



In discussions of gay male sexuality, a common question posed to gay male couples is “so, who is the man in the relationship?” This question is problematic for a number of reasons: the misogyny inherent to the idea of a ‘man’ who rules the relationship and a ‘woman’ who is led or the fraught implication of the man on the bottom (what this question is often pointing towards) is somehow ‘womanly’ for accepting penetration, but the sexual politics baked into the question and others along the same line are hard to brush off as just a homophobic and misogynistic non-sequitur. What about sex between cisgender men suggests a deeper struggle for power? Most importantly, in what ways do gay men interact with this idea of power within their own sexual relationships?

This question is one that Robert Mapplethorpe explored in his many photos of sadomasochistic sex. Through this lens of the power of sexuality, we can see Mapplethorpe’s photos as not an answer but another perspective, one through the camera’s lens, with which we can view power dynamics between gay men. Combined with the writings of Michel Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality*, and the article *Is the Rectum a Grave?* By Leo Bersani, we can begin to form an idea of the role power plays between gay men, and how the crux of power is much more fluid than penetrator and penetrated.

At this point, According to Foucault, we can view power in sex not through the idea of “a group of institutions or mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state...” nor through the power one social group has over another. Rather, we see

power as a fluid state of being, one that is affirmed and re-affirmed from multiple axes.¹

This concept of the fluidity of power is one that is crucial to this reading of Mapplethorpe's work: power is not something that ever stands still.

In Leo Bersani's *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, we see an interpretation of power that relies upon an idea of position, both literal and in the sense of a power dynamic. As Bersani states, "...it is also true that being on top can never be just a question of a physical position – either for the person on top or for the one on the bottom."² I would like to focus on the phrasing never *just* be. In this reading, being on top is about sexual position, but there is another element that goes beyond simple physicality. Bersani's analysis of sexual dynamics explores the idea of power in several ways, with particular focus being on the fact that powerlessness may not be something that should be avoided, but rather allowed a space in the lives of gay men.

In Mapplethorpe's *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, we can begin to see the shape that power takes in Mapplethorpe's larger body of work. One man in the photo, Brian Ridley, sits forward in an armchair with his gaze fixed towards the camera. His open posture and spread legs reveal that his ankles, wrists, and neck are all connected by a series of chains and shackles that loop around his leather-bound form. Lyle Heeter holds the end of this chain, resting on the side of the armchair with legs crossed and wielding a riding crop that

1 Michel Foucault, "Methods," in *The History of Sexuality* (Penguin Books, 2020), pp. 92-102.

2 Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 216. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

he presses to the inside of the arm of the chair. Heeter also stares towards the camera, though his Muir cap obscures his view and his shadow is cast on the wall behind Ridley.

Despite the clear elements of sadomasochism in the photo, the room the two men inhabit is not a dungeon nor bedroom. Instead, the room is furnished almost extravagantly, with a glass-top table held up by an array of antlers besides them and a variety of small knick-knacks: a vase on the left-side shelf or a small table clock on the table. The room resembles a wealthy person's lounge or living room more than a room where you would find BDSM dynamics being played out. Behind the armchair that Ridley sits in is a window with curtains drawn, revealing that the two men are exposed both through the view of the camera lens and through the window.

Here, we can begin to understand these three works in conjunction with one another. More specifically, we can see the conversation that Mapplethorpe's works have with Foucault's and Bersani's. Mapplethorpe's work does not necessarily reject Bersani's, nor does it necessarily exclusively treat Foucault's reading of power as true. It does, however, at least speak to the fluidity mentioned before in the reading of Foucault. Power in Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, and by extension the sexual relationships of the men depicted, never settles. In *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, the composition of the photo rejects a simple reading of who is in control even through the common visual language of BDSM. Ridley is the one in chains, but his posture as wide and open opposes that of his dominant, Heeter

who seems to hide behind his cap and keeps his body closed off to the view of the camera, of Mapplethorpe, of the viewer.

In relation to Bersani's discussion of physical position being a question not only of physicality, this photo in many ways supplements that: there is no sexual act occurring in this photo, yet we can understand implicitly that the relationship between these two men involves plays of power. Where it diverges is the fact that this power is evenly distributed between two men. When Bersani speaks of the loss that he views of as inherent in passive sex, this loss of sight of the self,³ the question of power in an S&M relationship only helps to complicate matters. Is a submissive entirely powerless, with the ability to use a safeword, with the measures in place to ensure that they can end a scene as needed? Is the dominant truly the one who holds all the power when these scenes rely on the fact that to dominate, it requires someone who is acting with equal force by submitting? As we can see through these photos and the others that will be discussed, power in sex is not something that exists purely in the act of penetration nor is it something that ever rests on one person. The shattering of the self becomes a mutual act, one that requires both parties to enact force upon each other.

This push and pull is not exclusive to just this photo, either. In the untitled 1978 photo for *Son of Drummer* magazine, we see two figures in leather fetish gear, one on his knees

3 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", 222.

with a chain that connects to clamps on his nipples, and a figure above who holds onto that psuedo-leash. In this photo, the wave-like metaphor is almost literal as both men are leaning back slightly, both are moving away from each other but at the same time, applying pressure to one another through the chain that connects them. The figure on his knees is not powerless, he is just as capable of moving the one above him forward, bringing them closer together. As author Richard Meyer notes in *Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography*: “And indeed even the photograph’s s/m roles appear reversible since the models are similarly outfitted for sex (both sport tit-clamps, for example) and appear, as far as one can tell, to be nearly identical.)”⁴ Meyer uses the term “erotic reversibility” to describe this, the way in which the roles in Mapplethorpe photos are often so open to this fluctuating readings of the power dynamics within.

Another photo that Meyer analyzes is Mapplethorpe’s 1979 *Elliot and Dominick*. In the photo, Dominick is suspended upside down through a largely unseen apparatus of chains and rope, while Elliot holds both his own and Dominick’s crotch. Both men stare forward at the camera, gaze playing another powerful role in the dispersal of power. Even despite Dominick’s position, he is no less aware of the camera and the viewer’s eyes resting back on him. In this case, we can see the fluctuation of power both as it relates to the subjects but the gaze of the viewer of the photography. In Foucault’s reading, power is

4 Meyer, Richard. “Imagining Sadomasochism: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Masquerade of Photography.” *Qui Parle* 4, no. 1 (1990): 62–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685907>.

something that does not and cannot exist just between two people but is rather a complex entanglement of forces in which there is no exteriority⁵ to power.

In the same way that the figures of the photograph have no exteriority to power, the photographs themselves hold no exteriority to the plays of power of the world around them. This sense of push and pull is often part of readings of Mapplethorpe's work, both celebratory and more critical, the latter of which we can see from Glenn Ligon in his *Notes on the Margin of the 'Black Book'* or Kobena Mercer's critical view in *Skin Head Sex Thing*, both of which focus on the racial politics of Mapplethorpe's works with a particular focus on the black male nudes that make up Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*.

Mercer's account often focuses on an idea that he describes as mutuality, the way in which Mapplethorpe both inhabits privilege as a white male while also acknowledging his identity as a gay man.⁶ This mutuality plays a large part in Mercer's interpretation of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* and in his explanation of his own feelings of ambivalence towards the work. This ambivalence seems to inhabit a similar place as this push and pull of power, an acknowledgment that things are being both taken and given in Mapplethorpe's depictions of the black male form. Mapplethorpe's photography often uses imagery that speaks to stereotypes of black male sexuality in which the black man exists only as a sexual object for white consumption, in particular noticeable with his photo *Man in a Polyester*

5 Michel Foucault, "Methods," in *The History of Sexuality* (Penguin Books, 2020), 95.

6 Kobena, Mercer. "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." (1989): 186-220.

Suit of a man's penis hanging out of his pants with no depiction of the subject's face.

However, as Mercer readily admits, this push also comes with the allure of the positive depiction of the black body as beautiful and admirable through the camera's lens. As he states later on in the paper, "The photographs can confirm a racist reading as easily as they can produce an anti-racist one."⁷

This is to say that there is no objective truth in either of these readings, but that doesn't mean they are both false by extension. They can share a space within this interpretation of Mapplethorpe's work, similarly to how these readings of power can do the same. Power as it is depicted in the photography of Mapplethorpe does not speak to polar opposites, power as something you either have or do not, but the gradient of possibilities that exist within sexual relationships to describe who holds power, in what contexts, and by what definition of power. In this way, we can see Mapplethorpe in his relationship to Bersani and Foucault's discussions of sexual power not as someone who fully inhabits any space that those scholars carved out in their readings. To reference a question asked in the first paragraph of this paper, "In what ways do gay men interact with this idea of power within their own sexual relationships?", we can see that the question is one that refuses to be answered, not because there is no answer, but because there are too many answers to ever fully account for.

7 Ibid.