was founded. Today, it boasts 6,394 fictional stories and a moderated BBS to which over forty-five thousand messages have been posted.<sup>29</sup>

From its beginning, the *Eunuch Archive* was intended to serve as a resource and community for anyone interested in castration. This includes those who only want to fantasize about losing their testicles, as well as pre- and post-castration eunuchs. It also includes male to female transsexuals who undergo bilateral orchietomy as a prelude to sex reassignment surgery.<sup>30</sup> The site is similarly diverse in terms of sexuality. Gay, straight, married, single, vanilla, S/M, celibate: the *EA* is for everyone. A sense of humor and irony is encouraged (epitomized by the animated icons of snapping scissors), and regular members make efforts to keep track of each other over time. The overall goals and methods of the *Eunuch Archive* are strongly allied to those of the new gender politics. Like transsexuals, the transgendered and the intersexed, the *EA* calls for tolerance and diversity within the framework of building something that does not exist in contemporary Western society: in this case, the eunuch identity.

Online organizing is crucial to all of these movements, but it has even

more importance for eunuchs. The online community that awaits, post-castration, to offer congratulations and affirmation of their new status provides the only way for these men to attain the “recognizability” that Judith Butler identifies as so important to making life livable. It’s easy to see why, for while a man might *become* a eunuch in a basement, hotel room or medical clinic, the internet is still the only place where one can go to *be* a eunuch. Next, I examine the ways in which the eunuch identity is established, maintained, and regulated in cyberspace, starting with a basic split epitomized by the *Eunuch Archive*’s two parts: the story boards and the discussion boards.

The six thousand stories posted to the *Eunuch Archive* portray just about every imaginable scenario of castration: from accidental to intentional, from malevolent spinster aunts wielding sewing scissors to ritualistic S/M encounters with “hot leather daddies.” The story boards also include historical pieces about Italian castrati, Ottoman harems, Russian Skopti, and Chinese court eunuchs, as well as fiction about contemporary Indian hijra. These latter stories dream of a home for the eunuch identity: a place where it can be expressed positively and is accepted by society at large. They comprise an act of cross-cultural appropriation based on a nostalgic fantasy of a symbolic order, located ever elsewhere, that has marked out a place for eunuchs within it.<sup>31</sup> The discussion boards, on the other hand, seek to carve out that space in the here and now.

As the *Eunuch Archive* grew, its focus shifted from discussions of castration fantasies to the practical reality of becoming, and being, a eunuch. In the last few years, many discussion board threads have discussed the health effects of castration—physical and mental; both benefits and drawbacks—and warned against the danger of attempts at self-castration or castration by unqualified cutters. Participants in these threads always stress that castration is a permanent, life-changing act: simultaneously, they affirm that it was the right choice for them. Through this “safe and sane” approach, eunuchs seek to clear the path to acceptance of their identity by the medical establishment and society in general.<sup>32</sup> Identity building efforts such as these, however, ignore the central, indeed constitutive, position of fantasy in the *Eunuch Archive*. All participants on the *EA* have a sexual fascination for castration, in which they indulge with every visit to the archive, whether or not they refer to it directly. Of his participation on the *EA*, one man writes: “I have learned that there are other issues to ‘castration’ in general, quite a lot to be true and some

of them quite fascinating too, but the simple sexual fascination of it is clearly recognizable, [and] generally widespread.”<sup>33</sup>

The regulatory efforts of the *EA*—that is, the efforts its members make to present a self-aware, health-conscious front to each other and the world—and the strong, shared fantasies underlying the site clash on the issue of illegal cutters. Discussions about where to find a cutter, or debate on the merits of various cutters, are banned from the boards: the official position of the *EA* is that all castrations should be performed legally by qualified physicians. However, the fascination for using underground cutters remains high in the *Eunuch Archive*, and it is clear from offhand comments on the discussion boards that private discussions on such matters using instant messaging occur regularly among members of the *EA*. My analysis now turns to this enigmatic figure, present everywhere but nowhere, who haunts the online eunuch community: the underground cutter.

#### HAUNTED BY A BLOODY SCRAP

Gelding, a eunuch castrated in 1994, long claimed on his webpage and in many interviews to have been cut without his consent by “a studly leather couple with an obvious Top and bottom, both hot, hairy-chested leather-wearing men” in an elaborate S/M scene. Gelding tellingly admitted that his lurid tale was a distillation of all of his personal castration fantasies:

My fantasies when I thought about being castrated when I was playing with myself were similar to the actual event. All the essential parts were there: being tied and helpless to object to or prevent anything, the presence of more than one male to take part and to watch. Even the cooking and eating [of] my excised testicles was something I had imagined in my wildest fantasies.<sup>34</sup>

However, in a 2000 interview by Bob Whitby for the *San Francisco Weekly*, Gelding reveals that this oft-told and very theatrical tale was, in fact, a complete fabrication.<sup>35</sup> Gelding says that he concocted this story for his own protection after he landed in the hospital due to complications from a castration by an underground cutter. By portraying himself as a victim, he escaped the psychological evaluation usually forced on men who are hospitalized after illegal castrations. He refuses to say anything about his actual castration to Whitby.<sup>36</sup> Presumably, it doesn’t make nearly as good a story.

Gelding's fantasy was accepted as true for years in the eunuch community; and no wonder, for it is a very common one among men interested in castration. Here we find an Oedipal fantasy of the primal Father. The force that the child imagines would fulfill its mother's desire renders the child itself unnecessary, and thus sweeps aside everything in its path. We can see this in Gelding's fantasy: the dominant, hairy leatherman represents pure, unstoppable *jouissance*. These would-be eunuchs feel their testicles don't belong to them, they belong to the Father, so they sacrifice their balls to the Father's *jouissance* with relief and pleasure.<sup>37</sup> In psychoanalytic terms, we take on lack in order to flee the primal Father and enter into the realm of desire: for, as I said previously, embracing lack offers protection from the destructive power of *jouissance* and opens the way to subjectivity. So far, so good: but Gelding's story does not end here.

Gelding's highly visible online presence—he claims to have counseled thousands of men about castration—causes Whitby to describe him as “a kind of den mother for the genitally obsessed.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, even after becoming a eunuch himself, Gelding's life continues to revolve around castration; and furthermore, it seems he offers services beyond mere counseling. Gelding makes a surprising, indeed unprecedented, admission in Whitby's interview. He declares that he himself has become an underground cutter who has performed around fifty castrations, many in S/M contexts.<sup>39</sup> Gelding's earlier admission of deceit casts a certain amount of doubt upon this assertion, so I will analyze it as I did his initial story: as a constitutive fantasy, this time of the eunuch-turned-cutter.

When Gelding takes up the scalpel and performs castrations, he does so to invoke the figure of his own fantasies, the primal Father. Slavoj Žižek's term for this figure, “the obscene and revengeful Father-of-Enjoyment” is particularly evocative, for Gelding admits to being troubled by the amount of sexual excitement he feels while performing castrations.<sup>40</sup> He voices fears that his own enjoyment may have led him to perform operations on men who were not ready for castration; but, though he professes regret, he also shows no intention of putting an end to his underground activities.<sup>41</sup> Gelding thus reveals another force at work in the eunuch community: the drive, not just to be castrated, but to castrate others. While the community officially casts out underground cutters, it secretly not only tolerates them but embraces them, and I want to consider the nature of this embrace.

This article set out to examine how self-declared eunuchs fit into the new gender politics. However extreme an act voluntary castration may at first appear, through a careful deployment of the concept of the phallus-as-lack, I have argued that a non-pathological desire for castration is possible. For some men, castration can end a harmful obsession and set them on a more livable path. But there is more to the eunuch identity than life without testicles. Because the eunuch identity is not recognized as legitimate by the medical establishment, the underground cutting scene is burgeoning. Therefore, though there is an obvious need to differentiate between those with a fetish for the act of castration and those who really want to live as eunuchs, telling the difference is not so easy, even for the men themselves.

Twenty years ago (I was 35), I too would have vehemently asserted that my interest in castration was strictly fantasy and that I would never want it to happen in real life. But the fetish is something that creeps up on you over the years. It stalks you like some dark specter from your dreams or your subconscious, growing stronger, asserting its will. If you have the fantasy, then the thing surely lives in you. All it needs is a fertile environment to manifest itself and grow.<sup>42</sup>

Most men trace the origin of their desire for castration to adolescence. They flee in terror from the onslaught of testosterone, which they are told will make them into men. Curiously, though, most men don't consider actually being castrated until late middle age, like fifty-five-year-old Farrell Squire, whom I quoted above. Although these men have lived the whole of their adult lives in flight from masculinity, they only choose to become eunuchs when the tide of testosterone finally begins to *recede* from their bodies. In the desire of these older men we can clearly see the symbolic import of castration: why their need to be cut goes beyond the biological. When the need for castration would seem to be at its ebb, instead of going away it only renews itself with undeniable ferocity.

Though a small group from the *Eunuch Archive* recently marched in a gay pride parade with a sign marked "Eunuch Unit" in Halifax, Nova Scotia, eunuchs are still far from being a visible minority.<sup>43</sup> Most of their identity building efforts still take place on the internet, which provides the "fertile environment" that Farrell Squire identifies as key to the development of the desire to be castrated. But behind their efforts to create, express and inhabit the eunuch identity—to build a livable life together after castration—a darker force looms. Castrations by cutters

are increasingly documented by web logs, photos, and videos, which are uploaded to *BME*.<sup>44</sup> This proliferation of representations of the irrevocable cut of the knife that turns fantasy to reality testifies to the enduring power that this scene has for men who desire castration. It offers a dangerous pleasure: to organize one's life, not around the eunuch identity, but rather around the act of castration. Eunuchs who become cutters themselves are able to continue to indulge in a fetish for castration even after their own has occurred, but only by encouraging more men to be cut. By doing so, they embrace castration not as protection against *jouissance*, but as a fetish for *jouissance* itself. It is here, on the far edge of an already marginal community, that we find a broader lesson.

Judith Butler's call for a new gender politics was prompted by communities of people who feel that they cannot live without being recognized to some degree, but who also feel that the way that they are recognized makes their lives unlivable. Now, in this underground circuit of cutters and clients that traces a self-contained, closed loop around a fetishized, private *jouissance*, we find the potential for something different: a group that avoids the need for recognition entirely. Free access to (castrated) cutters by anyone who desires castration entails a group that lacks nothing, and therefore has no motivation to interact with anyone else. Here, then, lies the limit of our ethical obligation to recognize difference, for the fetishization of private *jouissance* makes the very concept of community impossible to realize.

My analyses of anti-circumcision men and the "eunuch calm" showed that the demand for recognition of an imaginary subject position (i.e., one that revolves around a fantasy of being the phallus) does not incur an ethical obligation. In contrast, the claim to a eunuch identity that involves a symbolic subject position (that of having the phallus), does incur that obligation, but only under the following conditions: when eunuchs call to be recognized on their own terms, they must be met not only with acceptance, tolerance and compassion, but also with legislation and regulation, both juridical and medical.<sup>45</sup> It is, in other words, the plea for their *lack* to be recognized that incurs an ethical obligation, for it is only by this means that the community of eunuchs may form in a way that requires it to exist in relation to others.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1977), 265.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Wissing, "The Great Castrator," *The Daily Yomiuri*, October 31, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> "Edward Bodkin," *The BME Encyclopedia*, Ed. Shannon Larratt, 2004, [http://encyc.bmezine.com/?Edward\\_Bodkin](http://encyc.bmezine.com/?Edward_Bodkin), [Access date: September 10, 2005].

<sup>4</sup> "Castration Suspect Faces Charges in Court," *ClickOnDetroit.com*, 2002, <http://www.clickondetroit.com/news/1629114/detail.html>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>5</sup> "Kitchen Table Castrator Convicted," *CNN.com*, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/04/05/court.castration/>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>6</sup> <lurvain>, "Chinese Castrator Sentenced in Michigan," *Eunuch Archive* online posting, April 20, 2003, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the *Eunuch Archive* at <http://www.eunuch.org>.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in 1997, the "Heaven's Gate" religious cult encouraged its male members to undergo castration before committing suicide in order to be reborn on the alien spacecraft they believed was following the Hale-Bopp comet.

<sup>10</sup> <Sag111>, "Is Castration a Fetish or a Necessity?," online posting, June 11, 2003, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>11</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> A fact buttressed by the growing number of FTM transsexuals who choose not to undergo phalloplasty.

<sup>14</sup> "Discovering Circumcision Feelings," *Circumcision Resource Center*, 2004, <http://www.circumcision.org/discover.htm>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> "Psychological Impact of Circumcision on Men," *Circumcision Resource Center*, 2004, <http://www.circumcision.org/impact.htm>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>18</sup> "Men Circumcised as Adults," *Circumcision Resource Center*, 2004, <http://www.circumcision.org/adults.htm>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>19</sup> Richard Wassersug, "Third Sex," *OUT*, September 2003, 13–15.

<sup>20</sup> Felix Spector, "Jeff's Pages," *Felix Spector, D.O.*, 1998, <http://www.felixspecter.com/jeffspages.htm>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, trans. Angela Richards, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1959), 58, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 118.

<sup>23</sup> <Charlieje>, "Tell Me: Why are You into Castration?" online posting, December 14, 2001, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>24</sup> Talula, interview, *Body Modification Ezine*, January, 1998, <http://www.bmezine.com/news/people/A10101/talula/>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>25</sup> <Nolo>, "Tell Me: Why are You into Castration?" online posting, January 8, 2002, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>26</sup> <Frankie>, "Tell Me: Why are You into Castration?" online posting, December 21, 2001, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>27</sup> Riverwind, interview with Talula, *Body Modification Ezine*, July 13, 2003, <http://www.bmezine.com/news/talula/20030713.html>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>28</sup> "Male Nullification," *Body Modification Ezine*, 2005, <http://www.bmezine.com>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>29</sup> *Eunuch Archive*, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005]. Images of castration continue to be uploaded only to *BME*.

<sup>30</sup> This is often for financial reasons: full gender reassignment surgery is very expensive.

<sup>31</sup> Structurally, this fantasy is the same as that indulged in by the anti-circumcision men when they imagine the full, complete sexual life that an uncut penis would grant them.

<sup>32</sup> See also the "Eunuch and Castration FAQs," *Eunuch Archive*, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>33</sup> <haltos>, "PR Issue and More," online posting, March 12, 2003, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>34</sup> Gelding, interview, *Body Modification Ezine*, [undated], <http://www.bmezine.com/news/people/A10101/gelding.html>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>35</sup> Gelding, "My Life as a Eunuch," interview with Bob Whitby, *SFWeekly.com*, June 28, 2000, <http://www.sfweekly.com/Issues/2000-06-28/news/feature2.html>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Those men who dream of being castrated by a woman, in contrast, address their desire to The (unbarred) Woman; that is, the phallic Mother.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>41</sup> Gelding's regret separates him from Edward Bodkin, who, in his blind devotion to following his own *jouissance*, sought more to be the primal Father rather than to invoke that figure.

<sup>42</sup> Farrell Squire, "Tell Me: Why are You into Castration?" online posting, January 5, 2002, <http://www.eunuch.org>, [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>43</sup> See photos at <http://www.eunuch.org> [Access date: September 14, 2005].

<sup>44</sup> For an interview with a would-be cutter who advocates the right to choose castration and the legal licensing of cutters, see: Matthew A., "Luvpain99: Well, It's Been Quite a Year," interview with Chris Clark, *Body Modification Ezine*, January 8, 2005, <http://www.bmezine.com/news/guest/20050108.html>, [Access date September 14, 2005].

<sup>45</sup> Dr. Spector's clinic, which offers legal access to castration surgery without pre-castration psychiatric evaluation while persisting in its spurious promise to grant the eunuch calm, is a further example of this need for full symbolic recognition of the eunuch identity.