



The GRASS
is GREENER
on MARS

Myra Ferrell is spearheading the MARS Project

under the CONCRETE

by Kyle Boggs

I'm worried about men. More to the point, I'm concerned about the way in which our culture's understanding of masculinity continues to subjugate women and further degrade the environment. This is, of course, nothing new.

Men have been oppressing women and systematically dismantling the natural world for thousands of years. Whether one attributes such behavior to religion, the development of nation-states, or the rise of economic systems, doesn't change the fact that power structures play a significant role in shaping our experience of the world. Further, root causes don't change the fact that patriarchal power structures degrade our ability to engage in meaningful healthy relationships and connect with the physical reality of the world around us. Finally, the history of oppression doesn't change the fact that we must do something about it.

Ani DiFranco hit the nail right on the head when she wrote, "women learn to be women and men learn to be men" in the song, "Letter to a John." She was, of course, not referring to gendered identity on an individual level. Ms. DiFranco is more appropriately referring to gendered identity on a larger social scale where gender becomes a series of roles we play, roles which represent and protect institutional order.

Therefore, when I flush out our culture's concept of masculinity, I am referring to the beliefs that shape the way men are expected to behave. While I could spend a significant amount of time discussing the ways in which "women learn to be women," I believe I would be avoiding the idea that concepts of masculinity constitute dominant cultural norms. And I believe it is "dominant cultural norms" which lead to the objectification and subjugation of women and the environment.

The news media, advertising, teachers, coaches, historians, parents, priests, and public figures, and many other outlets — which contribute to how men think about themselves —

create traditional masculine ideologies. Within each of these examples, masculinity is shaped by "subcultural influences" such as racial groups and socio-economic status — each of which carries a unique set of expectations.

Other key influences on masculinity are shaped by individual experiences. These experiences might reflect the way a man was raised, the type of parents he had, and the kind of masculinity played out by other men in his environment. Psychologist **R.D. Laing** makes clear in his work, *The Politics of Experience*, our experience of the world dictates our behavior. **If we can understand the way one experiences the world, we can begin to understand their actions.** Beyond actions, one's experience shapes their perception of the world and their role within a culture; therefore, experience is central to one's identity.

This semester, **Dr. Doreen E. Martinez**, from Northern Arizona University's Women's Studies Department, is teaching a class on masculinities called "Making Real Men." Though most colleges and universities in the country are not offering classes on the subject, Dr. Martinez believes "a class on masculinities has always been necessary." I certainly agree. Overt masculinity, as Dr. Martinez explains, is everywhere. "You literally can't escape it."

When considering the parts of the sum instead of the sum of the parts, it might not be easy to immediately see the negative affects of traditional masculinity. After all, people often joke about how men never ask for directions. More examples might include the colors men can and can't wear, the assumptions that men are naturally handy with tools, men are more aggressive than women, men don't show weakness, and men enjoy playing sports because they're naturally competitive. It is crucial to understand these are learned behaviors, and there is a difference between personality types and learned gendered behavior.

One of the prevailing cultural myths says

men are taught not to feel emotion. Dr. Martinez explains this myth is extremely inaccurate. "Of course men are taught to feel emotions," she explains, "however, they are taught specific *gendered* emotions" such as aggression. Men are taught from an early age to "toughen up," not to cry, and approach every situation "like a man." Basic psychology teaches us when emotions are bottled up, they come out in other ways. When men are taught not to show their pain and frustration, to provide one example, this suppression literally feeds the violence **(not to mention, heart attacks!)**.

"So what do you do with this pain and frustration? It has to go somewhere." It obviously comes out in other ways. "Men don't understand the levels of violence that is bred into them." The truth is, we live in a very violent culture. By violence, I am not necessarily talking about physical violence — the kind that draws blood, breaks bones, or inflicts pain, although that is certainly part of it.

Rather, I'd like to discuss the type of systematic violence that reinforces patriarchy and obedience to hierarchy. **Violence may more adequately be defined, quite simply, as the subjugation of people, either by another person or institution.** In our culture, the violence perpetrated by men against women is so pervasive, so embedded into our experience of the world it no longer feels like violence. It is, rather, accepted and fully rationalized as "human nature" or simply, "the way things are."

There is, however, nothing natural about rape and sexism. There is nothing in the chemical or biological make-up of male bodies making them inherently violent.

The latest statistics say one in six women in our culture will be raped in their lifetime. Another 19% will fend off rape attempts. Because these numbers are notoriously under-reported, the reality is much worse.

In fact, **Myra Ferrell** from the Northland

Family Help Center who spearheads "The MARS Project" (**Men Against Rape and Sexism**) at NAU, discovered "According to the US Department of Justice, fewer than 5% of completed and attempted rapes were reported to law enforcement officials." This is more than just an ephemeral or isolated problem. **If rape were considered a disease, the health department would surely refer to it as an epidemic.**

The MARS Project is a new organization to Northern Arizona University, although it was founded in 1995 by a former advocate of the Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education in Minnesota. "The original goal of MARS was to educate men about the relationship between rape and sexism."

Ms. Ferrell asserts that in order to extend the reach of the MARS project, it emphasizes the fact that "men play an important role in every aspect of the prevention of sexual violence." It has become very clear what hurts one sex, impacts the other. "For far too long," as Ms. Ferrell says, "sexual violence prevention has been a field driven by women." For far too long the affects of sexual violence have merely been bandaged and rebandaged.

If violence against women is to stop, however, it is absolutely crucial men be involved. Involvement does not imply complacent pacifism. "Martians" will undergo "bystander education," which encourages men to be active participants in educating others about rape and sexism. If a man, for example, tells a sexist joke that is degrading to women, it is the responsibility of "bystanders" to, as Ms. Ferrell states, "stand up and say: 'hey, you know that is not funny.'"

I would, of course, extend the definition of violence to include the natural world. In the same way the very existence of rape crisis hot-lines and domestic violence shelters indicate a very real social problem, the fact that environmental conservation exists as a "movement" implies something very wrong about the way we're living on the planet.

My dictionary defines "movement" as "a group of people working together to advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas." Therefore, it is obvious the environmental conservation movement is an idea that exists outside of conventional cultural concerns; it is, in fact, an "idea" of which people still need to be convinced. The environmental crisis we face today is unparalleled. The catastrophic doomsday events environmentalists often emphasize to get people's attention are not delusional, nor will they happen in some future time. The consequences of our way of life are very real and they are happening before our eyes.

Ninety percent of the large fish in the sea are gone. Seventy-eight percent of the world's old growth forests are gone. Phytoplankton populations are collapsing. On the surface, krill and plankton populations might not seem very important. The annihilation of these vital populations is, however, akin to pulling the rug out from under entire eco-systems. Furthermore, animals are going extinct every day at a rate faster than ever before. In the next couple decades, a quarter of all the earth's remaining nonhuman animals will be gone, **forever.**

If your empathy doesn't extend to the natural world, it's important I also emphasize we're killing ourselves. Every single river in the continental United States contains several different kinds of dangerous toxins. There is dioxin and other deadly chemicals found in woman's breast milk, and cancer is now the leading

cause of death. I could obviously go on and on.

It isn't just multi-national corporations, or chemical manufacturers, or logging companies, or over population — or even George Bush — killing the planet. Rather, the culprit it is a mindset of objectification and entitlement, a mindset refusing to acknowledge limits, placing the needs of the economic system above the needs of the natural world and those who inhabit it, both human and nonhuman.

Many eco-feminists have pointed out striking similarities between this mindset — which is killing the planet — and a mindset that rationalizes what Ms. Ferrell refers to as a "culture of rape," whereby the statistics surrounding rape, for example, are so normalized and rationalized they become acceptable, even expected. **Only until we stop identifying with and rationalizing violence, will we begin to stop it.** When a man subjugates a woman, he is not simply "being a guy." Similarly the destruction of entire eco-systems may not be rationalized as "developing natural resources."

The problem is men don't recognize their own privileges and entitlements. Phrases like "I'm just being a guy," as Dr. Martinez points out "has always been the rhetoric," and for a long time, such mindsets have excused and reinforced inexcusable behavior.

Dr. Martinez continues: "Men have adopted the script to such a degree they don't even recognize a script exists." But it does. Entitlement and objectification is reinforced by the way men experience the world.

If a man looks at a woman and sees an outlet for sexual gratification, he will perceive her — and therefore treat her — much differently than he would if he saw her for the absolute singularity of who she is. Similarly, if a man walks into a forest and sees "natural resources" and an opportunity to make money, he will perceive the forest — and therefore treat it — much differently than he would if he saw a living, thriving ecosystem.

To expand on an idea introduced to me by environmental activist and writer **Derrick Jensen**, when the word "resource" is used to describe trees and minerals, it literally means they exist for our use. If we perceive them as "resources," we will use them until they're gone. That is the explicit function of a "resource."

The literal definition of "entitlement" is, "to furnish with a right or claim to something." The fact that our culture's concept of masculinity teaches men entitlement is simply part of life is not up for dispute. Dr. Martinez further elaborates on these privileges: "men need to understand how institutionalized these entitlements are and how they are reflected in everything from law and economics, to the opportunities they receive."

Similarly, what of the fish in the sea? Were we entitled to them? The old growth forests? Do they exist for us to use, to destroy? The masculine power structures governing the decisions made in this culture also render a certain form of entitlement, as if the entirety of the planet is one big buffet for us to devour as we see fit. Violence against nature will continue as long as the exploitation continues, while violence against women will continue as long as our culture's concept of masculinity remains fully rationalized.

10 THINGS MEN CAN DO TO PREVENT GENDER VIOLENCE

1. Approach gender violence as a MEN'S issue involving men of all ages and socioeco-

nom, racial and ethnic backgrounds. View men not only as perpetrators or possible offenders, but as empowered bystanders who can confront abusive peers.

2. If a brother, friend, classmate, or teammate is abusing his female partner — or is disrespectful or abusive to girls and women in general — don't look the other way. If you feel comfortable doing so, try to talk to him about it. Urge him to seek help. Or if you don't know what to do, consult a friend, a parent, a professor, or a counselor. DON'T REMAIN SILENT.

3. Have the courage to look inward. Question your own attitudes. Don't be defensive when something you do or say ends up hurting someone else. Try hard to understand how your own attitudes and actions might inadvertently perpetuate sexism and violence, and work toward changing them.

4. If you suspect a woman close to you is being abused or has been sexually assaulted, gently ask if you can help.

5. If you are emotionally, psychologically, physically, or sexually abusive to women, or have been in the past, seek professional help NOW.

6. Be an ally to women who are working to end all forms of gender violence. Support the work of campus-based women's centers. Attend "Take Back the Night" rallies and other public events. Raise money for community-based rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters. If you belong to a team or fraternity, or another student group, organize a fundraiser.

7. Recognize and speak out against homophobia and gay-bashing. Discrimination and violence against lesbians and gays are wrong in and of themselves. This abuse also has direct links to sexism (e.g. the sexual orientation of men who speak out against sexism is often questioned, a conscious or unconscious strategy intended to silence them. This is a key reason few men do so).

8. Attend programs, take courses, watch films, and read articles and books about multicultural masculinities, gender inequality, and the root causes of gender violence. Educate yourself and others about how larger social forces affect the conflicts between individual men and women.

9. Don't fund sexism. Refuse to purchase any magazine, rent any video, subscribe to any Web site, or buy any music that portrays girls or women in a sexually degrading or abusive manner. Protest sexism in the media.

10. Mentor and teach young boys about how to be men in ways that don't involve degrading or abusing girls and women. Volunteer to work with gender violence prevention programs, including anti-sexist men's programs. Lead by example.

— Jackson Katz, jacksonkatz.com

For more information on the MARS project or to become involved, contact Myra Ferrell at the Northland Family Help Center: (928) 233-2202. Or send an email to: marsproject@nau.edu [yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) ●

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