

### **Trailblazing: The True Story of America's First Openly Gay Track Coach**

By Eric Anderson. Published 2000 by Alyson Books, Los Angeles, CA. (304 pp., \$13.95)

#### **Introduction**

In 1993 Eric Anderson came out as an openly gay high school coach in Orange County, one of the most conservative areas in California. In *Trailblazing*, Eric offers a compelling personal account of the homophobia and the support experienced by himself and his male athletes. The book rehearses a familiar narrative about gay male identity, placing it within the genre of "modernist coming out stories" (Plummer, 1995). For example, there are moments when life was extremely bleak. Eric recounts his suicide attempt, and the immense isolation and confusion he experienced:

The solitude I felt evoked thoughts of suicide. I didn't know a single gay person and had tried for years to change my desires. . . . I even appealed to God for a cure. Alone, and in despair, suicide seemed the only answer.

"Coming out" was the event that transformed Eric's life. The book goes on to document a series of homophobic incidents that plagued his coaching life after he came out in 1993. He was repeatedly harassed for potential coaching violations by a principal, and other runners and coaches verbally harassed his team, which became known as "the fag team." These homophobic events culminated in "The Negrete Incident" where the gay bashing of one of Eric's runners by a football player at the same school resulted in criminal charges and a media furor. Eric's writing is compelling when he describes the event with visceral violence and bone-chilling dialogue:

What happened next is indisputable and horrific. Josh [the football player] tackled Jerryyme and sat on him. He pounded Jerryyme's face with closed fists. He fractured one side of Jerryyme's jaw and continued to pulverize, breaking the other side while yelling "I'm going to kill you, you fucking cross-country faggot!"

Josh continued the onslaught, yelling, "How does it feel to get fucked up the ass, you fucking faggot?" Jerryyme tried desperately to cover his eyes as Josh scraped and gouged at them.

Jerryyme's friend yelled for Josh to let up. "Stop it! Stop it! It's over! It's over Josh!"

Josh screamed, "It ain't over till you're dead, faggot."

The homophobic hatred aimed at members of "The Fag Team" is all but resolved by the end of the book. Eric and the Principal initiated a gay-sensitivity

training program for the school, and “in short, we agreed to disagree on our past and try to make my final year at Huntington Beach peaceful for all” (p. 179). The final chapter returns to the “Dynamic Duo’s Senior Year” and takes us through a victory by victory account of a glorious and sometimes nail-biting running season in which Eric achieved his ultimate coaching goal of advancing a cross-country team to the State championships.

*Trailblazing* is directed at both mainstream and gay popular readership as an inspirational personal story. While the book was not intended for an academic audience, the poststructural blurring of genres between “popular” and “scholarly” personal narrative has led to considerable academic interest in *Trailblazing*. Being billed as “A True Story” certainly invites theoretical debate, given the epistemological turmoil surrounding what counts as truth in personal narrative. Patti Lather suggested the issue might be considered by drawing from Walter Benjamin’s insight that “truth is what it does via presentation, performance, production” (cited in Lather, 1999, p. 3). The reviews in this symposium consider what *Trailblazing*’s “true story” does in educational, theoretical, and political terms. As Mike Messner points out, it could be used in undergraduate courses to introduce students to issues surrounding homophobia in American schools and sport. Yet questions are raised by the modernist assumptions about identity and identity politics underpinning *Trailblazing*. How do poststructural and queer perspectives about realism and desire engage with the modernist identity of the “gay male coach”? What are the limitations of “coming out” as an assimilative political strategy to combat homophobia in high school sports? The reviews that follow bring various theoretical perspectives to bear upon this compelling account of contemporary homophobia and coming out in men’s high school sport.

## References

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## Comments on Eric Anderson’s *Trailblazing*

*By Jane Stangl, Smith College, Northampton, MA.*

Eric Anderson’s book, *Trailblazing*, offers an insiders account of life as a young cross-country and track coach at Huntington Beach high school in the conservative confines of Orange County, CA. This is also a story about the author’s own struggle to achieve and maintain success in that role while simultaneously coming out as an openly gay coach. Touted as an exposé of his runners’ roles in a quest for success, Anderson’s young harriers often take a back seat to this highly personalized account of coming to terms with one’s sexuality and the consequences of doing so in a public high school setting and the notoriously homophobic world of athletics.

*Trailblazing* walks the reader through a series of seasons with high school runners by providing a rich flavor for the sport of cross-country, its trials and

tribulations, as well as its relative status within the hierarchy of “real” sports. On the surface, this is a tale of seasons constructed around the talents of two runners Anderson dubs his “dynamic duo.” Anderson’s quest for success then, comes off as developing these “heroes” into “superstars.” However, throughout the undercurrent of Anderson’s coming out story, a tale emerges that defies secrecy, and the intimate life of this running coach overshadows his runners throughout the body of the text.

Though Anderson repeatedly makes his coaching goals clear throughout the book, his goals as an openly gay man are less clear. Consequently, the homophobic *will* and the critical reader *maybe* left wondering: at what price glory and at whose expense? In this particular read, those questions are pressing at multiple levels. Who pays the price for what are perceived to be a coach’s social transgressions has a “blame the victim” mentality deeply embedded in whatever outcomes occur. The author can not avoid this conundrum, and while his teams—though straight—are forced into undue stressful situations, none of which are fair nor reasonable, they learn to negotiate them with strength and conviction.

Whether compelling or not, personal narratives like *Trailblazing* are often subject to debate in part because their usefulness as a deeply meaningful tool of social analysis is questionable. Anderson neatly unfolds a compelling story, where the reader must work through Anderson’s own complex identity transformation. Though we learn throughout the story the depth of social support provided by Anderson’s friends, family, and his runners’ parents (as well as the lack of support from some of his colleagues), we learn less about the feelings and perceptions of these people, a group that could surely enrich the telling of this tale.

As a social statement on being “the *true* story of *America’s first openly gay track coach*” (the subtitle of *Trailblazing*, emphasis added), the book may fall short precisely because it is the story of one male coach, his teams, his gayness, and his interpretation of “open” and “out.” While the importance of subjective experiences and the desperate need for out coaches are significant, cumulative narratives about real life experiences of gay and lesbian athletes and coaches, such as Dan Woog’s, *Jocks: True Stories of America’s Gay Male Athletes*, and Pat Griffin’s, *Strong Women, Deep Closets*, may offer readers a broader perspective on these respective populations, while Anderson offers us a richer, more nuanced account. Thus, its value as a personal statement.

Still, notions of “being out,” “open,” and “true” are arguably fraught with subjectivity and ambiguity, but they also encounter a contingency of social forces, some historical, some regional, and some that simply go to the core of human dignity and honesty. Not all “out” coaches lived in similar closets. Consider the circumstantial assumptions lesbian coaches have been up against for decades. Anderson, however, credits his runners as “heroes,” and while their role as social players/activists is significant, it also seems important to recognize those heroes (or heroines) previously undermined by sports’ larger objective of winning and being the “best.” Throughout, *Trailblazing* is loaded with repeated examples of such status qualifiers, thus offering multiple layers of meaning to unpack.

Anderson’s ability to personalize the account with vital descriptions followed by very relevant and believable examples of the hostilities and triumphs faced by his teams deserves attention. Indeed, it should warrant attention from every individual involved at any level in institutionalized sport. Yet, aside from this ideal, Anderson’s account may better serve those interested in a psychological rather

than sociological or cultural read. The book offers much to dissect as a case study in its own right; especially relevant here is the process of coming out in athletic contexts, a move often laden in guilt and self-hatred, and in Anderson's case, manifested in physical illness. His recollections of his life experiences are deeply vulnerable and intimate, if self-ruminating—a process common to those suffering extraordinary distress. In this effort to blend personal sensitivities and newly found sensibilities with an athletic career that makes pressing demands on ever more pressing terms, process and product rarely mesh so easily. Doing this in the context of a high school setting carries even greater risk, which perhaps explains why Anderson is arguably overdetermined on the coaching end of his role. Yet, his cognitive dissonance is ever-pressing, compromising this piece in terms of political astuteness. But, herein lies the beauty of being an energetic and youthful coach of the young—being almost naively willing to risk yourself at the cost of educating others and paying the obvious but not always believable price of the prospect of losing your job, something Anderson realizes later on in his struggle.

At its core, this is a story about a complicitous relationship; what Anderson does with his teams' success will supposedly quiet those with suspect opinions about who he is as a gay man. Unfortunately, producing champions will not right this wrong regardless of how well Anderson coaches, even though his coaching philosophy reveals an attempt to create a democratic team spirit. We do, however, hear a lot about "kicking ass," and in that winning clearly matters to Anderson, the reader is often treated to his adeptness at quantifying races and times. Indeed, for some, this may prove to be the most exciting part of the book—Eric Anderson narrates a great race. His ability to frame competition speaks to his intimate knowledge of running and keeps the reader running with him as well. Moreover, his takes on strategizing clue those in the know of competitive running into his desire to succeed and his potential for success.

The story's depth, however, is Anderson's relentless pursuit of legitimacy at multiple levels—as coach, gay, friend, and intimate. Thus, the book gets caught in a circuitous conundrum of self-reconciliation within an often controversial profession—the catch-22 of the disenfranchised. Regardless, this book does blaze a trail as good as Patricia Nell Warren's, *Frontrunner*, the 25-year-old gay fiction that has been compared to *Trailblazing as gay fact*. Through the quagmire of what becomes this coach's gay life, a greater social awareness emerges for those on the outside regarding homosexuality's unnerving tension within the world of sport. To this end, the author deserves credit. In a culture that seems to thrive on "real life" stories, Anderson provides telling evidence that at least this runner's world is a highly self-reflexive one.

To the scholar interested in "stories"—ethnographies, life histories, and narrative analysis—this is a loose construction. If you are looking for a read that speaks to the depth of such narratives, *Trailblazing* loses its course because it lacks a deeper evaluation of the meaning of these events at a social and political level. While it does not slight the relevance of these issues, the book speaks more to the daily frustrations and anger that come with treading such muddy waters. Still this work should not be dismissed in spite of its failing to critically evaluate its larger purpose. There is merit in *Trailblazing*, especially for the reader broadly interested in coaching, running and gay life. To this end, the book is a very worthy choice.

Academics interested in the relative value of subjective experiences and "autobiographical" narratives will find merit in this piece. Although this book may speak

to students in a way that academic jargon can not, this tale is not intended for scholarly richness. For example, Anderson's use of quoted conversations throughout the text privileges the oral recounting of his circumstances as real "evidence." The reader can not know whether such conversations actually happened "as lived," or "as recorded," or whether or not they are contrived reminiscences of casual conversation played out in story-like form, months later perhaps. The critical reader would question such a rhetorical move, as much as they would question the genre blurring that occurs in this effort; is this fact, fiction, or over-wrought narcissism, the latter being a condition to which many coaches are often condemned. These are legitimate questions from which potentially emerge a problematic representation of what it means to be a gay coach. A reader can and perhaps should ask: what are Anderson's assumptions about his own agency in this story's creation?

Regardless, *Trailblazing* will create dialogue and debate. For the undergraduate sociology courses focusing on social inequities or gender and sexuality, or the sport psychology course seeking a good case study, the book is an excellent selection; it does speak to everyday realities. *Trailblazing* is also a quick and accessible piece that few coaches, few academics, and even fewer administrators would have risked taking to the public in an effort to undo an obvious injustice. Thus, *Trailblazing* retains highly commendable attributes—this gay coach had a lot of guts, and the metaphorical title works well in relaying his tenacious efforts to open even further the coach's closet.

## Comments on Eric Anderson's *Trailblazing*

By Brian Pronger, University of Toronto.

*Trailblazing* is a treatise on desire in sport and in education more generally, written in the genre of popular autobiographical political advocacy. As such it demands a particular critical treatment. Donna Haraway (1988) says that the disembodied objectivity of most of modern science (physical, biological, and social) is a "god-trick" that hides the embodied situatedness of the writers of science and the political programs that their work helps to produce. Like many feminists, she says that knowledge needs to be produced by conversation, not unidirectional analysis. My favorite authors these days, inspired by deconstruction, say that such conversing needs to be fuelled by a desire for alterity, which is to say, openness to difference that can change us. In order to have an alteritous conversation the critic must acknowledge her own embodied situation and be ready to be altered by the other. So I should begin by situating my desire viz sexuality and sport, listen to what *Trailblazing* says of the same, and then consider alteritous possibilities for an ongoing conversation on sexuality, sport, and education.

My preferred form of writing, while certainly one of political advocacy, has not taken the extended personal confessional narrative form that *Trailblazing* does. My reluctance to engage in such writing involves a Foucaultian suspicion of the disciplinary character of the confessional, which focuses desire through the lens of the confessionable, structuring the confessor's reality so that it fits the logic of the faith, be it Catholic Christianity, psychoanalysis, competitive sport, or sexual identity. *Trailblazing* is a confession that seeks the sympathy of the reader, appealing to an American libertarian sense of justice, in order to get the reader to agree to a

political program of acceptance and support for gay identified boys in mainstream American sport, specifically high school sport. It joins a growing list of such texts: monographs, anthologies, magazine and newspaper articles that purport to tell the “true stories” of gay and lesbian athletes. But following Foucault, I wonder how this confessional form represents a disciplinary technology for the control of human multiplicities (Foucault, 1979). My short answer is: by consolidating sexual identity while preserving the libidinal structure of competitive sport.

That said, my deconstructionist commitment to alterity asks that I be open to the otherness that I find in *Trailblazing*—which is at least in part its confessional structure—and following Deleuze, “experiment” with the “tool” that is being offered in its conversational overture (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In order to enter into a conversation with Eric’s book, I need to situate my own desire for sport and physical culture. And so I will offer a (very brief) personal confession that shows both convergence and divergence of personal experience and political desire in each of our lives. Keep in mind that while I believe what I am going to say about myself is “true,” it is also a confession. Anyone who has tried to tell the truth kneeling before a priest or prone on a psychiatrist’s couch will appreciate the ironic impossibility of actually doing so. The act of speaking produces its truth situationally, which means that what I confess here is grounded in particular historical constructions of sexuality and sport, as well as in the very milieu of confessing in an academic journal. Hoping to open further this conversation on sexuality and sport, I will deconstruct the shared historical hermeneutical ground through which Eric and I confess ourselves.

There is much in Eric’s account of his early sexuality that had strong parallels in my life. The feeling of pariah has been very powerful for both of us. We both passed as straight, or at least thought we did. We both tried to sexualize women. We both eventually resolved to restrict our sexual experiences to males. With the support of our families, friends, and gay communities we “came out” and became proud of being gay, found relief and happiness doing so, and learned to live as gay men in what we understood to be a predominantly straight world.

In sport, I was not good at anything athletic except swimming, and even there I seldom won races. Eric was good only at running, and later at coaching running as well, but at least he was able to win. With the exception of my ability to enjoy significant pain while swimming hard, I was a complete sissy, a quintessential fairy. And in my adolescence I had very little desire to be anything like the sporty straight boys I knew, although I was interested in playing around with them and, unlike Eric, was very successful all through high school at doing so. They loathed me but were glad to have sex with me; the feeling was mutual. I eventually quit swimming and anything remotely related to sport because I couldn’t stand the masculinity that was expected. I didn’t return to the swimming pool until I was thirty years old, where I again came to love the body and the transcendental power of physical activity. I found considerable irony in sissies such as myself being in gyms, swimming pools, and locker rooms, and wrote a book about it (Pronger, 1992). To this day I find myself both inside and outside sport. While I love the erotic intensity of exercise, and the gay cultural capital it can produce, I loathe competitive sport in all its forms. In my experience of myself and of others, the playful desire to win is evil. I have explored this philosophically elsewhere (Pronger, 1999). For me, success in competition marks failure in the ethics of alterity; in truth, I think it is a form of spiritual poverty. To my mind, the ideological success

of the cult of competition, in North America, in gay and straight cultures, and now on a global scale, is the triumph of spiritual indigence. The desire to maintain competitive sports by reforming them so that they can include those who have been traditionally marginalized furthers the global franchise of this spiritual failure.

Eric, on the other hand, says he flourished in his sport until he came out, and as a coach, with the help of his athletes and supportive parents, they were ultimately able to prevail despite the homophobic violence of their high school society. Eric's relationship to sport in *Trailblazing*, then, involves cultural alienation (in a homophobic society), followed by athletic success, perseverance in the face of adversity, acceptance by some peers, and the writing of a book advocating the acceptance of gays in society in general and sport in particular. It is an earnest American trope that so often recruits sport as its vehicle: the rugged individual and his friends battle against an unjust society and eventually win social approval by being successful at the game—the marginalized struggle to be marginalized no longer. Inclusive acceptance into the benefits of living a white American middle class sporting life becomes the reward of living as an openly gay man. *Trailblazing* attempts to create a space for gay identified boys and men to become part of the cult of competition, to have a gay space in straight culture.

While I benefit from that kind of space in my own personal and professional life, I am uncomfortable with it. I think there are parallels here with “successful” post-colonial experiences, outsiders making it on the inside. I know that as a WASP third generation Canadian able-bodied male citizen I could never claim the alienation and displacement that has been narrated by great post-colonial writers such as Nadine Gordimer and Salman Rushdie. But I find the ironic experience of being inside and outside, the self-conscious love of the hated oppressor that the post-colonialists invoke, to be the tropic texture of my confession. I loathe sport the way I loathed the sporty boys I had sex with in high school, taking pleasure in their bodies, grateful that they let me get close to them, while simultaneously hating the culture that produces them, indeed that makes any sense of them, the whole fucked up hermeneutic circle that makes them so damned sexy. Deconstructing that hermeneutic circle may show why I love and hate the gay embrace of sport. I will try to do this by showing how it is for me a Faustian contract.

I mentioned earlier that I was a sissy, a quintessential fairy. I see a continuity between my earlier experiences as a sissy-fairy and the way I experience life now, which is also radically outside mainstream representations of reality, not so much in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, and so on, but in a much more expansive way. It would take a long time to fully explain what I mean, and a very long time to untangle how it is related to the sissy-fairy experience. But I'll try something quickly: I find there is an openness in the sissy-fairy experience that correlates with the alterity one finds in great mystical writers: Annie Dillard, Teilhard de Chardin, Bal Shem Tov, Dogen Kigen, Hui-neng, Shunryu Suzuki, Tenzin Gyatso, Teresa of Avilla, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, Simone Weill, Friedrich Holderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Patrick White, Gilles Deleuze, to name a few. All of these people worked to make a compassionate open space for the transcendence of identity and the altering experience of radical difference. My experience as a sissy-fairy provided me with a hermeneutical context to appreciate the alterity of mystical reality. As Jess Hollenback (Hollenback, 1996) explains at length in his historical cross-cultural study of mysticism, the experience is if not entirely socially constructed, at the very least socio-culturally mediated.

My understanding of mystical reality, therefore, is mediated by my education in the alteritous hermeneutics of fairy-life in a world that prefers identity over difference, let alone the radical difference to which I am referring. Alterity means: loving radical difference.

So, what does this have to do with gay boys/men in sport? Competitive sport, as I argued in "Outta My Endzone," is not about alterity, it's about phallic conquest and anal closure. Following Julia Kristeva, I would say it is also about the abjection of womanhood in phallogocentric culture. Rather than openness to difference, competitive sport is about the triumph over difference in the exercise of the will to power on the leveling ground of the playing field, the track, the swimming pool. Men's sport, as many of us having been saying for years now, builds masculinities. The performance of masculinity makes the men doing it both socially acceptable and sexy. So here is the hermeneutic circle: sportsmen and boys are socially legitimated by the various ways they perform masculinity, which is about degrees of the abjection of women. It's about loss. The more successful we are in competitive sport, the more we perform phallogocentric masculinity, the more we abject difference, the more we lose. None of the writers of radical difference I mentioned above would be sports fans or participants in the Euro-American sense. The will to power of competitive sport, precisely in the way that it deals with the difference of the other, as competitor, produces desire that plunges us ever further into the melancholic (Butler, 1997) circle of phallic masculinity. In my experience, the sissy-fairy-mystic trajectory moves to a reality that transcends masculinity. The gay male sportsmen trajectory, on the other hand, plays the masculine field of phallic desire. The Faustian contract is this: our participation in competitive sport gives us legitimacy in the mainstream of Euro-American culture, and on the playing field it does so precisely by negating the alteritous potential of the sissy-fairy-mystic. We get what we want by destroying who we are. Success in competitive sport requires the embodiment of phallic desire. Which means that the sissy-fairy-mystic who engages in competition betrays himself, sells his soul to the devil. As the post-colonialist writers show, the gains which the marginalized make by going it in the mainstream is the loss of their inner difference and ultimately their desire to be different. For the sissy-fairy-mystic, playing competitive sport means gaining respect by negating the desire for alteritous radical difference. Like the post-colonialists, I love the acceptance and hate the loss of difference that this entails.

This love-hate relationship applies not only to competitive sport. It applies also to the gay identity that my friends and I have worked so hard to build. While my gay identity has given me untold pleasures, it has also been seriously limiting. As Foucault and so many others have pointed out, there is nothing natural about sexuality; it is the product of discourse. We do not simply create our sexual lives, we inherit them, and contribute to their ongoing reproduction by the ways that we perform sexuality, in bed, on the playing field, and in our writing. Sexual identity is a disciplinary technology that controls the potential for living multiple sexualities. Gore Vidal, Michel Foucault, queer theorists, and post-gay writers agree: gay identity is confining. We left Kansas to come to Oz and we've had a whale of time there, only to find out that the city is walled in. The space of sexual identity is a space of profound exclusion. No matter how you cut it, for gay male identity, it is an exclusion that relies on the abjection of women. The walls through which gay, lesbian, straight, and bisexual identities are created are boundary projects par

excellence (Haraway, 1991). Such walls hardly foster alterity. And the solidity of these boundary projects form the cultural logic, the hermeneutic ground, of both Eric's and my stories. Neither of our confessions could have been made without the disciplinary boundaries of those libidinal structures.

So, what if we turn our conversation to transcending the libidinal structures of competitive sport and sexual identity? Perhaps then, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, crossing the border of America, "we will have nothing to confess, but out genius."

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## Comments on Eric Anderson's *Trailblazing*

By Michael A. Messner, University of Southern California.

I can't wait to have my undergraduate students read *Trailblazing*. Like Leslie Heywood's (2000) memoir, *Pretty Good for a Girl*, Eric Anderson's *Trailblazing* is a compelling story that provides the kind of personal "hook" that is so effective with today's younger readers who often have little patience for abstract, analytical works. Anderson's treatment of his own story as an openly gay high school track coach is well balanced: On the one hand, he tells of both subtle and overt homophobia and heterosexism. On the other hand, we read not only of the emergence of greater "tolerance" for "difference," but of courageous individual and group-based challenges to a system. And we see encouraging evidence of both personal and institutional change.

*Trailblazing* is also useful for rethinking our understanding (and teaching) of social theory. In particular, the book helped me to think about "sport" in more nuanced ways. Recent developments, such as the movement of women into sport and physical activity, the rise of gay and lesbian sport communities, the expansion of the fitness industry, and the explosion of sport and fitness media industries, have led some scholars (e.g., Cole, 1994) to question whether we can even claim to know what the term "sport" defines anymore. Don't recent changes and

developments call for a more expansive and inclusive definition of our object of study? Can we even empirically locate “sport” anymore? I want to argue that it is possible—indeed, crucial—for us to identify and critically examine the contested but still powerful “center” of sport. Works like *Trailblazing* give us a vantage point on the complex dynamics in sport, as well as at the intersections of sport and other institutions like media, schools, and families. We locate the center of sport partly by “following the money” to the most highly celebrated, rewarded, and institutionalized physical practices that are defined largely by physical power, aggression, and violence. The center of sport is the symbolic reference point for “alternative” images and practices, and it is a social location occupied by the biggest, wealthiest, and most visible sport programs and athletes. It is a position of domination and privilege, and it is the major focal point of fans and spectators. We find sport’s center at the core of athletic departments in schools and universities, at the top of status systems among young people, and at the major nodes of sport media (Messner, in press). As Anderson’s stories illustrate, sport’s center is still, by and large, a space that is actively constructed by and for heterosexual men.

My thinking takes as a point of departure Connell’s (1987) discussion of what he calls “core” and “peripheral” institutions. Connell argues that the larger gender order is made up of a cluster of “core” institutions (the military, the state, corporations) that still retain a powerful patriarchal legacy of male power, control of labor, and heterosexual hegemony. Other institutions (such as education and families), though still retaining some patriarchal legacy, are more contested by women and by sexual minorities. Through most of the twentieth century, sport was clearly one of the less contested, core institutions in which heterosexual men’s embodied power was enabled and celebrated in ways that supported and naturalized patriarchal beliefs in male superiority and female frailty and dependence. Once generated within sport, these ideas were then liberally transported into other “core” institutions like the military and the state and used to support the “naturalness” of men’s rule. As institutions like higher education and certain professions became more contested by women, these patriarchal ideas from sport continued to be used as a damper on women’s quest for full respect and equality.

However, by the latter third of the twentieth century, sport had begun to change, especially in response to girls’ and women’s movement into sport, but also to the rise of gay and lesbian sports. Here is where Connell’s concept of “gender regimes” is useful. When we consider not simply the state of play between large-scale institutions within the overall gender order, but also the internal state of play—the gender regimes—of institutions, then we see far more complexity. “Sport,” as an institution, is not fully internally consistent or coherent. Some of the terrain of sport, especially its “center,” is still thoroughly patriarchal and is tightly (often violently) controlled by heterosexual men. “In high school sports in California,” writes Anderson, “football is the tail that wags the dog. The powers that be use football to determine the organizational structure of almost every other sport” (p. 135). Less central, though, are sport spaces that are not fully integrated into, or controlled by, sport’s institutional center: most women’s sports, extreme sports, recreational sports, and “non-revenue” school-based sports like swimming, gymnastics, lacrosse, golf, and cross country. It’s not that these sports are fully outside the commercial and bodily discipline regimes of the core of sport—in fact, there is often a contradictory tension that pulls these sports toward the core, while also repelling away from it. However, that these sports are not fully integrated into the

center of the gender regime of sport means that there is greater potential in these spaces for the development of a range of (even sometimes subversive) meanings, identities, and relationships around issues of gender and sexuality. This wider range of play is quite evident in Anderson's descriptions of cross country athletes, coaches, and leagues.

Examining the gender regime of sport, then, becomes a complex process of exploring the different kinds of spaces within "sport," how these spaces are variously occupied, given meaning, and contested. For instance, Anderson deftly juxtaposes the bodily regimes, relationships among athletes and coaches, and locker room behaviors of cross country athletes with football players (many of the latter who clearly represent, defend, embody, and enforce the patriarchal, violent, homophobic, and heterosexist "center" of sport culture on his campus). Anderson's accounts of the football players' taunting of his runners and especially his chilling descriptions of how the tensions resulting from some footballers' attempts to "protect" the heterosexual sanctity of "their" locker room from the cross country fags revealed the lack of support he and his team had from other coaches and administrators, and eventually resulted in a horrific incident of gay bashing perpetrated against one of the cross country runners. This story offers the reader a sociological window into gender and sexual tensions within sport. In addition to seeing the ways resistance to change emanates from those at the institution's center, we see Anderson and his runners deploying brave and often humorous strategies of self-protection and also successful organizing to bring about greater tolerance and acceptance of sexual diversity.

And perhaps these challenges to the core of the institution of sport occur partly because cross country, in the first place, is a marginal "sport" space that attracts, or is open to, boys who are already different, in some ways, from the boys who are at the top of school male status hierarchies. As Anderson puts it, "distance runners aren't usually the coolest guys on campus, and they are rarely voted homecoming king," but, as I read the book, these kids sounded pretty cool to me. This alternative cross country space, especially as it was carved out by Coach Anderson, set up a context in which it was possible to create empowering group identities and solidarities apart from, perhaps even in opposition to, the school's core hegemonic football masculinity. Among other things, this challenge put the definition of "athlete" a bit more up for grabs: can non-violent boys be athletes? Can faggots be athletes?

Anderson's descriptions of the school context illustrates the tensions of an athletic "core" being challenged. What forms does a backlash take? Under what conditions do people (students, athletes, parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators) and institutions change—first toward tolerating, and even eventually embracing, sexual and other kinds of diversity? How does change in sport sometimes have an impact on change in institutions (like education) in which it is embedded? In *Trailblazing*, we read an inspiring story of a high school gay-straight alliance that is grounded partly in a strong bond among mostly heterosexually identified male athletes and their gay coach. Here, those at sport's margins not only challenge sport's core, but also the larger school context. We see also how their activism brought about a backlash—the anti-gay "Future Good Boys of America Club" that encouraged verbal harassment, death threats, vandalism, and even outright violence against Anderson and his athletes. But eventually, the book ends with descriptions of positive personal and institutional changes. Moreover, Anderson

proudly describes the ways that some of his former athletes continue, in other contexts, to work for increased fairness, tolerance, and equality.

Finally, I want to raise a question about boys' and men's forms of bonding, especially the use of women as sexualized "others" (as either symbolic or actual bodies) around which to bond. In particular, one part of the book raised questions for me concerning the relationship between the fight against heterosexism in men's sports with the fight against sexism in sport and society. When Coach Anderson returned to his home one day for the usual post-meet video-review of that day's race with his players, he found that his players had played an April Fools' joke on him, by converting his home into "a Larry Flynt shrine":

My home was brimmed with photos of nude *women*. Women everywhere! In every room they covered the walls, mirrors, ceilings, and windows. . . . My runners had acquired a huge stack of porn magazines and spent the better part of three hours redecorating my house. . . . The gag was funny and much appreciated. I know my runners are comfortable with my sexuality when they make fun of it. (p. 126)

Anderson's interpretation of this event—that it was "very funny and much appreciated," as it indicated that "my runners are comfortable with my sexuality," is perhaps understandable, given the fact that he was an openly gay coach working with mostly all heterosexually identified athletes. However, I want to ask if such moments don't also have different layers of meaning: can we also perhaps interrogate this as a business-as-usual moment of male athletes getting close to each other by displacing their erotic bond on to the symbolically debased bodies of women? Of "marginal" male athletes actively importing and reproducing the misogynist values and group bonding practices so common in the "core" sports? This raises a larger question: if "change" happens, both inside and outside sports, such that same-sex sexuality becomes more tolerated, will this change be part of a simultaneous move toward greater equality in gender relations? Or will it simply mean that hegemonic masculinity has been sexually reconfigured to incorporate same-sex relations between men, while still dominating, debasing, and marginalizing women? I suspect that increased sexual tolerance, though desirable, does not necessarily correlate with greater equality for women. Any movement against heterosexism, thus, must also simultaneously be a feminist movement. Anderson, to his credit, appears to know this. And his book can be read as the first chapter in a young man's struggle for personal affirmation and social justice. I'll have my students read this one, as I await chapter two.

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## Comments on Eric Anderson's *Trailblazing*

By Heather Sykes, University of Toronto.

In *Trailblazing*, Eric Anderson describes the “true story” of coming out as “America’s first openly gay track coach.” It is a narrative of triumphant individualism where Eric and his athletes confront and apparently overcome the homophobia that surfaced after Eric came out. As a popular autobiography, *Trailblazing* offers a compelling story about confronting homophobia and passionately documents Eric’s personal journey. The book is being promoted as an inspiration to others to come out to further reduce homophobia in American schools and athletics. In the wake of poststructuralism, however, portraying autobiography as the “true” story run and claiming a single identity such a “gay” carries some theoretical and political risks. Also in the context of queer and coalition social politics, it is worthwhile to question championing “coming out” as the obvious political response to homophobia.

### “Gay” Identity and the Risks of Exclusion

Eric’s singular focus on his identity “gay coach” struck me as too easily essentialist and the “true story” as too realist. There is little self-reflexivity about what being “gay” means within the book. Modernist coming out stories written in this way cannot but cast shadows over excluded others. In poststructural terms, such self-presence cannot escape the trace of absence. As Robert Smith (1995) suggested in *Derrida and Autobiography*:

The bone of contention is the subject or self and whether it is whole, or fragmented; self-determining, or wrought with political and conceptual barbs. It is the subject not as “he” or “she” which is at stake, but as the “I” which takes itself to be its own object or subject, univocal and present to itself. (p. 57)

Sidone Smith (1993) recounted how personal narratives in the late 1980s and ‘90s challenged “the certitudes of bourgeois individualism—for instance, the certitude of stable, unified selfhood” (p. 395). Throughout my reading, my thoughts turned to many other coming out stories I had read, listened to, and learned from. One of these was Sapphire, a poet, performance artist, and novelist who ironically was born not too far away from Orange County and only a few years before Eric. She described her autobiographical writing in somewhat similar terms to Eric’s:

For me it has always been about erasing a certain kind of invisibility, about saying that some like me exists. I was a young Black woman born on an army base, working as a go-go dancer and bisexual.

Her notion of identity, however, is less unitary and permanent:

I wasn’t writing “We’re just so happy to be lesbian. We’ve found a new land and there’s no conflict.” I wasn’t denying my sexuality. I was questioning it and trying to place it context. I asked myself, “How can I talk about nationhood, and I’m out here go-go dancing? How can I talk about radical lesbian

feminist separatism, and I slept with a man last night?" I was aware of my own contradictions and I was writing about them. (cited in Bell-Scott, 1998, p. 19)

Sometimes I caught glimpses of more fluid and fragile identities running just off the shoulder of the "gay" and "straight" runners in *Trailblazing*, but I suspect this was more a matter of interpretation on my part than Eric's intention. My reading was repeatedly stalled by the erasure of "whiteness" and "sexism" from the "gay male" narrative. There is no mention of male privilege and sexism to augment the litany of homophobic acts documented in the book. The different, slightly marginalized masculinity available to boys on Eric's team is preferable to the compulsory heteronormativity on the football team. Yet, the privileged position of boys' cross-country in relation to girls' teams is not analyzed. Equally, the absence of talk about race and racism in *Trailblazing* concealed the privileges attached to "white" identities.

### Politics of Assimilation or Antagonism

*Trailblazing* seems to take for granted that the best response to violent homophobia in schools and athletics is to strive toward liberal assimilation of "gay" coaches who are good at their job. Given the legacy of single-issue identity politics within the gay movement of the 1980–90s, this is understandable. It is also problematic.

The rich lineage of oral and personal histories produced by marginalized groups offers indictments of oppressive cultures, inspiration to others and, sometimes, incitements to action. *Trailblazing* certainly offers an indictment of homophobic school administrators and high school football culture. It is also intended to inspire other coaches and athletes to come out. At heart it is a modernist narrative of triumphant individualism in which Eric's individual courage, the support of friends and family and, most of all, his athletes result in glorious triumph. The lesson to be learned is that coming out and being excellent can overcome homophobia in high school sports. If it can be done behind the Orange Curtain, it can be done anywhere is a strong message in the book. However, the underlying problems of homophobia in school athletics are not going to be resolved so easily. It seems to me, we must consider what is missing from the inspirational call for liberal tolerance proffered in *Trailblazing*. How far can this political strategy of assimilation go? Who is assimilated and who is excluded? What structural dynamics of oppression are changed and what are left in tact? Soliciting tolerance from previously homophobic male football players or school administrators is a successful short-term victory, but it can only be a partial response to homophobia. It leaves unchallenged the meritocratic, sexist, and racist structures shaping schooling and high school sport, which are irreducibly connected to homophobia. Confronting "homophobia" requires a broader conceptualization of what is at stake in these struggles. Britzman's (1998) work on anti-racist pedagogy and the narcissism of minor differences provides this broader view. Homophobia, she suggests, can be thought of as an unwillingness to risk engagement with the "other." That is, homophobia entails dynamics of value and de-value that are not tied to "gay" and "homophobic" identities *per se*. Viewed in this way, homophobia is not a static prejudice directed against the "gay coach" or "fag team" but rather a defense against

the risk of difference. She goes on to ask how progressive social movements are implicated with their own narcissism:

The dynamics of narcissism of small differences also extend to aggression within communities; there, they may take the prejudicial form of homophobia, sexism and abuse. In moving backward and forward—inside communities and between communities—the twists of narcissism of minor differences suggest identity not as explanation but rather as antagonistic and fragile, as history and as relationality. (p. 97)

Britzman therefore urges communities to consider how these risks play out even *within* gay communities. Conceptualizing homophobia in this way broadens the issues facing gay sensitivity programs and anti-homophobia activism. Chantal Mouffe (2000) draws attention to the “blindness” of liberal democratic theories that hold that “political questions are of a moral nature and therefore susceptible of a rational treatment” (p. 86). This negative consequence of the approach to democratic politics is it “erases the dimension of antagonism” (p. 86). Drawing on Pierre Saint-Armand’s recent book, *The Laws of Hostility*, Mouffe suggests that enlightenment philosophers presented an optimistic view of human sociability in which violence had no originary place. Sociability is viewed as aiming toward the “good” via empathy. However, such a view overlooks the complex, ambivalent nature of human sociability and therefore democratic politics. Mouffe calls for politics to acknowledge the “contradictory pulsations set to work by social exchange,” that antagonism and violence are inherent in sociability.

What are the political implications of thinking about homophobia as antagonism? Single-issue activists might come to recognize antagonisms with other marginalized communities, thereby broadening the landscape of political action through coalitions and concern for other forms of oppression. Maybe this would enable political and analytical links to be made between homophobia directed at a “fag team” and misogyny, lesbophobia, transphobias, erotophobia, and racism in school sports. After reading the book, I was left wondering what does the triumph of a gay male coach in Orange County mean for the girls’ cross-country program, for less successful gay coaches, lesbian coaches, non-athletic queer students, and teachers? For me, one of the unintended truths of Eric’s coming out story is that there probably still is a vast network of progressive trails that still need blazing in Orange County high school sport. At the same time, there will be an equally vast network of reactionary trails, legislative backtracking, and neoliberal inroads to worry about. Perhaps the gay activism inspired by triumphant individualism might start designing a trail map to navigate the antagonistic network of interlocking political struggles.

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## Author's Response to Comments Made on *Trailblazing*

By Eric Anderson

*Trailblazing* is about my 1993 coming out as an openly gay high school coach in a homophobic school, city, and sport. It is the only non-fiction book ever written about an openly gay coach and was designed as a trade book to relate how I experienced a four year period after coming out. It was also intended to reflect the impact that my sexuality brought to my team, and how my team dealt with that impact. *Trailblazing* was not intended to be, nor should be read, as an academic examination of the relationship between gays and sport. Indeed, *Trailblazing* was written with no formal education in the understanding of social forces—it is a sociologically naive account. In fact, the four years chronicled in *Trailblazing* represent the type of formal education I had at the time, namely a Master's degree in sport psychology—where I was trained to make athletes perform better and with greater consistency.

The text of *Trailblazing* clearly takes a positive stand toward competition. At the time, I did not question the value of competition or of proving myself as an openly gay coach. After coming out, I used my status to begin creating a space in sport for gays and to show that gay coaches could compete with heterosexual coaches. Today, however, as a 4th year graduate student in sociology, and college coach, I take a much more critical perspective in my analysis of competitive sports. I must, as Stangl points out, examine my ever growing cognitive dissonance. I must now face my own conflicts as I try to negotiate the terrain of loving my sport, while loathing many of its implications.

In fact, my formal education in sociology has made writing this response difficult. For just who is writing the response? Is it Eric Anderson, the sociologically naïve Coach that wrote *Trailblazing*, or Eric Anderson the 4th year Graduate Student in sociology? *Trailblazing* is simply data—it is not an ethnography—and makes no claim to be a nuanced sociological examination. Since *Trailblazing* makes no pretense of being an academic book, critiquing it for not taking into account race or patriarchy makes responding difficult. Examining it from my prior perspective, race did not seem an issue for the Asian, Hispanic, or White athletes on the team; the focus of attention was turned toward my gayness. Similarly, I could say that I did not notice my male privilege, as Lipsitz (1995) suggests one who possesses such privilege is likely to do. However, from my current perspective, I can problematize the lack of discussion regarding my whiteness or maleness and also point out that *Trailblazing* also failed to examine the effect of class and education as well.

But critiques of *Trailblazing's* failure to take into account male privilege might also be an erroneous taken-for-granted assumption, as it is also possible that the Coach in *Trailblazing* possessed no male privilege at all. Those whom he

struggled with were exclusively heterosexual, white men with institutional power. Messner (1997) suggests that lumping all men into a position of patriarchal power may tend to over-state the amount of power possessed by marginalized men—that “One can make a good case that the economic, political, and legal constraints facing poor African American, Latino, or Native American men, institutionally disenfranchised disabled men, illegal immigrant men, and some gay men more than overshadow whatever privileges these people might have as men in this society” (p. 7). Rather than examining issues of masculine privilege and power from a single-gendered lens, I maintain that we look to a more nuanced approach, and understanding the location of gay men in the masculine hierarchy and/or gender order may be a good place to start.

Sykes critiques *Trailblazing* for not examining identity from an intersectional approach. Collins (1990), Grusky (2001), and others have problematized the theoretical paradigm of examining identity groups as unique and independent of each other—as if it were possible to select out just one identity for examination. However, *Trailblazing* might be valuable precisely for the reasons Stangl mentions; it speaks to the detailed examination of *just one* group identity—namely male homosexuality—and how perceptions about it affected the lived experiences of the coach and his athletes. Thus, the text may be valuable data regarding a gay coach in a social arena in which all the principle players were white, heterosexual men with institutional power (i.e., school administrators, athletic directors, football coaches, and police). It is this perspective that I would encourage readers of *Trailblazing* to adopt: “how does being gay affect this individual and his team at this place in time?” Rather than looking to *Trailblazing* as an examination of male privilege, I would encourage readers to the text to better understand heterosexual privilege. It is from this perspective that Messner has found value; it illustrates that the center of sport “is still, by and large, a space that is actively constructed by and for heterosexual men.”

*Trailblazing* is, as Pronger and Stangl suggest, written with political intent facilitated by the popular American hero genre. Pronger’s assertion that the text appeals to an American sense of liberty and justice captures the essence of the understandings of *Trailblazing*. It is, in a very real sense, a call for justice. It is also, as Sykes contends, a call to “come out” in response to social and political homophobia. Admittedly, the book’s political intent deprivileges alternative visions of sport, as it uses the same genre to accomplish its goals as other American struggles—the quest for victory. But specifically isolating perceived sexual identity, as problematic as it may be, might also have value in that it focuses specific attention on the possibility for policy change.

Paradoxically, where I was once permitted the one-dimensional thinking that a social wrong could be “fixed” by simply proving that gay coaches could be good coaches, I must now contend with just how the problem is to be solved. Stangl, Pronger, Sykes, and Messner astutely question whether polemics like *Trailblazing* will simply help gay coaches and athletes become accepted as an alternative form of masculinity, consumed into the larger patriarchal substrate, or whether they can serve as transnormative agency in subverting male privilege. Similarly, today I can appreciate the postmodernist perspective that Pronger brings to the discussion of sport and the questions Sykes raises about the subjectivity of being “out.” But rather than critiquing *Trailblazing* as treating gay identity one-dimensionally, *Trailblazing* should, as Messner posits, serve as an investigation upon the

mechanisms in which sport both creates and maintains heterosexism and patriarchy in an institution which young boys are taught to be homophobic and misogynistic. Indeed, there is a great dearth of literature regarding openly gay male athletes and coaches. Does this dearth of gay athletes suggest that gay males are not attracted to or cannot excel in sport? My research (forthcoming) disputes this. Pronger (1990) even theorizes that gay athletes might be drawn to sport precisely because of the homoerotic environment it offers. The lack of openly gay athletes and coaches therefore suggests that powerful social forces are opposed to the outing of gay male athletes and coaches in America. As such, *Trailblazing* should be used toward gaining a greater understanding of the mechanisms involved in this form of oppression so that we may better learn how to deconstruct them.

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