Sample Student Essay and Prompt

Directions for applicant: Imagine that you are teaching a class in academic writing for first-year college students. In your class, drafts are not graded. Instead, you give students feedback and allow them to revise their essays before submitting them for grades. In response to your first essay assignment (given below), you have received the following draft from Antonio, one of your students. Write a brief end comment (250 words max.) in which you offer advice to Antonio about how he might revise his essay. You do not need to submit a marked version of the sample student paper itself. We will be considering only your end comment.

Antonio's Assignment: Find a problem, tension, or complication that emerges from your textual analysis of a particular aspect of the essay, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” by Michael Kimmel, and craft an argument about your textual analysis so that it helps a reader understand Kimmel’s essay in a more nuanced way. You should not use any additional sources.

____________________________________________________________________________

Mask-ularity: Others Underneath

What does it mean to assert “we think of manhood as…” (Kimmel 23)? Michael Kimmel’s essay “Masculinity as Homophobia” is both an examination of this question and an exercise in answering. The essay claims “homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood” (24). Rather than being the mere fear of gay people, homophobia is defined by Kimmel as the “fear that other men will unmask us” (24) by revealing “our” un-masculine weaknesses. Awareness of this fear leads to shame because it reminds men that “we are not as manly as we pretend” (24). Kimmel explains that men react to the feeling of shame by reasserting their supposedly resilient masculinity through “exaggerated male behaviors and attitudes” (26) which rely on and support a system of labeling and treating others as “non-men” (27). Following Kimmel’s thinking, homophobia is an “organizing principle” (24) because it creates an organization of “others” who are distinctly “screens” (28) for men to exclude as a way of “proving the unprovable—that one is fully manly” (28).
The mandated exclusivity of masculinity, according to Kimmel, helps create a host of problems, such as sexual harassment of women (24-25, 30), increased health risks for men (26), and racism (26-28). Ultimately, his essay aims to create the understanding of masculinity necessary for forming a “politics of inclusion,” apparently the “only” source of relief from the ills of masculinity (30). Such a wish for a political solution seems fitting since the problem concerns the way bodies of people are labeled and made to act toward one another. However, given that Kimmel’s essay attempts to foster inclusion, its reliance on rhetoric which seems exclusive is puzzling. Is there a way to read Kimmel’s essay that reconciles his exclusive we-versus-other-men rhetoric with a “politics of inclusion”?

From its first word, the essay reaches out to the reader as part of a “we” (23). The essay’s pulling of the reader into a self-understanding marked by membership to a group which is under the “constant careful scrutiny of other men” (23) implies a masculine reader—indeed, the label for the reader’s group is later put simply as “we men” (29). Oddly, the possibility the reader is female or a violent “other man” is passed over. In other words, these groups are excluded from the “we” group Kimmel seems primarily occupied with persuading.

Kimmel’s reader is not just a man though—he is a certain kind of man. Continuing his introductory remarks on how homophobia scares men straight, Kimmel makes clear that “other men” do the scaring, creating the violence with which “we” silently comply. Despite his claim that “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (25), those called “we” in the section “Masculinity as a Homosocial Enactment” (23-26) are not described as violent. Rather, proclivity for violence is consistently attributed to others: the author, in first-person narration, hypothetically provoking six-year-old boys to fight (25); an anecdotal boy (a literal third-person) who is willing to fight (25). Unsullied, “we” the readers are passive men who may “scurry past a
woman being hassled by men on the street” (24), but certainly do not ourselves instigate such acts.

Possible rationale for Kimmel’s creation of an exclusive understanding of “we” appears in the second part of his essay, “Homophobia as a Cause of Sexism, Heterosexism, and Racism” (26-28). That “American men played out their definitions of manhood” (27) against people such as immigrants, gays, women, and others judged as “non-men” (27) Kimmel argues demonstrates how exclusion creates identities grounded in a sense of not-being other (e.g. not a sissy foreigner, but a strong American male). With this insight, the reader is offered a strategy for interpreting Kimmel’s construction of a nice “we” as opposed to mean “other men.” Without explicit acknowledgement, Kimmel has been playing with the creation of distance all along, opening the door for formation of new identities for “we”—a group that, while male, preserves for itself the possibility of distancing itself (as Kimmel’s essay does through its reliance on labels with asserted legitimacy like “we”) from “other men.”

His aim for a politics of inclusion still unstated and having just given “us” the tools to distance the potentially peaceful “we” from the violent “other men,” Kimmel seems perfectly poised after his section “Homophobia as a Cause of Sexism, Heterosexism, and Racism” to demonstrate precisely how to best exclude these “other men” and thereby create a more inclusive space for everyone except those oppressors “we” have thus far called “other men.” Even the subsequent section heading “Power and Powerlessness in the Lives of Men” (28) seems to hint at showing “us” an empowering application of the theoretical process of otherization.

And this is exactly what does not occur. Instead, Kimmel describes how men “see themselves as powerless” despite such a feeling “not accurately [describing] their condition” (29). In fact, Kimmel points out that the typical male response to such feelings of powerlessness is to partake in reifying the same forces of exclusion “of any we deem less than manly” in order
to win back a sense of manly agency (30). Noticeably, Kimmel’s exclusive boundaries have started to crack, and “we,” as those who “deem less than manly” (30), seize a more active role.

This break from the pattern seems odd given the previous passive description of “us.” By starting to drift away from the same feelings of “powerlessness” (29) felt by men, “we” have just come to a moment of self-reflection on our own power which seems particularly apt given that Kimmel has shown us in the previous essay section how exclusion can empower. Perhaps the withering of divisive labels such as “other men” signals the resolution of the exclusion/inclusion dilemma. Can “we” now collapse into purely inclusive politics?

No, tension persists. “Other men” will return even upon the moment of realization of a “politics of inclusion” (30) because “we” must expel those other men whom Kimmel has described as predatory and harassing, just as the oppressive men of the past used as justification for exclusion their perception of “non-men” (27) as “sexually aggressive” (27) and “violent rapacious beasts” (28). Kimmel avoids a blatant embrace of exclusion—the double negative of excluding exclusion is instead framed in its positive form as a “politics of inclusion” (30). Does Kimmel’s political inclusivity necessitate reproduction of structures of masculine exclusivity?

A more complex understanding is suggested by his concluding description of masculinity as “a relentless test” (30). Recognizing the political as similarly vexing enables the reader to appreciate how the heightening drama of Kimmel’s questioning makes transparent the irresolvability of identity into a non-exclusive sphere such as “we.” If, as Kimmel asserts, men’s feelings of powerlessness lead them to blindly wield power over themselves and “others,” the awareness created by confronting exclusivity, even if it only sheds light on its complications, is a step in the right direction where the failure is “running away” (30). Deciding what Kimmel’s “we” is (and is not) is an exercise in temporary identity-stabilization which, if fruitful, can
advance its undertakers’ perspective enough to move past itself, just as the reader must critically dwell with Kimmel to move past his reproduction of unnecessary exclusion.

Work Cited