

Adonis Mirror



6/17/2005

On “Pleasure Activism” [sic]

By Richard Leader

After I first managed to get *Adonis Mirror* up and running, whipped into some semblance of shape, I found myself asking, “now what?” Making friends and influencing people—gently anyway—has never been my forte, so the world of public relations is a daunting one to me. Thus, I decided to start small. Before venturing into email campaigns targeting people far higher up the food chain than myself, and those letters of mine still remain unanswered, I chose to advertise the journal in more parochial arenas such as the public forums hosted by Yahoo.com. Of the two groups purportedly dedicated to pro-feminism, “Feminist_Men,” seemed to be the better as it was not entirely grounded in the mock-humanist ethic (a favorite of Liberal misogynists everywhere) that always trumps actual feminist concerns, something the alternative group was actually founded upon.

Posting a brief announcement of *Adonis Mirror’s* existence and a link to “First Blood,” I was welcomed by the host, Jim Salisbury, and also greeted by Michael Flood, the proprietor of XYonline.net who said he would forward my message to two other lists he participates in, “profem” and “menagainstviolence.” I also met Rick Seelhoff, someone I had conversed with online before, several years ago. It was an auspicious beginning, although not one that would last.

The group as a whole was and is dominated by the presence of a single individual, one Alexis Long, who posts under the email handle of “bi-gendered@yahoo.com” (another address of “bonobo@” is visible but truncated), who relentlessly posts news briefs to the group, drawn from whatever sexism-as-entertainment male news-portal, such as Fark.com, had uncovered and offered up to its audience on that given day. Of hundreds of such posts, few were delivered with any sort of commentary by Long, although each was accompanied by a signature-slash-advertisement for Long’s website, PleasureActivism.org.

I took special exception to one of Alexis Long's posts, a simple quotation and hyperlink without comment, forwarding people to an article called "Small Chested Women: Unite and Be Proud" written by a college student at Arizona State University. While the article was perhaps appropriate to a "Pleasure Activism" website and vaguely dealt with gender issues, it was not suitable—especially without careful criticism from the get go—for a pro-feminist one: first in that its goal of equal-opportunity objectification by the male-gaze is problematic on its own, but that the article itself was not, in fact, news. Women, especially young college women, have been forced to take on the role of sex educators since men have continuously shirked any and all responsibility for their sexual actions, leaving females to foot the bill. When women enter college publications they are routinely shoehorned into that same function there, a thankless and unrewarding one, as even when they get into trouble with conservatives and make the national lime-light it is often their male editor who gets to make the appeals to "free speech" while debating the furrow-browed priest of the week on FOX News. When these women's sexual reporting in print turns salacious, the stories are often picked up by the men of the internet—their words taken far a field of their original audience—and this ASU student's work being passed around was equally part of that dynamic, the male-gaze itself.

My response to Long, in full, was:

OK, you read Fark.com. We get it. We really do. And if we want to, we can go there and read it ourselves. It's not beyond our capabilities!

Far be it from me to speak up—fuck that, I'm the one who always speaks up—but the wide variety of your reposts here seem to be violating the spirit of the group.

Yes, 20 year old women write about sex for college newspapers. This seems to benefit them far less

than the men who to make them doing so a fucking event at the national level. I'm sorry, but this is not news and the only reason it became news was because men have a vested interest in promoting women's speech when it aligns so closely to their own proclivities. They don't promote women's speech when it doesn't. (Hence in all your "pleasure activism" [sic] you don't seem to quote much Sheila Jeffreys)

So yes, let's objectify women of all body types and call it pro-feminism.

Or not.

So knock it off already. Your orgasm politics are tired and useless.

RL

For the trouble, I received a letter from Jim Salisbury saying that the message violates the terms of the group and would not be published. I wrote back and explained my position to him, that I thought he was making a mockery of the feminist concept of "safe-space" —where now unruly criticism of a sexist post is more threatening than sexism itself—and expounded my take on various issues that prevented me from editing my message just to converse with someone, Alexis Long, that I would likely find no joy in conversing with. He replied amicably (he is a likeable person although, to be blunt, I suspect he has not thought critically about many feminist issues) and we left it at that; subsequently I stopped participating in the group. However, my message was a needed one and I am afraid that I let my pride get in the way of what was necessary: some response was required and my refusal to jump through the necessary hoops at that time did little for 'the cause.' Part of my argument regarding "safe-space" with

Salisbury had to do with the “pleasure activism” component of Alexis Long’s posting: while reticent to post original material to the group, Long has no problem setting up an atmosphere conducive to the bashing of radical feminists.

On February 5, 2005 Long posted an excerpt of an article by Nina Hartley at *CounterPunch* entitled “Thus I Refute Chyng Sun,” a response to an anti-pornography article written by Dr. Chyng Sun. The catfight dynamic was certainly exploited by the misogynist editors of *CounterPunch* (can you imagine a male writer titling a piece “Thus I Refute Stephen Hawking” and an editor not dropping it or translating it into something more sensible?) and it was one that Long wanted to capitalize on, too, at long last making a brief dictum of “...thoughts, comments, criticisms, anyone?” While the two men who responded were hardly John Stoltenberg when it came to their pro-feminism, and that is perhaps putting it far more charitably than they deserve, both were still somewhat apprehensive of Hartley’s polemic; irritated that they did not take the bait as intended, this had the effect of drawing Long out of the self-imposed shell and coming clean with an actual agenda, the promotion of ‘sex work’ and its industry. The claims made were hardly original, that many occupations are dangerous, degrading, or exploitive (so why single out pornography and prostitution?) and that there are lots of self-avowed “feminists” engaged in such business who feel validated by it; in fact, Long even told a story of one particular friend who evidently believes that “many of her clients are really nice guys who treat her with respect, honour her for the work she does, and who she enjoys seeing: one such guy is now her partner.” I had informed Salisbury that I doubted Dr. Chyng Sun would find the group very “safe,” being that the verbal gang-rape of her that was being promoted by Liberal-men everywhere had infested it and that his moderation was to blame for that.

On March 16, 2005 Rick Seelhoff posted a link to an article by Robert Jensen (who is, for better or worse, currently the most celebrated pro-feminist writer around) entitled “The

Cruel Edge” which was then published at Stangoff.com, a piece that was previously pared down to appear in the Spring 2004 edition of *Ms. Magazine*. Alexis Long again tried leading the horses to water, stating objections—but not did not at that time elaborate beyond the fact that those objections existed—and asking “aren’t there other people on the list who have problems with aspects of this article?” Again, there were responses but no real takers. But neither did these pro-feminist men stand up to Long and vehemently disagree.

It seems that part of their reticence was the result of the ambiguous gender that Long presents to the forum, where Long occasionally puts on male and female “hats” to make declarations. This amounts to presenting as ‘more woman’ when it comes to issues of privilege, stopping the other male participants from disagreeing as strenuously as they might otherwise, and regularly co-opting the plight that intersexed people face by subtly claiming that identity (message 274: “So what about people, such as myself, who are both male /and/ female—do you think it’s appropriate for us to try to play leadership roles?” [in the feminist movement]) when Long deems it convenient, something egregious that many ‘male-to-female’ transsexual and transgendered individuals often attempt. Indeed, Long claims to still have a penis and complains bitterly of other transfolk who see such people as “mere transvestites”—but is careful to make it only where and when the physiological admission will not backfire and cause a loss of sympathy or authority, rather than the rewarding of it by an audience.

While Long was perhaps upfront in an introductory message early (October 29, 2004) in the group’s history, it is improbable that later participants immediately rushed to check out such previous postings and would likely fall for the hedging that would be done presently, leaving many pro-feminist people “raised to be men” to think that they owed some sort of circumspection to this individual not much different from themselves, who once wrote:

i thought I'd quickly introduce myself: I'm Alexis; I'm 30, transgendered (born male, now identify as both male and female), bisexual, and live in Melbourne, Australia. I've identified as feminist for most of my life, despite much opposition from women who claim that i /can't/ call myself 'feminist', but at best only /pro-/feminist. I strongly disagree. For me, being a feminist is a core part of who i am.

For the record, Jim Salisbury is in agreement with that take on men calling themselves feminists, despite any objections from females raised to be women (he claims to 'respectfully disagree' with their position, which he feels free to ultimately disregard), so Alexis Long was hardly out of place in the venue; still, the group's participants treated—or were forced to treat, due to Salisbury's censorship of messages like mine—Long with kid gloves, as if Long had some more authentic claim to that feminism than they themselves, something that would come back to haunt them.

On June 13, 2005 Rick Seelhoff again posted a link to an article that was critical of pornography. This time, it was Rob Horning's "Inefficient Intimacy" at Popmatters.com. It was enough to set off Alexis Long, although evidently not enough to stop subjecting the Yahoo.com group to spam messages. Instead, Long complained to women, on June 16th, under the handle of "Hierodule" at a Livejournal.com community called "Feminist_Rage." Livejournal's feminist communities have been bifurcated by this "rage" phenomenon, where posters upset by a barrage of male critics in the main forum create an alternate one with a "rage" designation; being that they do not want to take momentum away from the primary site, they only allow so-called 'rants' in the rage-versions, prohibiting more scholarly or reasoned arguments from being presented. This results in the familiar divide where men are allowed to keep

'logic,' or what passes for it, in the domain that they can effectively rule through force of numbers and sheer persistence of bad behavior. Long appealed to this group:

i'm on an email list for feminist and pro-feminist men, and what i've noticed is this: there seems to be a distinct lack of interest on this list in issues other than pornography. When i've posted about women being harrassed online, i've got no response; when i've posted about how women are increasingly seeking breast enlargement to "boost their self esteem" i've got no response; when i've posted my thoughts about sex-segregated schooling, i've got no response. But apart from one guy, most of the time, the only things the guys post (when they post at all) is anti-porn stuff, in which 'pornography', 'pornographers' and women's sexuality are homogenised. (i consider myself to be a 'pornographer' in the sense that i occasionally create "sexually explicit material designed to sexually arouse", but i have big problems with being put in the same category as people who produce porn that isn't based on consensual sex between adults.)

So to those guys on that list, i say, LISTEN UP. Some, or even most (but NOT all—deal with it) porn, may well contribute to violence against women. But how about you actually start DEALING with the PLETHORA of OTHER things that involve the abuse and control of women? Like the so-called 'beauty' industry, and its collaborators, the mass media? Women and girls are constantly subjected to a barrage of rubbish telling them, directly or indirectly, that they're worthless unless they modify their bodies to an 'appropriate' :-/ size by going through surgery and dieting. Women and girls are constantly subjected to a barrage

of heteronormative rubbish: that they are 'best suited' to particular roles or work, that they're worthless unless they find the 'right man', are a 'good wife', and raise children.

i say to the guys on the list in question, how about you stop IGNORING this stuff and actually start CONFRONTING it and DISCUSSING it? Or would that be too hard, because that may force you to confront things you'd rather not think about, like heteronormativity, and your own daily contribution to its reinforcement? Tough. Patriarchy isn't just expressed through porn. You need to start dealing with patriarchy WHEREVER it appears - otherwise, stop calling yourself 'pro-feminist'.

This is a gross mischaracterization. While Rick Seelhoff's two whole posts on pornography may well represent a keen personal interest on his part in the issue, taking note of it in this manner is a factual reversal: Alexis Long wanted us talking about pornography, wanted *nothing more* than it and even implored us to do so, but is now upset that it was not done—and I am going to drop the pronoun bomb now—on *his* terms. Secondly, "Feminist_Men" is indeed a rather lousy forum, pathetic even, with not a lot of genuine posting going on. However, pretending that the reams of automated news briefs (and it is impossible to tell how many separate newsgroups and communities that they are sent to in unison; Long even claims to broadcast them to cell phones) constitutes a real effort at contribution by Long is equally disingenuous. The group's other participants do not exist merely to respond gratefully to any spam that he drops at their doorstep without any comments of his own, something that is widely regarded as a transgression of online etiquette. Indeed, Long is hardly a verbose personality or a font of feminist wisdom:

Pleasureactivism.org, as I write this, itself only has barely over 3,000 words of original content displayed on it despite having existed for nearly a full year (this response to such nonsense weighs in at nearly 4,000 even after quotations are subtracted).

While it is hard to disagree with most of what Long posted at "Feminist Rage" on its own terms, ignoring its accuracy given the context described above, most of the damning evidence is clearly supplied only in support of the principal complaint; that is, the "homogenisation" of pornography, pornographers, and women's sexuality, the last of which is purposefully constructed to paint himself into that group as a primary claimant. Thus Long is included in the social group that the other male participants of "Feminist_Men" are oppressive towards; this is something that Long's use of "pro-feminist" is also designed to highlight. Indeed, in a separate posting on his personal journal ("Hierodule"), that "pro-feminist" was repeated:

i've recently posted a rant in the feminist_rage community about pro-feminist men who don't seem to be interested in discussing any women's issues apart from those related to porn. It will be interesting to see what sort of comments i get about it.

A third-party left a reply asking "If their only issue is porn and not the larger scope, can they really be considered feminists?" to which Long responded, "Or indeed, even pro-feminist? A good question," making absolutely sure the "pro" remained firmly attached to the "feminist." All this despite Jim Salisbury deliberately naming the group "Feminist_Men" and his charter declaring:

Most importantly I want to do what I can to help encourage men to use the word "feminist" to describe themselves—and then to try to live up to it. The order

might seem backwards, but I don't think so. Psychologically, I'm a firm believer in the "fake it 'til you make it" theory.

So even though Alexis Long refuses to abdicate 'down' to pro-feminist himself, "feminist" being some intrinsic portion of his identity, and neither the founder of the Yahoo Group nor any of the participants who agreed to his terms of service necessarily abdicated thusly themselves, when rhetorically convenient, it is necessary for Long—and for many such males who are more attached to finding womanhood than personhood—to 'other' those people in order to deny his own responsibility and privilege through finger pointing; in this case, using "pro-feminist" to describe everyone but himself. Indeed, he is even 'more woman' than the women who have objected to him doing so, freely admitting to having taken on that feminist appellation despite their objections, and is now owning the label in a way that he permits no one else.

One avowed pro-feminist posting at "Feminist_Rage" took personal insult to Long's condemnation (Long then pointed out that he was only talking about the pro-feminists at 'that forum,' which went unnamed due to Livejournal's terms of service—an attempt on their part to reign in personal attacks by one group on another—although Long did promise to email the location of the offenders to an interested party) and attempted to link to examples of pro-feminist men doing good things, accidentally linking to first to OneAngryGirl.net, apologizing, and then finally supplying a link to Michael Flood's website at XYonline.net. Long was gleeful: "Thanks, i know Michael well—he's actually put a link to a group i created, called Pleasure Activism Australia, on that very Web site;" despite the name-dropping, no mention was made of Flood ironically belonging to that same offensive pro-feminist group in question.

Long continued, again making it appear that he is 'more woman' than the person he was conversing with, "i think other people have *no* right to tell me or other women *what* sexual explicit material i produce or consume, as long as it involves consensual sex between adults. i feel that people who try to ban *all* porn—as though it's a homogenous entity!—*are* wrong." [emphasis original] The pro-feminist was inevitably flustered by this and made a grave error, asking Long to "calm down," which was precisely the opening he was looking to exploit: "Finally: you might like to reconsider telling me to 'calm down', given this community is FEMINIST_RAGE." Three women—presumably anyway, as the second of which lists PleasureActivism.org as a home-site in her profile and the third is an advocate of Camp Trans, a group dedicated to allowing males into womyn-only space—descended upon the pro-feminist:

Dear Pro-Feminist Man,

Could you not tell women to calm down, please?
Your privilege is showing.

Best,
Woman

Hmmmm ok, so you've decided to respond to this thread rather than the other ones that actually ask questions of you...that's pretty predictable. I've seen that happen so many times that it's no longer funny. Is it that you cannot answer the questions asked of you? Is it that you can't admit that you can't answer the questions? Is it because you don't want to?

Do you have any idea how condescending it is that you tell someone to calm down in a feminist *rage*

[emphasis original] community? Why don't you just add 'you're hormonal and over-emotional' to your 'calm down' comment because that is all that is missing. [note: this poster, with the Pleasure Activism.org link and whom Alexis Long claims as a sex partner in his own journal, likely knew full well that Long has not, does not, and will not ever menstruate, and yet took advantage of the existence of such sexism against the female-bodied through this rhetoric to slant public opinion against one male in favor of another]

Reading your responses has allowed me to remain affirmed in my belief that self-identified "pro-feminist" men have nothing to offer the world

Beyond just playing both sides of the gender fence, having taken to claiming whatever identity is most expedient at any given time (and surrounding himself with an small entourage that will surreptitiously help him do this so fewer people ask questions) Alexis Long has played two other sides for his own benefit and that of his "pleasure activism." This is a sadomasochistic game where Long has managed to 'top' both men and women, the first in an elaborate stunt to push pro-feminist men towards the sex industry and increasingly separate them from radical feminist women, and failing that, to use the attempt as fodder to push the latter—the so-called liberal feminists—away from pro-feminist men as well, so that he can stand alone with them as some sort of rare supernatural figure.

Indeed, males make the best women: literally, we invented the gender classes and policed them and now make them malleable when it is at last to our advantage. Even the Goddesshead of Queer Theory, Judith Butler, admitted that an epiphany for her was seeing how much more a drag queen seemed to 'own' femininity than she herself did; something

echoed in a new pop-feminist saying that takes that up a notch in that "fabulous should be its own gender." Now, males even own feminism more than females and many, like Alexis Long, want to ensure that it stays that way by demonizing pro-feminist males, ones that are far more honest than themselves. They need 'other' males to be not just men, but M-E-N, in order for themselves to be more believable, more authentic, and more 'entitled' as W-O-M-E-N.

Many pro-feminists allow this to happen through the belief that they are in fact more privileged than trans-persons and should thus defer to them. Although this is itself a faulty notion, it is perhaps a genuinely benevolent one; at least some of the time, anyway, as many males involved in the 'punk' scene seem to enjoy the mock-chivalric relationship set up with those purportedly more 'genderqueer' than themselves: this means that 'male-to-female' persons will treat them 'like-men' in return for their treatment of them 'like-women,' a contract that is infinitely regressive and sexist for all parties involved, and harmful even to those of us who are not.

Other pro-feminists allow this to happen through sheer stupidity. One of Long's acolytes, his young sex-partner who worked to put the hammer down on that male poster at "Feminist_Rage," showed up at the "Feminist_Men" group at Yahoo.com and introduced herself as a "pleasure activist." She responded to one of Long's news posts on a bladed-tampon that women can use to combat rape; the newcomer argued that it was an interesting but ultimately futile idea. (Interestingly, and it might undermine her 'agency' to say so, but she used certain elements such as 'bolding' with slash-marks that are fairly unique to Long's own writing.) Jim Salisbury welcomed her to the forum, agreed with her remarks, and stated "I would be interested in hearing more about 'pleasure activism' and how it's working for equality," as if he had not noticed the hundreds of links to the PleasureActivism.org website that he had personally signed off on over the past year.

But what of this “pleasure activism?” On the subject, I will again defer to Sheila Jeffreys (“How Orgasm Politics has Hijacked the Women’s Movement”). People long for validation and, for most, sexual validation is the easiest to obtain. It is also the shortest lived, the most tenuous, and ultimately the least rewarding when it comes to leverage for political power. Despite what the average college educated urban-professional these days might recall about the Lysistrata (even those who participated in The Lysistrata Project.org and conducted readings of it to protest the invasion of Iraq), they fail to remember that it was a comedy and that the Greeks considered females to be the inherently lustful sex unable to overcome base-urges (taken as biological proof of female inferiority that translated into real-world oppression), something that made the very idea of the play all the more farcical. Alexis Long, in his argument with that pro-feminist in the “Feminist_Rage” community, stated wistfully that:

Well, [pornography] means ‘whore writing’. Just because whores are disrespected now, doesn’t mean that that was always the case, as i imagine you know. In ancient Greece, there were three classes of sex workers; iic, the hetarai [sic] were very much respected.

Never mind that for every Diotima (just as there are Nina Hartleys and Dr. Susan Block’s today) there were tens of thousands of women who were powerless and forced into the occupation, subtly or not; this “respect” being a whitewashing of historical truth, a truth that can still be seen in the images on vases that are not generally shown in text books of old, toothless prostitutes with sagging breasts fellating the men of the symposium; images designed to impress men as humor. Similarly, Long takes the name of “Hierodule” (holy slave) for himself, referring to various sects of priestesses who some-

times served as ritual prostitutes throughout various cultures, their “respect” and freedom came at a great price—as it always does for females in patriarchy—where they could be drowned or even buried alive for their indiscretions. Their existence was not an honor to the feminine-divine, but the antithesis of female humanity. Yet the word itself is now being ‘reclaimed’ by someone who is male and was privileged as such at birth.

The ‘sex positive’ movement in general has a substantial interest (a perverse one considering how harmful patriarchy has been throughout history) in eking out some form of validation by rooting around the past for archetypes, examples, and language to impart some bit of gravitas to the less than inspiring fact that they are ultimately about friction. Thus so-called sexologists make good money off of their dirty-dictionaries, buyers less concerned with what their sexual actions signify politically, but with their own political station vis-à-vis those who are ignorant of such various cultural legacies or who are less able to yoke them to their own identities in a convincing manner.

Etymologies for sexual terms and expressions are often spurious or tenuous; the one for “masturbation” is no exception, the most popularized but not necessarily the most scholarly attaching a Greek word for “penises” to the Latin for “disturb.” The runner-up identifies a synonym, “manustupration,” suggesting “to defile by hand.” However, there are a number of words in ancient Greek that might, at first blush (and many students translating in classes do), seem just as likely an inspiration: *μαλακιζομαι* (one of the contemporary Greek favorites), “to soften” or perhaps “wear down;” *μαστικωτεος*, “to whip or flog;” *ματαιο-πονος*, “to labor in vain.” All of which are a rather harsh view of masturbation, but a fairly adroit one for “pleasure activism,” something that will never end wars, deliver people out of slavery, or escape patriarchal colonization.