

# **Gear Maketh the Leatherman? A Perspective on Leather Cultures and Masculinities**

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## Abstract

This article explores masculinities within leatherculture through an autoethnographic approach. This includes a discussion of a photoshoot titled *What Makes a Leatherman?*, created in collaboration with photographer Thomas Evans, to problematise and play with notions of gender within leatherculture. The article pays tribute to the critical importance of Tom of Finland's work to leatherculture, while acknowledging valid critiques of the artist's work. In addition to autoethnography, it draws from research on leatherculture, acknowledging that such scholarship is scarce and precarious. The article underscores the importance of storytelling from within the community and suggests some paths for future research, including leather's intersections with cultures of sustainability. It concludes with a call to embrace the diversity and fluidity of leather identities, demanding unity and openness.

## Acknowledgment of Country

I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Kamaygal clans of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands I live and work. I pay my respects to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. Sovereignty of these lands has never been ceded; these are stolen lands. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

## Gratitude

I am deeply grateful to the workshop participants at the Dialogical Bodies conference; the generous discussion enriched my view of leatherculture. I thank research assistant Safwan for his support with preparing this article. Leatherfolk: thank you for the world you are.

*'No, I have no regrets. I will die from this disease that I may have caught in a place like the Slot. It will consume me. Unfortunate, maybe. But I have no regrets. I loved my world.'*

From an essay by leatherman Geoff Mains,<sup>1</sup> written shortly before he died from AIDS in 1989.

### *Introduction*

This article examines notions of masculinity among leathermen through an autoethnographic approach: I am a leatherman. A selective review of literature is followed by a discussion of *What Makes a Leatherman?*, a gender-bending leather photoshoot I did with New York-based photographer Thomas Evans in October 2023. The photographs were presented and discussed in a workshop at the Dialogical Bodies conference in Borås, Sweden, in April 2024. The workshop discussion, which ranged from construction of gender to issues of voice and power within subcultures, guides the thinking in this article. The article contributes to decades of fragmented scholarship on leatherculture by leatherfolk at a moment when that culture is increasingly divergent, acknowledging that it does so from a white and privileged position. The article concludes by pointing to potential research paths within leatherculture.

### *Background*

Touko Laaksonen, also known as the artist Tom of Finland, died in November 1991. Until his death, his work was not widely known in his native Finland outside of the gay community. Suddenly Finnish newspapers were flooded with his art. I was a wide-eyed sixteen-year-old and saw in his artworks men who were deliriously happy with being gay. Living in a quiet Finnish country town, I wanted to find these men and inhabit their world. In the three decades since, I have found many of them, and I cherish the world I am now a part of. Yet, it is a world that on occasions struggles to accommodate genderqueer leathermen like me—and even more so many others who do not fit the narrow physical ideals of the visual iconography of leatherculture. This paper argues that to thrive, leatherculture (or perhaps more accurately the plural, leathercultures) should embrace diversity and its own, queer contradictions.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoff Mains, 'The View from a Sling,' in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Geoff Mains (Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991), p. 238.

## *Leatherculture*

Although fetish is probably as old as human culture: adorning ourselves in leather goes back to the dawn of humanity. However, leatherculture as we recognise it today emerged after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> *Leatherfolk* (1991), edited by leatherman Mark Thompson<sup>3</sup> and comprising essays from diverse leatherfolk, provides an excellent insight into the emergence of leatherculture in the US. Disillusioned, disenfranchised veterans made up the core group of the first generations of leathermen. As essays in *Leatherfolk* vividly demonstrate, BDSM was inseparable from leatherculture in the early decades, unlike in today's divergent leathercultures. Equally embedded was a kind of uncompromising masculinity: hard, hairy, muscular. Laaksonen was one of a handful of gay artists shaping the culture from its earliest days. That form—the artworks of Tom of Finland—can rightly be critiqued today as narrow.

Hunter Scott productively problematises Tom's work in the context of intersectional queer politics, while noting that we should simultaneously 'insist on our rights to joy and solidarity.'<sup>4</sup> Scott demands that Tom's work not be sanitised from its fascist origins because such erasure ultimately harms all of us by reinforcing structures of normativity. A critique like Scott's does not invalidate the pleasure and affirmation many leathermen, me included, receive from Tom's work. Instead, it potentially opens his work up to a broader range of queer folk, including leathermen who may have previously felt alienated by it. Leatherculture today is wonderfully diverse. On social media, I am connected to a geographically and culturally divergent leather community ranging from Japan to Indonesia to Sri Lanka to Guyana to Ecuador. It is beyond the scope of the present study to investigate if and how leatherculture permeates non-Western cultures as a colonising entity, or if and how it is 'absorbed' without an asymmetry of power and cultural hegemony. Applying Arturo

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<sup>2</sup> Niels Van Doorn, 'The Fabric of Our Memories: Leather, Kinship, and Queer Material History,' *Memory Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): p. 89; Kyle Kingsbury, 'A History of Leather at Pride,' 2021, p. 10, <https://aphyr.com/data/posts/358/leather-pride.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Thompson, '1990s. Black Leather Wings,' in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson, pp. 157–165 (Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Hunter Scott, 'Facing Sameness: Reconsidering the Radicality of Tom of Finland,' *InVisible Culture* 36 (2024): p. 14.

Escobar's concept of pluriversality<sup>5</sup> into such an investigation could be a future project to better understand how leathercultures emerge, exist and commingle across diverse worldviews. The fetish for leather transcends cultures, languages and worldviews: people from vastly different backgrounds have a reason for an immediate bond and subcultural connection. I have come to love my global siblinghood deeply.

Images Rissanen 01.jpg & Rissanen 02.jpg

Caption: *What Makes a Leatherman?* Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans. Hair and makeup by Wesley.

### *Masculinities*

Despite some media discourse suggesting otherwise through (deliberate) misinterpretations of 'toxic masculinity,' there is nothing inherently wrong with masculinity. Problems can arise when notions of masculinity become narrow and singular, and when masculinity is overtly associated with aggression, force, brutality: a hardness. And yet suggestions of a 'soft' masculinity are often mocked in memes harking back to a time when men allegedly were men. The fear of softness can become pathological. In my worldview, masculinity and femininity, and more broadly gender, exist on a non-binary, non-linear multidimensional spectrum. Humanity has a long history when it comes to accepting and honouring the diversity of gender beyond the binary construct of male/female. The colonialist attempts to erase this diversity are futile because gender is inherently biologically diverse and often fluid. In *Evolution's Rainbow* (2004), biologist and trans woman Joan Roughgarden provides a rich account of the diversity and fluidity of gender across animals, the kingdom of life that we humans are part of. The book is a liberating read: diversity and fluidity are inherent to any notions of 'biological' gender.

Leatherculture emerged at a time and in a context—the US and Europe in the 1940s and 1950s—where binary gender roles were fixed to an extreme extent. This has likely shaped ideas of masculinity among leathermen. Yet even BLUF, a leather organisation at the traditional end of leathermen's organisations, has advocated for self-identification for many

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<sup>5</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2018).

years: if you identify as a man, you are a man, and you are welcome to join the organisation.<sup>6</sup> This is important to acknowledge at a time when the hashtag #gaynotqueer is gaining traction, concurrent with the emergence of trans-exclusionary organisations like the LGB Alliance and increasingly hostile anti-trans legislation in the US and elsewhere. In my home of Warrang/Sydney, almost all events for leathermen are inclusive of people who identify as men. It does not mean our work in this regard is done. One of the competitors for a leather title in Sydney in 2024 identified as non-binary and became a target of online trolling ahead of the competition. Commendably, the community dealt with the incident decisively and swiftly in support of the competitor. Van Doorn notes<sup>7</sup> the long histories of trans men and trans-masculine folk within leatherculture, including as bootblacks, who clean, maintain and repair boots and other leather items at events. Ideas of masculinities within our communities have perhaps always been more diverse and fluid than we acknowledge.

Image Rissanen 03.jpg

Caption: *What Makes a Leatherman?* Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans. Hair and makeup by Wesley.

### *Whose Voice? Situating Leather Culture Discourse*

At Dialogical Bodies, a workshop participant—who was, notably, not from leatherculture—stressed the importance of protecting the subculture: it should not be accessible to everyone. The subsequent discussion on whether it was even appropriate for me to discuss the culture with people not belonging to it was tender and generous. Discourse on a subculture needs to acknowledge whether the voice comes from within or outside of the subculture. Why? By definition, a subculture is in a subservient, even antagonistic, position to the dominant culture surrounding it. Locating the voice acknowledges its inherent power and agency as much as its limitations. For example, the previous reflections on masculinities in this paper are coloured by my own genderqueer identity. I am a privileged, white cisgender man, yet sometimes my geared-up expression as a leatherman includes elements traditionally considered ‘feminine.’ The connection for me is to do with BDSM rather than drag or transvestism: high-heeled shoes and tightly laced corsets are primarily a pain kink for me. Managing the self-inflicted,

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<sup>6</sup> BLUF blog, ‘What Makes a Man?’ <https://bluf.com/b/477>, 2018, accessed 4 August 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Van Doorn 2016, p. 93–96.

slowly accumulating pain that heels and corset wear requires a particular focus that reinforces and amplifies the dominant side of my sexual identity. Both heels and corsets have an appearance that we understand as ‘feminine,’ yet I would not describe the sensations they create for me as feminine. Heels force one to walk in a somewhat ‘feminine’ way, perhaps, but what matters to me is that within half an hour a persistent, slowly increasing pain sets in. Meanwhile, a corset severely restricts the way the torso moves and affects how one breathes. Both restrictions can be interpreted as one becoming an object, a notion also sometimes viewed as ‘feminine,’ yet I don’t see it that way. The brutal pain of heels and the relentless constriction of a corset with steel bones, both self-inflicted, bring out my unrelenting dominant side. I am in control of my pain, and I will be in control of yours.

Why share this, a facet of sexuality and sexual behaviour, in a professional context? In addition to unapologetically jettisoning any shame I previously carried relating to my sexuality, it has taken me a long time to realise that we cannot leave the telling of our stories, whether with words, images or our bodies, to people outside of our communities. They are our stories to tell, about ourselves, for ourselves. This paper is in part a response to the call by Wagner for the ‘recentering of subjectivity within queer historiography led by queer-identified scholars.’<sup>8</sup> I first read the passage on leathermen in groundbreaking fashion theorist Valerie Steele’s seminal book *Fetish* (1996) as a fashion student more than 25 years ago. Rereading it now as a leatherman feels like politely listening to a tourist account of a place and a people Steele didn’t quite try to understand. Steele’s sources on leather are mostly secondary, some of which are texts by leathermen while others are not. Oddly, Steele cites the British fashion writer Colin McDowell—instead of speaking with a leatherman, for example—who claims that the origin of leather’s appeal lies in the fact that ‘the unaroused male penis [is] pink and pathetic.’<sup>9</sup> According to McDowell leather reasserts masculine virility. A leather jacket ‘disguises’ the body’s ‘inadequacies,’ ‘but it also functions as an icon of butch, raunchy, even brutal, masculinity—and raw power.’<sup>10</sup> Brutal masculinity. Yes, we leathermen can look brutally masculine and be brutally masculine, but I argue we are not only

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<sup>8</sup> Travis L. Wagner, “‘We Are Openly, Proudly Subjective... This History Is Important to Our Contemporary Survival’: Queer Embodied Knowledge and the Curatorial Work of ICT-Based LGBTQIA+ History Content Creators,” *Journal of Documentation* (2024), p. 1380.

<sup>9</sup> Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Steele 1996, p. 160.

that. In my experience, we leathermen are also loving, tender, funny, and yes, soft. Softness does not in any way compromise our masculinity. In fact, it can amplify it. This critique does not mean people from outside the leather community, including Steele, cannot write about us. When doing so, please speak to us and ask us how accurately your writing reflects who we are. Positive examples of leather scholarship by ‘outsiders’ already exist: Van Doorn<sup>11</sup> is not a leatherman yet his careful engagement with his research subjects is embodied in the writing cited throughout this article.

A single voice from within a community does not represent that community: leatherfolk and leathermen are not a monolith. As a leatherman, I do not speak on behalf of all my fellow leathermen. Here, I point to authors in the field, in addition to those already mentioned. *Urban Aborigines* (1984) by the late Geoff Mains remains a pioneering text by a leatherman. Mains held a doctorate in biochemistry but relished in broad scholarship that intersected with his life in leather. For *Urban Aborigines*, he drew from diverse sources on physiology and psychology to build understanding of BDSM within leatherculture. Shortly before dying from AIDS in 1989, Mains wrote an essay for *Leatherfolk*, a love letter to us; a quote from that essay opened this article. *Urban Aborigines* remains a gift and a blueprint to leathermen scholars: Mains was unapologetic about who he was as a leatherman while critical, thorough and imaginative in his scholarship. This paper does not attempt to build a comprehensive review of scholarship on leatherculture by leatherfolk, but I acknowledge here two other scholars. I welcome communications regarding others. Andrew Childs is a geographer from within the leather community exploring notions of masculinity and place.<sup>12</sup> Kyle Kingsbury is a leatherman scholar who has written a history of leather at Pride events.<sup>13</sup> I should note I am aware of the two authors being leathermen because they explicitly state so in their texts; this is partly why I do, too.

Image Rissanen 04.jpg

Caption: *What Makes a Leatherman?* Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans. Hair and makeup by Wesley.

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<sup>11</sup> Van Doorn 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Childs, “‘Where You Are Is What You Wear’: The Leather Community, International Mr Leather and Hyper-Masculinity,” in *Masculinities and Place*, pp. 109–124 (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Kingsbury 2021.

### *Collaboration with Thomas Evans*

As Tom of Finland's work shows, visual storytelling is vital to subcultures in creating, maintaining and evolving the visible facets of subcultural identities. The notions of 'soft masculinity' discussed above informed the photoshoot with photographer Thomas Evans. Evans has had a long career in photographing a diversity of gender expressions. His ongoing series, *Femme the Man*, explores this in depth. Conventionally 'masculine' men—muscular, hairy—are made up, laced in corsets, donning wigs, and posing 'effeminately.' The work may be initially disorienting but ultimately it is alluring. Rather than diminished, the masculinity of the men in the series is amplified: perhaps it takes a 'real' man to sit in hair and makeup for two hours, to put on a corset, and to walk around in heels. These acts are physically uncomfortable and potentially psychologically confronting: it requires a strength of character to undergo this transformation and to allow another document it. The vulnerability one needs to participate in such a shoot requires a robust sense of self.

Image Rissanen 05.jpg

Caption: *What Makes a Leatherman?* Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans. Hair and makeup by Wesley.

A recent event inspired the shoot. In June 2022, my husband and I attended a fetish dance party in Sydney. I wore a leather jock, a bulldog harness, Muir cap or a cover, and stilettos with fishnet stockings. It is worth acknowledging here that a Muir cap is an object with deep traditions and beliefs: it often signifies dominance within the community. Within parts of the community referred to as Old Guard, the right to wear it is earned. On the dance floor, another leatherman in a Muir cap looked me in the eye, raised his index finger, and shook it side to side in disapproval. The same night, my husband in leather and sporting fierce eyeshadow was told by another leatherman: 'Men don't wear makeup.' After an hour we left. It is thankfully my sole negative experience in person, yet it hurt at the time as this was a community I had only recently begun to reconnect with. Maybe I didn't belong after all? That uncertainty continues to shape me. In leather, I modulate my body postures more than I do out of leather. I mostly don't cross my legs when sitting. I avoid 'effeminate' hand and arm movements. I lower my voice when I speak. Why do I care so much about appearing masculine? At times, I fear that my presentation in heels and a corset may be seen as a mockery, as disrespectful; I certainly felt it that night. Yet, no aspect of what I wore was

accidental. I have always endeavoured to learn as much about the leather traditions as possible, so that I understand when I break with tradition, for reasons that are valid to me. I always strive for respect, though I know I may not always be perceived as respectful. Thinking back to that evening, I wish I'd had the confidence to engage the leatherman in conversation: how did I offend him so much that he would wag his finger at me?

The photoshoot with Thomas Evans is a playful yet serious exploration of what it means to be a leatherman when the construction of gender—what it means to be a man—is deliberately and humorously destabilised. We began the shoot with a classic Tom of Finland biker look, one I wear somewhat regularly: quilted jeans and jacket, shirt with tie, boots, gloves and a Muir cap. Look by look, I took on more feminine elements, from a corset to hosiery to heels. Halfway through the day, I shaved my beard off and spent two hours having my face made up in drag by Wesley, a brilliant New York drag queen. We did some photos with just a wig cap and the shoot culminated me donning a platinum Marilyn wig. Getting cat-called while near-naked on a Brooklyn rooftop was unexpected. Reflecting on the shoot reminds me of some of my queer heroes who were not afraid of humorous play with gender: Andy Warhol in Marilyn drag and a moustached Freddie Mercury in drag for the video of 'I Want to Break Free.' Yes, gender is a very serious matter and yet we can play with it. I hope this 'serious playfulness' comes through in our shoot.

Image Rissanen 06.jpg

Caption: *What Makes a Leatherman?* Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans. Hair and makeup by Wesley.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

This paper concludes with a consideration of opportunities for future research regarding leatherculture, by people within it. As this paper has indicated, scholarly voices from the community are still scarce but not non-existent. While excessive subjectivity may be a risk, scholarship from within leather communities should be encouraged. Our cultures and communities are often precarious and somewhat invisible to mainstream discourse, yet even as a subculture within a highly heterogeneous sexual minority, leatherculture is worthy of study and documentation, especially for future generation of leatherfolk. Our histories have at times been deliberately erased, and our cultures seriously destabilised by the HIV/AIDS crisis

in the 1980s and 1990s. We ought to tell our stories about ourselves for us and for future generations of leatherfolk.

Some readers likely know me as a fashion and sustainability scholar; it has been my work for two decades. I do not intend to keep these streams of scholarship entirely separate in my future work. Within fashion and sustainability research, leather raises many valid questions about animal welfare, our relationships with the more-than-human more broadly, and about the use of toxic tanning chemicals in leather production, and more. When discussed inseparably from leatherculture, the questions are productively problematised. For example, as Van Doorn discusses,<sup>14</sup> there exists a deep culture of care and maintenance of leather within the community. At many leather events, bootblacks are present and they will clean and condition any leather item requiring care, in addition to cleaning and polishing boots. The lifespan of many items is thus extended to years, sometimes decades. Furthermore, there are long-established traditions of passing items on from one member of the community to the other; this sharing economy existed before the term did. It seems that there is rich ground to explore the notion of emotionally durable design<sup>15</sup> beyond individual products in the context of a specific material culture that includes fetishising a material. Such research would not be a silver bullet to give leather the moniker of ‘sustainable,’ but the approach would shed light on the grey areas within a topic that is often presented in bluntly black and white terms. Two decades working in fashion and sustainability research has taught me that often the greatest insights reside in those grey areas. The current overproduction and overconsumption of fashion by an industry hellbent on growth even at the risk of our own annihilation could perhaps learn something from fetishising a material and the cultures of care and reciprocity around that material.

Just as Geoff Mains proclaimed his love for this world in the quote at the start of this article, I love the world I inhabit. Yet leather is contentious in many contexts. As Kingsbury discusses,<sup>16</sup> the debate continues within LGBTQIA+ communities: does kink, and alongside it leather, belong at Pride? My response to the debate continues to be turning up to Pride marches in leather. We may not fit comfortably within the wider LGBTQIA+ communities, but we are an integral part of them. And we are less monolithic than our physical appearance

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<sup>14</sup> Van Doorn 2016, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy* (Routledge, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Kingsbury 2021.

sometimes suggests. More than thirty years ago in closing his essay ‘Black Leather Wings’ for *Leatherfolk*, Mark Thompson<sup>17</sup> pondered on his existence as both a leatherman and a radical faerie:

*‘Somehow, I reflected, definitions of leather and faerie would never be quite the same. The fusion of the two had produced a third, and possibly unknown, quantity. Whatever it was, whatever it would grow to be, it had created a state of satisfaction I had never felt before. It was here that one journey ended and—by crossing time and cultures—another would begin.’*

In trying to make sense of two subcultural identities that seemed at odds, Thompson reminds us that a ‘leatherman’ is not some fixed, immutable entity. Three decades later Scott echoes Thompson: ‘we cannot be fixed: we embrace fluidity.’<sup>18</sup> Our humanity—ourselves as constantly evolving biological, spiritual and social entities—means that we are forever in flux, responding to and commingling with the world around us. Over dinner, a friend recently said: ‘Aren’t we all non-binary?’ Of course, they are right: when we ditch the binary thinking about gender, we all emerge as non-binary, even when many of us, myself included, continue identifying as men. Yet the statement is liberatory: gender identity becomes a personal creation, which it arguably has always been anyway. Even when we have tried to be ‘men’ or ‘women,’ none of us have ended up exactly alike. How dreadfully boring would that have been anyway?

My call to my fellow leathermen is for us to continue exercising care and love for our community and its diversity. This applies especially when we encounter a member who we might not yet fully understand. Simply trust that they know themselves better than we ever can. There is ample prejudice coming our way from outside the community for us to inflict it upon ourselves. We must stand united in all our differences. Our diversity is our strength, one of the greatest gifts.

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Thompson, ‘1990s. Black Leather Wings,’ in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991), p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> Scott 2024, p. 15.

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#### Author biography

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