

## Culture



**Brian PRONGER, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992; 305 pages. \$19.95 (paper)**

Blye Frank

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Brian PRONGER, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992; 305 pages. \$19.95 (paper).

By Blye Frank  
Mount Saint Vincent University

Brian Pronger disrupts and unsettles "received definitions" from the hegemonic gender and sexual discourse which has prescribed a complex world of sport and sexuality as simple to give us a rich interpretation of "life on the field" (and in the locker room, including in the shower). In asking us to think differently about how we think about men, sexuality and sport, Pronger rejects what are often considered the foundational truths of the gender and sexual regime, often arising out of theories on identity and role, and asks us to welcome the irony and ecstasy of the homoerotic paradox of gay men's masculinity. Clearly recognizing that gendered and sexual boundaries, like all boundaries, only materialize in social interaction, Pronger shifts our focus from the "real" to the "discourses of the real," those myths of our culture that are appropriated by each of us in our daily activities.

Based on open-ended interviews with thirty-four men (all except two of whom were self-identified as gay) with broadly based athletic experiences, this book is adequate in its contestation and disruption of much of past theoretical works which, like all theory, analytically fix, delineate and attempt to contain what is actually not containable: a fluidity of pluralistic, diverse, contradictory and overlapping ideas and practice in the lived world of men, sport, and their sexualities.

Pronger suggests that the goal of his book is to offer an interpretation of the ordinary day-to-day gay and athletic experience through the perspective of homosexual men. I think he reaches his goal rather well. With epistemological essentialism giving way to informative local narratives, the situated knowledge, from gay voices not often heard in the "authoritarian" heterosexual voice of sport discourse, makes visible the fluidity and dynamic interpretations that gay men give to their lives. Using the notion of gay "sensibility," Pronger asks us to see defining oneself as homosexual and heterosexual as

modes of being in the world, fluid ways of perceiving and interpreting oneself. He would have us believe that sexuality is not a drive but an ability to know. He suggests that gay men "having paradoxical intuitions about the myth of gender while being in the midst of an overwhelmingly orthodox world . . . can respond to these intuitions by viewing the world in three ways" (pp.8-9). The triad of gay sensibility which Pronger describes, in what is seemingly an overly prescribed way, involves: 1) de-emphasizing the impact of intuition on one's life and living within the orthodox sphere as much as possible; 2) grasping the irony of the paradox; or 3) seeing the world in the context of the authority of the myths that are the origin of the paradox. He suggests that depending on a multiplicity of influences in their lives, homosexual men will employ these sensibilities exclusively and in various combinations.

In the end, I recommend this book. It is not a simple "retreading" of the present discourse on men and sport adding to the theoretical layering of an already totalizing and universalizing "cover," a cover that has obscured the messiness of men's lives in the arena: the contradictions, tensions and confusions, including their sexualities. By expanding the boundaries, Pronger provides us with new glimpses into what we "knew" was already "there": a variability of sexual forms, assumptions, beliefs, ideologies and practice, as well as a glimpse into the human agency which both constitutes and governs masculinity and sexuality. However, at the same time that he shifts the boundaries, Pronger tends to return to the very essentialism and determinism of gender and sexuality that he argues against. "To be a homosexual man is to have a special intuitive interpretation of the myths of our culture" (p.8). In addition, he creates the "sex-splits" in a way they do not exist in our daily practice: almost as if heterosexuality and homosexuality were mutually exclusive practices, with gay men on the top of the dyad because of their essentialist nature for knowing (which, by the way, is also less sexist). If Pronger is correct in his analysis of homosexuality and athletics, we may be able to anticipate great accomplishments from gay men in sport with their special ability "to know" and the resulting power that they possess to subvert the orthodox gender myth in its challenge of patriarchy. We look forward to the changes.