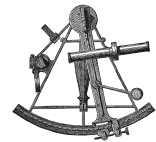


Are They Really Challengers?: Inclusive Masculinities, Tenacious Homophobias, and Enduring Inequalities in Luca Guadagnino's *Challengers* (2024)



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Abstract

This paper examines Luca Guadagnino's 2024 film *Challengers* using Eric Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory as well as Tristian Bridges and C.J. Pascoe's discussion of enduring sexual inequality. *Challengers* follows professional tennis players Art and Patrick through their late teens, twenties, and thirties as they grapple with the difficulties of young romance. The pair struggle to gain the affection of fellow tennis prodigy Tashi, while also struggling with their complicated feelings for each other. Drawing from the scholarship mentioned above, this paper argues that although declines in homophobia enable Art and Patrick to incorporate elements of homoeroticism into their relationship, their friendship ultimately *does not* challenge the heteronormativity and homophobia embedded in the sports world, illustrating how these forms of inequality are both flexible and tenacious.

Keywords: masculinities, hybrid masculinities, sport, gender inequality, homophobia

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Introduction

Two boys rush toward each other, arms extended, colliding in an embrace. As they collide, the brown-haired boy leaps into the other's arms, wrapping his legs around the blonde boy's hips, pressing their temples against each other. The blonde boy spins the other in the air; two bodies wrapped together as one. The pair tumble to the floor, one boy lying on his back, his hand clasped around the other's head. Laying over the brown-haired boy's chest, the blonde boy presses their bodies together. They pull apart for a breath, just far enough to look into each other's eyes. The brown-haired boy pulls the blonde boy forward, placing his forehead against his lips in a furious kiss. *What happens next?* The players get up, straighten their shirts, shake hands with their opponents, and lift their trophies. After all, they've just won the biggest junior tennis tournament in the nation!

The scene described above is from Luca Guadagnino's 2024 film *Challengers* (00: 21:30). The film follows professional tennis players Art and Patrick through their late teens, twenties, and thirties. Raised together in a tennis academy boarding school from the age of 12, the duo forge an inseparable bond through sport, sharing with each other their crushes, hopes, dreams, and desires. But shortly after lifting their junior tournament trophies, everything changes. At a post-tournament party, the pair fall head over heels for Tashi, a top female tennis prodigy. As the film plays out, Art and Patrick fight for Tashi's love, first together, then against each other.

This paper dissects three scenes from the earlier phases of Art and Patrick's friendship using Eric Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory as well as Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe's (2016) discussion of enduring sexual inequality. I draw upon these theories to explore Art and Patrick's masculine practices in the film, looking at how these practices are shaped by shifting understandings of acceptable masculinities, and how these practices in turn shape their friendship. I argue that although declines in homophobia (Anderson, 2009) enable Art and Patrick to incorporate elements of homoeroticism into their relationship, their friendship ultimately *does not* challenge the heteronormativity and homophobia embedded in the sports world, illustrating how these forms of inequality are both flexible and tenacious (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). In the following section I introduce the key theories drawn upon in my analysis.

Masculinities in Flux

Pascoe's (2007) seminal work illustrating how high school boys use the word 'fag' to discursively marginalize each other and bolster their own masculine identity *seemed* dated less than a decade after its publication.

Sociological research on adolescent and young adult men during the 2010s largely supported the claim put forth by Anderson (2009) at the end of the 2000s—being gay was no longer the antonym of being masculine. Rather, a new form of masculinity appeared to be shaping the social interactions between young folks, a more *inclusive masculinity*. Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory centralizes the concept of *homophobia*, the fear experienced by men of being labeled or perceived as gay. Anderson posits that a profound decrease in homophobia occurred during the 1990s and 2000s (Baunach, 2012; Keleher and Smith, 2012). He rests his argument on the fact that Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities—which scholars had cited with such alacrity to explain the position of gay men at the bottom of a patriarchal hierarchy of masculinity—could no longer explain the interactions he observed between young men. In his study of student athletes at a Southern California high school, Anderson (2010) did not hear epithets, but he did see embraces. Anderson and those who extended his initial theory observed athletes gently hugging each other (Adams, 2011), spooning, and cuddling together (Anderson and McCormack, 2014), gay athletes being accepted by their straight teammates (Anderson, 2010), high schoolers mixing freely in a non-hierarchical social environment (Anderson, 2010), and perhaps most significantly, boys engaging in intimate behaviors such as sharing beds 'without risking their socially perceived heterosexual identity' (Anderson and McCormack, 2014, p. 215). It seemed that social interactions between young men were no longer circumscribed by homophobia. As inclusive masculinity theory suggested, a new world of possible relationships between men had opened.

However, Bridges and Pascoe (2016) warn that even as some forms of sexual inequality are being challenged, others may be emerging. They define homophobias not as 'fear or hatred of gay men,' but as types of gender practice which assist in maintaining inequitable power relations between men as well as between men and women. This understanding of homophobias allows for the critical evaluation of gender practices and masculine performances, regardless of an individual's sexual identity. Bridges and Pascoe (2016) contend that the inequality reproduced by nascent masculine practices is often difficult to identify, both because it may be obscured 'behind a façade of gender and sexual equality' and because new masculine practices may challenge existing forms of inequality while *simultaneously* producing new ones. As such, they argue that it is possible for some forms of homophobia to be in decline *and* for homophobia to still be a pillar of masculinity—a homophobic ship of Theseus. In this way, sexual inequality is both flexible and tenacious (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). While Anderson's (2009) work provides a relatively optimistic view of contemporary changes in masculine practices, Bridges and Pascoe suggest that such changes should be closely analyzed to uncover how they may be sheltering new forms of inequality. The

following sections draw from the work of these scholars to explain gender practices in *Challengers* (2024).

Homoeroticism in Sport

While the opening sequence described in this paper's introduction sounds more like an internet fanfiction than a tennis match, the scene is a familiar one for those who have ever attended a high-stakes sporting event. Athletic celebrations frequently entail forms of same sex-touching from butt slaps to bear hugs (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). The scene described in the introduction is no different. Art and Patrick, having just won the final point of the US Open junior title, gleefully embrace. The crowd roars with excitement and approval as the players hug each other, tumbling to the floor and giggling with joy. The whole sequence is over in seconds, and no one seems to bat an eye. As Bridges and Pascoe (2016) explain, the homoeroticism which athletes engage in is often actively ignored or dismissed on the athletic field. This is because these forms of intimacy exist within the rule-bound constraints of a heteronormative environment. That is to say, one crucial consensus which allows this same-sex touch to be permissible is the assumed heterosexuality of the athletes involved (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). When this heterosexuality is assumed, the homoerotic behavior of the players on the field can be overlooked, as it is 'safely' occurring within the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. As such, it is unlikely that any individuals in the crowd watching Art and Patrick share this intimate moment would question their assumed heterosexuality. Off the court is another story, but *on* the court the quick kiss which Patrick places on Art's forehead is neither disruptive nor transgressive.

In this way, Art and Patrick's display of homoeroticism on the court does not challenge the heteronormativity of sport, nor can the display be explained by Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory. Anderson and McCormack (2014) emphasize the cuddling, spooning, and hugging they observe *off* the field, because it is these behaviors which illustrate a shift in gender practices and attitudes towards homosexuality among student athletes. As explained above, this is because such behavior *on* the field is normative, not transgressive (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). If Anderson and McCormack had pointed towards on-field rituals as evidence of decreases in homophobia, they would've been laughed at by academics and sports fans alike. Homoerotic behaviors on the athletic field aren't new, they aren't even interpreted as homoerotic by observers, and most significantly, they actually *reinforce* the heteronormativity and homophobia of sport. This is because it is the assumption that none of the players are *actually* gay which permits such behavior in the first place. When athletes engage in on-field homoerotic behavior while maintaining their perceived heterosexuality, they continuously reaffirm and benefit from the heteronormativity and homophobia which constitute the athletic

field (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016). Art and Patrick are able to engage in a homoerotic victory celebration with the privilege of knowing that no one in the crowd will question their heterosexual identities or even interpret such behavior as homoerotic.

Ironic Heterosexual Recuperation

Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory does help explain Art, Patrick, and Tashi's behavior in their first interactions, and why their conversations subtly reaffirm heteronormativity and homophobia. Quickly becoming infatuated with Tashi after watching her play in the US Open tournament, the pair attend her family's party with the hope of introducing themselves. They catch Tashi alone as the party is winding down and convince her to walk to the beach with them for a smoke. In the conversation that follows, the trio discuss life, tennis, and life after tennis—Art and Patrick both attempting to flirt with Tashi along the way. Finally, as she gets up to leave, both boys ask for her number. Looking down at the pair of them, Tashi responds, 'I'm not a homewrecker' (Guadagnino, 2024, 00:34:22). Without missing a beat, Art replies, 'We don't live together,' Patrick adding sarcastically, 'It's an open relationship' (00:34:25). In this scene, Tashi playfully refers to the boys as a couple, joking that they are on the path to infidelity by asking for her number. Rather than deny this allegation, the boys both play into it in their responses. They do not rush to defend their heterosexual identities, displaying a certain comfortability with being labeled as gay, if even as a joke. Such behavior *could* be explained by the claim that a decrease in homophobia has occurred (Anderson, 2009; McCormack and Anderson, 2014). Indeed, while Kimmel's (1994) theory of masculinity as homophobia explains how men's deployment of homophobia is integral to their performances of masculinity, Art and Patrick *seem* to be doing the opposite, displaying their comfortability with accusations of queerness to assist in their heterosexual pursuit.

But if the goal of such behavior is heterosexual pursuit, is homophobia really being challenged? Anderson and McCormack (2010) explain that boys engage in *ironic heterosexual recuperation*, joking about homosexual desire in a way which 'seemingly dispels its possibility'. Art and Patrick play along with Tashi's joke because they take it as just that, a joke. They also take it as an opportunity to reaffirm their heterosexual desire for Tashi, jokingly insisting their relationship is 'open,' signaling their sexual and romantic availability for her. Anderson and McCormack (2010) explain that boys use ironic heterosexual recuperation as a way to affirm a heterosexual identity without being overtly homophobic. After all, if homophobia is the fear of gay people, what could be less homophobic than the willingness to characterize oneself as gay or permit others to characterize you in that way? But, just as athletes engaging in homoerotic behavior are assumed to be heterosexual, boys engaging in ironic

heterosexual recuperation reaffirm heteronormativity and homophobia. They assert their assumed straightness through jokes of homosexual behavior which signals to others: *I'm not being serious, obviously I am straight*. Thus, when Art and Patrick play along with Tashi's homewrecker joke, they are engaging in ironic heterosexual recuperation. They joke about being lovers to signal exactly the opposite, that they are interested in heterosexual intimacy with her. While this behavior comes off as charming in the film, it also reaffirms both heteronormativity and homophobia. The joke shared by the trio satirizes homosexuality in order to reaffirm the assumed heterosexual identities of the characters.

Homosocial Tactility

However, the following scene ponders whether every joke has a grain of truth in it. Art and Patrick lounge anxiously in their hotel room, arguing over whether Tashi will decide to pay their room a visit, a flirtatious suggestion which Patrick made earlier that night when Tashi left the pair on the beach. To their surprise, Tashi knocks on the door. They let her in and the trio resume their flirtatious dance. Sitting on the floor, they drink beer and share stories. Tashi occasionally alludes to a romantic dynamic between the boys during the conversation, but they both brush off her comments with awkward laughter. When the stories and the beer have dried up, Tashi seats herself on the hotel bed, motioning for Art and Patrick to join her. She briefly kisses each boy before leaning back, allowing them both to begin kissing her neck. As their make out session continues, the trio begin kissing in a three-way triangle, three pairs of lips against each other. And then, something unexpected happens. Tashi slowly pulls away, a smirk on her face as she watches the scene in front of her. Art and Patrick continue to passionately make out with each other, seemingly unbothered by the absence of the lips they had spent all night hoping to kiss. Tashi breaks their trance with a single word. 'Okay,' she says, the boys pulling away from each other to look at her. 'I'm going to bed' (Guadagnino, 2024, 00:43:47). Tashi gets up, reiterates that she is not a homewrecker, and leaves the pair sitting in stunned silence.

Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009) helps explain Art and Patrick's behavior in this sequence. Earlier in the scene, we again see the use of ironic heterosexual recuperation (Anderson, 2010). When Tashi inquires into Art's love life, Patrick jokingly replies, 'Art does fine for himself, I mean look at him!' (Guadagnino, 2024, 00:37:18). As he says it, Patrick reaches out to grab Art's cheek, but Art slaps his hand away. Patrick points out Art's physical attractiveness, but he does so in a humorous way to flirt with Tashi, reaffirming a heterosexuality identity. The superficial nature of their romance is seemingly confirmed shortly afterwards when Tashi addresses it head on. 'What about the two of you?' she asks earnestly, motioning between them as an awkward silence envelops the room (00:37:47). The boys laugh awkwardly, and Art directly

denies the allegation. Patrick simply remains silent with an uncomfortable look on his face. Neither boy is willing to sincerely admit to any homo-romantic feelings for each other, despite the ease with which they joke about such feelings and the homoeroticism they display during their tournament celebration.

Art and Patrick's heterosexuality is again called into question later in the hotel scene. As described, the sequence ends with the two boys making out. However, the way the boys react after Tashi leaves the room illustrates how they make sense of what just transpired, specifically how they satirize and reframe their homoerotic behavior. After their hotel door closes, Art breaks the silence, mentioning a pact they'd made earlier in which Patrick would allow Art to beat him in a tennis match the following day because Art's grandma would be watching. Art stands up, an erection clearly visible through his shorts. Patrick, turning toward him, smacks Art across his erect penis as he replies, 'I hope she has a fucking stroke' (Guadagnino, 2024, 00: 44:33). Art groans loudly, kneeling over in pain. He gives Patrick a hard shove and the scene ends.

Anderson and McCormack's (2014) analysis of *homosocial tactility* among student athletes explains how Art and Patrick are able to diffuse the tension of the situation by engaging in homoerotic behavior. The athletes in Anderson and McCormack's study shared beds with each other without compromising their perceived heterosexuality, even when homoerotic events occurred. One example from a boy named Stephen is particularly similar to Art and Patrick's situation. When asked how he responds when a friend sharing his bed wakes up with an erection, Stephen stated that 'sometimes you grab his cock, sort of as a joke, particularly if he's got a semi going' (Anderson and McCormack, 2014, p. 223). As Stephen explained, the action 'just relieves the tension' (Anderson and McCormack, 2014, p. 223). Other boys echoed the same sentiment, one explaining that he usually says something humorous like 'happy to see me?' when he sees his friends' erections (Anderson and McCormack, 2014, p. 223). For these boys, engaging in comedic forms of homoeroticism eased the tension caused by situations which could be interpreted as seriously homoerotic. Similar to individuals using ironic heterosexual recuperation, these boys satirized homosexuality to set themselves apart from it, affirming a heterosexual identity in the process. After Patrick takes a swing at Art's erection, the tension in the room immediately dissipates. Art returns the favor by giving his friend a shove, and the two are seemingly back to normal. The fact that Art and Patrick were drinking beer throughout the evening is also worth noting. González-López (2006) explains that alcohol consumption often plays an important role in male-on-male intimate encounters, especially as a way to dismiss such encounters as inauthentic or 'not counting'. Indeed, none of the men in González-López's study self-identified as gay, despite reporting homoerotic experiences. While Art and Patrick's alcohol consumption is never explicitly

mentioned, it is another explanation men use to affirm a heterosexual identity despite homoerotic behavior. Thus, after making out with each other, the pair act quickly to diffuse the tension of the situation. They do so by turning it into a joke, Patrick's penis slap being the first action that really brings life back into the room. The pair never discuss the event during the rest of the film, making their individual understandings of the incident difficult to gauge. On one hand, this could suggest that both consider the 'incident' not serious enough to warrant discussion, while on the other it could indicate that both understand the 'incident' to be *more* serious than they made it out to be, and therefore too difficult to talk about it. Regardless of their individual feelings, the fact remains that in the moment, both boys took steps to diffuse the situation by satirizing their homoerotic activity, distancing themselves from a homosexuality identity.

Hybrid Masculinities

Deciding whether or not Art and Patrick's make out at the end of the hotel scene challenges or reaffirm heteronormativity and homophobia is tricky. For one, Bridges and Pascoe (2016) argue that masculine practices can do *both*. However, they also focus on the ways that *discursive practices* produce homophobia and gender inequality, shifting their attention away from particular bodies labeled as heterosexual or homosexual. As such, I argue that the *act* of making out in this scene does not challenge *or* reaffirm heteronormativity and homophobia. Bridges and Pascoe (2016) suggest that *how* gender and sexual practices are interpreted, leveraged, and resisted matters more than sexual behaviors or bodies themselves. As the rest of this paper has shown, Art and Patrick engage in discursive practices which reinforce existing forms of sexual inequality. The fact that they engage in a passionate make out session does little to change this fact. In dislocating sexuality from particular homosexual or heterosexual bodies, Bridges and Pascoe (2016) render pointless the impossible task of trying to identify individuals as 'actually' gay or not. That is to say, they argue that the gendered practices which operate as forms of homophobia can target more than just gay men and are deployed by more than just heterosexual people. Thus, the answer to the question of whether or not Art and Patrick are 'actually' gay (if such an answer even exists) is insignificant, as it does not change the fact that they engage in masculinity projects which draw from both heteronormativity and homophobia. What their homoerotic behavior might 'say' about their sexual identities has little bearing on the actual effects of their masculine practices.

Conclusion

Challengers (2024) follows two young men as they navigate the trials and tribulations of sport, love, and friendship. Anderson's (2009) inclusive

masculinity theory and Bridges and Pascoe's (2016) discussion of enduring sexual inequality help explain these characters' gender practices, both how shifting understandings of acceptable masculinities shape their gender practices and how these practices influence the parameters of their friendship. I argue that even though Art and Patrick are able to incorporate elements of homoeroticism into their friendship due to declines in homophobia (Anderson, 2009), their friendship ultimately fails to challenge the heteronormativity and homophobia which define the world of sports (Bridges and Pascoe, 2016), illustrating the ways in which sexual inequalities are flexible and tenacious.

In this paper, I analyze the masculine practices which Art and Patrick engage in *and* illustrate some of the potential consequences of these practices. In doing so, I answer the call of Bridges and Pascoe (2016) who argue that nascent masculinities and homophobias should be examined 'in terms of *both* their forms and their consequences'. As shifting cultural understandings of masculinity continue to create new possibilities for gender practice, sociologists must ceaselessly analyze these practices to uncover how they may be sheltering forms of sexual and gender inequality, both old and new. Masculinities are performed in a multitude of ways and when actors engaging in nascent masculine practices are praised for challenging existing structures of inequality, the onus is on sociologists to ask: *are they really challengers?*

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