

The Destruction of the Earth is a Crisis of Masculinity

An artist statement.

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September 12, 2021

In my performance art in theatre spaces since 2006, I use my naked body and unscripted self to share and create space for vulnerability. In the years between 2012–2019 I did regular Vulnerability Vigils, where I made a practice of standing naked on the street once a month for at least an hour. (On the street, I held a sign in front of my body — often an Extinction Symbol — in a gesture of gentleness to those who are affronted by nudity.)

I do not feel comfortable presenting myself naked. It's not about comfort. It's about confronting comfort.

Through this confrontation, I have come to more deeply and viscerally understand that the destruction of the earth—and the corresponding violence to women, children, queer people, Indigenous and racialized people, poor people, disabled people, and other marginalized people—often viewed as a crisis of modernity and industrialism, must also be viewed as a crisis of masculinity.

Almost all of the world's violence is directly caused by men and masculine/patriarchal systems. We are all affected and all tainted by our participation in these systems. The world is run by men and every structure in the dominant culture (laws, institutions, language, technology, etc) is built on the domination principle of patriarchy/masculinity.

So this past hellish summer? Direct result of patriarchy.

People are still “debating” whether climate change is real and governments stall and lie. Why? Because the climate crisis narrative cannot be parsed. In our patriarchal structures there is no built-in “enough is enough.” Not in the language, not in the systems. As Slavoj Žižek has said: “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to capitalism.”

A simple definition of culture is the water we swim in. We swim in a water where EVERYTHING is about exalting masculinity, which is domination, which is lack of consent, which is dehumanizing and TRAUMATIZING.

Examining the mechanics of masculinity can help us understand how we got here and why it's so difficult to move out of it.

In *The History of Men*, masculinity scholar Michael S. Kimmel observes that:

“...masculinities are constructed in a field of power: 1) the power of men over women; 2) the power of some men over other men. Men's power over women is relatively

straightforward... Men's power over other men concerns the distribution of rewards [in society] among men by differential access to class, race, ethnic privileges or privilege based on sexual orientation... The constituent elements of 'hegemonic' masculinity, the stuff of the construction, **are racism, sexism and homophobia.**"

Jackson Katz is another masculinity scholar and anti-sexist educator/activist. In his documentary, *Tough Guise*, we see many young men answer a simple question: what does it mean to be masculine? The answers are obvious. Dominant. Don't show emotion. Don't be a pussy. Strong. Mean. Powerful.

Then he goes on to share statistics showing that men commit ~95% of every violent crime. Kimmel relates an experiment from many years ago:

"...groups of college students were asked to write down the 10 most important words that describe their identities... Invariably, women all listed 'woman' in the top three, gay people listed their sexuality, and African Americans almost always placed 'black' as their number one... not one man listed 'male'"

Kimmel himself describes the moment it dawned on him that he was white, middle-class, and male. Until he had taken a feminist seminar in the 70s it had never occurred to him to identify himself in this way because those aspects of who he is had never been an issue. "The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not to another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred," states Kimmel, "I enjoy the privilege of invisibility."

Men, Kimmel observes, are "ubiquitous in positions of power everywhere" and thus, paradoxically, "invisible to themselves."

When I read this, I was reminded of Gertude Stein's prescient observation of emerging suburbia in the early 20th century, "there is no there there;" and novelist Richard Ford's portraits of lost, numbed-out, middle-aged white guys. This concept of invisible masculinity also parallels my understanding of the black hole of the missing land-spirit connection so entrenched (and invisible) in patriarchal culture.

I have learned that my own privilege and its corresponding invisibility exacerbated/s my emotional pain and disconnection, while keeping me in ignorance of the ways I am complicit in creating pain for others.

Katz makes a compelling point about masculinity as performance. He shows how white, middle-class, suburban boys imitate black rappers who themselves imitate Italian gangsters in the movies. One of Kimmel's points is that masculinity is about constantly having to prove oneself.

The Mask You Live In, is a documentary about American masculinity. My upbringing and understanding of how to be in the world, as a privileged white girl and woman coming of age in the 1980s, was in many ways very similar to how that documentary sketches what boys are offered. I was brought up to suppress emotion and sensitivity. I was supposed to never show weakness and be "successful," which, in my milieu, was very much equivalent to what Kimmel describes as the "very specific construction" of the "generic man," which is, like Ford's characters, "a white middle-class entrepreneur."

Kimmel points out that a “version of white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity emerged as normative” and, from there, the normative became the normal. In other words, the experience of having to perform masculinity and always prove oneself is a function of culture; about maintaining privilege; and not limited to men.

A key point I take from Kimmel and Katz, is that masculinity is a performance performed to be safe, but the very need to perform creates lack of safety in an exhausting, self-perpetuating cycle.

In many ways, my performance art is about removing the mask of pretend okayness that I live in and doing the opposite of proving myself, i.e., the opposite of tough. I.e., vulnerable. (Not that I’m good at it. It works as an art piece, I’d say, partly because I’m shit at it.)

Indeed, a useful way to begin to understand the concept of vulnerability, I’ve learned, is to purposefully place yourself in a publicly vulnerable position in a culture where this way of being is so shameful it’s practically unthinkable.

Of course, LOTS OF PEOPLE understand lived, embodied, public vulnerability because through their bodies and/or circumstances they are marginalized by race, sexual orientation, gender non-conformity, poverty, disability, and/or etc.

Unfortunately, they must constantly fight for their voices to be heard because they are functionally taboo. So those whose lives and bodies and beings don’t represent masculinity or masculinity’s regimented standards of how to be or look are devalued. Beyond exhausting. (But also a lot of these people have community care, which is something the rest of the atomized, dominant culture does not.)

We observe at the Ada’itsx/Fairy Creek Blockade, that the most vulnerable people are the ones constantly putting themselves on the line. As Kelly Tatham writes in her recent rabble.ca article:

“As a white, cis, able-bodied person I am safe in society (or as safe as you can be as a woman living under patriarchal, colonial rule). When I leave Fairy Creek, I leave the front line. But Indigenous, Black, trans, and other peoples who are preyed upon by the white supremacist system do not share this privilege. Perhaps that is why they are the ones constantly holding down the front line, despite the repeated violence against their bodies. There is no safe society for them to return to.”

I use my privilege AND I have to fight for my voice to be heard. All these years, I have felt that my work is mostly directed to my white and privileged peers. Needless to say, they have not flocked to my shows. Lol. I’ve been an embarrassment to my family and my work literally exists on the fringe in fringe theatre festivals, which are lottery-based, which means there are no art-world/theatre/academic gatekeepers.

I don’t equate my struggle to that endured by non-white, less privileged people. But I am a disabled person living with a diagnosis of Stage 4 cancer, an illness I know I have because of my sensitivity to the damage and trauma caused by this culture. I make no money from my work as an artist and, indeed, can no longer hold a job. I am supported by my earning husband, who himself is tethered to that income source, whether he likes it or not, to support our family. (We’re the lucky ones.)

Doing this work, I have no status, except that of an artist on the margins. Letting go of or having no status in modern culture—patriarchy is all about status — is freeing in a way but it is also unsafe. Since starting this work, I’ve found it so weird that I have had to create a “show” and performance art practice to be authentic. That’s how unsafe I feel, personally, when I try to show up authentically in my “real life.” That’s a void accorded to me by “my culture.”

In the meantime, domination of the natural environment, domination of “labour” across the globe (I mean, billionaires, WTF?!), domination of women and anyone not quite masculine or high-status enough continues:

- The US Supreme Court just overturned Roe vs. Wade (a 50-year-old legal “victory” that should have been a cemented stepping stone for women’s rights but conservative groups have chipped away at it, and any number of equitable laws for women and queer people, for these last decades)
- Domestic abuse is the number one cause of injury among American females
- 1 in 3 women will be raped during their lifetime
- Every woman is a #metoo
- Trans-women of colour suffer the highest concentration of violence
- Men may kill their female partners at more than 20X the rate that women do but, still, men kill more men than women (US stats from Katz)
- Indeed ~75% of the victims of homicide (~95% of which are committed by men) are men **but men don’t seem to notice or feel the need for liberation from this masculinity-caused carnage**
- More people die every year from poverty and the effects of climate change than died in the Holocaust
- Industrial destruction of the natural world, that mostly benefits the already super-rich, continues at an exponential rate
- Rapidly escalating climate crisis

How long until this sinks in????!! **No one is safe.**

“That men remain unaware of the centrality of gender in their lives perpetuates the inequalities based on gender in our society” (Kimmel). Just as Kimmel observes that men are invisible to themselves, so is anyone who has never had much reason to question their entitlement.

Here are a couple of perfectly ordinary examples from our invisible culture of entitlement. I was 14 when my family went to Greece in 1976. It was my Greek father’s first trip back since he

had immigrated as a teenager. I was used to having hot baths and showers. So my Greek aunt, the one who lived with my old grandparents in a peasant home that still had a cellar built to hold animals; the one who made the cheese, slaughtered the goats, grew the vegetables and cooked; also gathered and chopped wood, started a fire and warmed up water for me. I watched her and thought nothing of it... for decades. I simply expected to have a shower.

I have also used the example of an Elizabeth Renzetti column in the Globe and Mail about Bashar al-Assad's British-born wife and her appalling behaviour as her husband waged war on his Syrian citizens: she went online shopping. I recall ads on the exact same page for several hundred dollar shoes and pricey crystal. The whole Western world (and our satellite consumerlands) is allowed to shop at the expense of the rest of humanity. Why do we get a socially sanctioned pass?

In my opinion, the biggest problem humans are facing is a world of there is no there there.
No connection=no accountability=no responsibility.

The there IS there, though.

We're just very well trained, through millennia of patriarchy not to look for it or look at it. It's why rape is still so invisible. Ohmygawd, besides the brutal and dismissive legal systems, how many women do you know that took forever to realize what happened to them was sexual assault? Lack of consent is embedded in our DNA.

Coupled with our disconnection from land and spirit, also a result of patriarchy, we don't even understand or have words for or have a relationship with "there."

But the struggle at Ada'itsx/Fairy Creek is VERY THERE.

These are the very very very last ancient forests. They exist. They are in danger.

These are the bodies of mostly young people putting themselves in the way of the last ancient trees being slaughtered. These are the Indigenous people, survivors of genocide, mostly young women and gender-nonconforming people, doing the MOST WORK, SUSTAINING THE MOST HARM. They exist. They are in danger.

And the forces against them can no longer remain so abstract. I can name some of them. Right off the top of my head.

They are:

- Teal Jones, the company that stands to make hundreds of millions to mostly benefit the Jones family who are ALREADY RICH
- Other deforestation companies, especially Timberwest (owned by the pension fund for the RCMP) and Western Forest Products whose employees and contractors have taken part in violence against forest protectors
- The RCMP who have committed atrocity after atrocity since their inception — and committed hundreds of illegal acts of violence and illegal arrests at Ada'itsx/Fairy Creek — and should be dismantled
- The BC and Canadian governments, whose patriarchal, colonial laws should be illegal and, which are, of course, illegitimate governments on stolen land.

The destruction of the earth is a crisis of modernity is a crisis of masculinity is a crisis of entitlement.

Is a crisis of pretty much EVERY SINGLE STRUCTURE AND SYSTEM that exists.

How are you? Fine?

Me? I never feel safe. But I keep trying to show up.

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Both Katz and Kimmel rightly give much credit to the decades of feminist/gender/race/queer studies work, conducted mostly by women, queer people, and other minority scholars/activists under often hostile circumstances, that they build upon. This is a reworking of a piece I wrote in 2014: www.humanbodyproject.org

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