

EFFEMINATE BELONGING

This book explores popular media narratives, queer theory, and biological explorations to coin a multifaceted understanding of effeminacy, gender normativity, and sexual pleasure. Moving from autobiographical narratives to twink porn, and well beyond, Richard Vytنيorgu weaves together diverse voices while retaining a notably enjoyable authorial tone throughout; one committed to honoring the complexities of gay male bottoming and its cultural framings.

—Susanna Paasonen, *Professor of Media Studies, University of Turku, Finland*

What if the bottom is more than a sexual position? In Effeminate Belonging, Richard Vytنيorgu challenges readers to reconceptualize and reorient themselves towards and about the bottom. Drawing on an expansive archive that braids together the social sciences and literary and cultural studies, the bottom is no longer just a position, but an identity, one rich with complexity and nuance. By reimagining the idea of the bottom, masculinity and belonging is brought into a new light, one which illuminates possibility.

—Jonathan A. Allan, *Professor and Canada Research Chair in Men and Masculinities, Faculty of Arts, Brandon University, Canada*

The uncoupling of same-sex desire, receptive positionality, and effeminacy might have enhanced the acceptance of same-sex sexuality and promoted the respectability of the LGBTQ+ community. Nevertheless, this separation has come at the expense of marginalizing men whose identities are shaped by these very aspects. This book presents a genuine and daring interdisciplinary argument for the reassessment and recognition of individuals embodying these characteristics. It advocates for the rehabilitation of fairies, pansies, and queens, while urging a more profound exploration of gender and positionality-based identities.

—Theo Sandfort, *Professor of Clinical Sociomedical Science (in Psychiatry), Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University, USA*

Breathtaking in scope and beautifully composed, Effeminate Belonging illustrates the ways gay bottoms are structured as a

'minority within a minority' and how fem gay bottoms write themselves into spaces of belonging despite these minoritizing tendencies. Richard Vytنيورгу's interdisciplinary approach to the subject of fem gay bottoms and his deft negotiation of non-Western cultural practices to critique Anglo-American discourses of bottoming is revelatory. A model approach for research and a gift to clinicians, Effeminate Belonging should be required reading for anyone interested in gay male identity or sexuality.

—Timothy Oleksiak, Associate Professor and Director of the Professional and New Media Writing Programme, Department of English, University of Massachusetts Boston, USA

Drawing from multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, queer theories, porn studies and fiction literature, this book is extraordinarily well-researched in spotlighting the often dismissed populations of effeminate gay bottoms. Richard Vytنيورгу thoroughly explores the nuanced in-between space of sexual orientations, gender nonconformity and sex role preference, highlighting the double marginalisation of homophobia and femmephobia, as well as courageously bringing forth the unsettling discussion on heterogender homosexuality. Vytنيورгу skilfully analyses the narratives of sexuality, gender and sexual behaviours in Western culture and beyond, helping his readers with an in-depth understanding of the bio-psycho-social landscape in which effeminate gay bottoms live. It is an essential read for academics in psychology, sociology, and queer theories as well as psychotherapists specialising in gender, sex, and relationship diversity.

—Silva Neves, Psychosexual and Relationship Psychotherapist and Author of *Sexology: The Basics*, Pink Therapy Clinical Associate, UK

Richard Vytنيورгу has marshalled his scholarly acumen and media savvy to investigate a pocket of gay male experience that is under-researched. The search for community as a fem gay bottom requires persistence, patience, self-compassion, and the courage to prize difference over conformity. The overlap of gender identity,

erotic practice, and embodied expression can present in different ways, and the author makes a thoughtful case for the meaningful link between effeminate belonging and sexual wellbeing.

—Don Shewey, *Author of The Paradox of Porn: Notes on Gay Male Sexual Culture and Daddy Lover God: A Sacred Intimacy Journey*

EFFEMINATE BELONGING

Gender Nonconforming Experience
and Gay Bottom Identities

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

All the time, I think, we want to find out about each other, to know if we really belong to each other, belong together.

(Bartlett, 1988, p. xx)

These words by the novelist Neil Bartlett capture the essence of what this book is about. At the height of the AIDS crisis, he wanted to know if he belonged with Oscar Wilde. In the late 1980s, very few wanted to belong with gay men, and an entire generation of gay men risked being wiped out.

While issues of belonging may have seemed especially pertinent to gay men at the time I was born, as the 1980s turned into the 1990s, they are also relevant now, as indeed they were before the 1990s. Many gay men grow up feeling different from other men. This is especially so if they present in ways others would deem gender nonconforming or effeminate, or in ways that deviate from socially normative standards of masculinity. And this in turn is connected to perceptions and self-awareness concerning sexual role and behaviour, particularly bottoming, or engaging in receptive anal intercourse with men.

Fears around anal sex have always been central to homophobic and effeminophobic attitudes, especially in countries such as Britain that at various times carried punitive legislation targeted specifically at male–male anal sex, or ‘sodomy’. Up until the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, men in England, Wales and Ireland risked the death penalty if caught engaging in ‘the detestable and abominable vice of buggery’, as the Buggery Act 1533 described anal sex. And, until the Sexual Offences Act 2003, it was technically illegal for men in public to ‘importune’ one another for consensual sex with each other, as it was for schools to even talk about gay sex with pupils, through Clause/Section 28. In many other places around the world, anal sex between men – hence bottoming – is still illegal, and in some instances punishable by death.

The impact of cumulative prejudice against gay anal sex, bottoming and effeminacy on males throughout history cannot be overstated. It can still be a conscious task to belong with these non-normative aspects of self in contexts that

hold very different standards of what is deemed typical or normal when it comes not only to being an adult male but being gay as well.

Effeminate Belonging is about the stories and experiences of male–male sex and love at the edges of acceptability: about those who are fem and who bottom and who see these two aspects as inextricably connected in themselves despite wider resistance to such a synergy. Perhaps because of this connection, this book is about the challenge of belonging in the gay community, with its own shifting norms and prejudices, as much as it is about belonging in the wider world.

As I will argue, the best response to this challenge of belonging is not to pretend – as some gay men do – that bottoming has nothing to do with effeminacy or gender nonconformity, now or in the past, or that bottoming should be analysed independently of gender expression. Rather, I argue for the need to forge more inclusive attitudes towards those for whom this connection feels both natural and integral to their sense of self, even if this goes against the political grain. Given the centrality of anal sex and non-normative gender expression to anti-gay sentiment throughout history, it seems crucial that the voices of those for whom bottoming and effeminacy go hand in hand are given sustained scholarly attention.

Since beginning to write about these topics and connecting on social media with fem bottoms from a diversity of places, I’ve found that far from being considered peripheral, self-indulgent or irrelevant, issues of belonging rooted in gender expression, sexual orientation and anal sex role preference are integral to some gay men’s wellbeing:

- ‘I like how you explore bottomness as an identity and not just a sexual practice. And that you bring up the bond that we effeminate bottoms share. Like a sisterhood of pussyboys.’
- ‘Your research shows that feminine bottoms exist and we are here.’
- ‘I think you are doing something wonderful for this particular section of the gay community.’
- ‘What you do is brave, cool and encouraging for boys like me.’

These comments, which come from around the world, speak of a desire to belong, to know that one is not alone. It’s in this spirit that I offer this book to various people: to other academics; to LGBTQ+, health, and educational professionals; to artists and activists; and perhaps most importantly, to those like me who knew they were different, but couldn’t articulate why, and why it mattered.

I hope this book can begin to help in this process of articulation, and in so doing, to re-orient perceptions of what it might mean to be gay and belong.

Abergavenny, 29 February 2024

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To all those who have reached out to me via Twitter/X: thank you. It means more than I can say to hear that my work has helped, inspired and encouraged you in your own self-explorations.

I would like to thank Heike Bartel, who not only introduced me to Emerald through her book on eating disorders in men but who also showed me how to use the study of autobiographical writing to understand and enhance personal and social wellbeing.

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