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Review of Contemporary Masculinities in the UK and the US: Between Bodies and Systems,
Stefan Horlacher and Kevin Floyd (eds.),
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Contemporary Masculinities in the UK and the US: Between Bodies and Systems, a 2017 collection edited by Stefan Horlacher and Kevin Floyd, is the sixteenth volume in the Palgrave Macmillan “Global Masculinities” series edited by Michael Kimmel, who authored one of the chapters, and Judith Gardiner. Scholars contributing the volume’s dozen essays are based at US, UK, and German universities. Five authors are affiliated with Dresden University of Technology, which is Horlacher’s home institution. The book has grown out of a five-year research project on comparative masculinity funded by the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation, Kent State University (Floyd’s home institution), and Dresden University of Technology.

The individual chapters and the collection in its entirety are a timely intervention into the emerging, perhaps solidifying, field of masculinity studies. The editors sought to extend the debate within masculinity studies to a discussion of bodies immersed and (mal)functioning in various systems. This ambition, announced in the book’s subtitle, is articulated by Floyd and Horlacher in their introductory essay:

this collection explores masculinity as a concept that operates in relation to a difference that the general displacement of the focus on systems by the focus on bodies implicitly suggests is unbridgeable: between the systemic and the bodily, the abstract and the concrete. (4)

Scholars have asked in the past if the body is an object of study among other such objects or the very instrument and foundation of all our knowledge. The latter position in particular “risk(s) occluding the larger structures or systems in which corporeal masculinity is implicated” (5). Even a scholar such as Judith Butler, who construes the (gendered) body as functioning within a specifically discursive

system, “invokes some larger social field that conditions the operations of the body, without fleshing out that larger field in any concrete sense” (5).

The editors do not dismiss phenomenological approaches, however, as they claim that “(t)he contributions collected here inquire how masculinities become apparent, how they manifest, ‘adumbrate’ (Edmund Husserl), or take shape, and what systemic functions they have” (5). With a nod to intersectionality, they proffer an answer that can never be complete because of the field’s inherent complexity:

(s)ome chapters situate a complexly embodied manhood in relation to some very specific systems: these include law, language, the institutions of Wall Street, what one chapter calls the “post-patriarchal,” and those international, managed flows of bodies we have learned to call human trafficking. (7)

Thus expressed, the volume’s intellectual ambition seems inspired by the “systems novel”, theorized by Thomas LeClair as a fiction investigating a particular system, such as the law, whose complex meanings are irreducible to a master reading. (Katja Kanzler invokes LeClair’s term in the volume’s penultimate chapter.)

Paul Higate’s essay on the emotional habitus of modern-day mercenaries reflects on some differences between British and American masculinities. (The concept of emotional habitus is borrowed from Ian Burkitt.) Based on participant observation and other sources, Higate determines, not surprisingly perhaps, that US mercenaries are more likely to engage in a narcissistic display of bravado and are more likely to take risks, including unwarranted risks, than UK mercenaries, who are acculturated to a more understated style of masculinity. The labels he gives these distinct national types are, respectively, “cowboys” and “grey men”. Higate discusses the American “cowboy” type, whom US mercenaries are likely to embody, in terms of “a gendered anomie derived from the tensions between aspiration and possibility” implicit in the American Dream (32). In contrast, “particular dominant modes of British masculinity” are characterized by “a sense of stability, permanence, and tradition [that] speaks to a lengthy past,” which is that of the British empire. Higate notes in his conclusions that “low-key contractors—while part of a privatized, and for many, controversial occupying force—may be operating largely under the radar and, as such, experience greater latitude and perhaps impunity” (34), an observation which complicates a reading of “cowboys” and “grey men” along political lines.

Charity Fox offers a reading of Frederick Forsyth’s bestselling novel *The Dogs of War* (1974), set in Zangaro, a fictionalized version of Equatorial Guinea where Forsyth served as a reporter. The plot revolves around an attempted coup carried out with the use of mercenary soldiers. Fox’s reading is based on a discussion of “rugged individualists”, exemplified by Cat Shannon, who engage in “systemic coups”. Shannon assumes control of the dramatic political process, but bends it to his will while acting for the good of the many: he intervenes in the seemingly predictable power grab he had been hired to effect when he chooses to defy his

employer. Fox reads this narrative pattern, with its pronounced emphasis on a heroics of individual choice, as both informed by non-fictional accounts of actual mercenaries and as affecting those accounts. Forsyth's novel exemplifies "prosthetic cultural memories" which "create long legacies for understanding the cultural places that 'real' mercenaries can occupy in globalized systems" (55).

Elahe Haschemi Yekani reads Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) as post-9/11 narratives in which a (perennial) crisis of masculinity is universalized by virtue of being equated with a broader political and social crisis. This is especially problematic in the case of the events of 9/11 because, "(d)espite the hypervisuality of the falling towers," 9/11 was traumatizing specifically due to "the lack of imagery pertaining directly to victims" (69). And yet, this lacuna was promptly filled by "stereotypical male figurations" (70). Haschemi Yekani reads the confluences of masculinity-in-crisis with a broader political and social crisis as a specifically gendered privilege: "Both facets of the privilege of crisis—as the predominant mode of narrating masculinity and as the relinking of male crisis to universality—produce what I call re-privileging tendencies" (60). The ultimate stake in resisting these tendencies concerns the question of whose experience will count as properly human. But the way to curb the re-privileging of masculinity is to sidestep the universalizing narrative rather than constantly dispute it: "Only by fundamentally severing masculinity from universality can there be a turn away from the perpetuation, rather than the dismantling, of the discourse of the crisis of masculinity" (60).

Wieland Schwanebeck reads *The Thick of It* (2005–2012) in the context of a larger discussion of the body politic and of male politicians' sexually charged posing. He concludes a brief overview of the concept of the body politic, from Plato to Ernst Kantorowicz, by noting

a visible gap; for whilst ... those studies dealing with the body politic mention the head, eyes and ears, legs and feet, a back and a belly, a nose and a tongue, pores and nerves, and even the anus ... the body politic is lacking in the genital region. (79)

The political body's lack of access to sexual pleasure was once presumed a condition of social cohesion. However, the current cultural norm reverses this rule: "the body politic may, in fact, not so much depend on its head and vital organs, as on the assumption of a fully erect penis" (80). As noted by Slavoj Žižek, it is now possible for male politicians, including Silvio Berlusconi, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, to boast of their sexual virility and project a self-image reminiscent of Holbein's rendition of Henry VIII (75–76). Ultimately, Schwanebeck's commentary on the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan* and on the BBC series' characteristic "phallic rhetoric" (86) ends on a note of ironic ambiguity:

It is left to the viewer's imagination whether the foul rhetoric and the phallic-aggressive masculinity performed in the political game ultimately stresses hidden political potency or the

exact opposite. Chances are that the Leviathan, cowering behind the hill, is not hiding an erection, but a lack. (92–93)

Sarah L. Steele and Tyler Shores comment on the participation of male celebrities in the “Real Men Don’t Buy Girls” campaign addressing sex trafficking, launched in 2011. “Anti-trafficking rapidly attracted celebrity advocates, as ‘modern-day slavery’ emerged both as a pressing issue and a ‘trendy’ cause” (99). Unfortunately, the campaign reflected and arguably perpetuated the symbolic inequality of the sexes by portraying young women as commodities and by suggesting that they may only be rescued by men. Moreover, campaign spots emphasized seemingly gratuitous (if self-consciously ironic) displays of masculinity, such as Sean Penn using an iron to grill cheese. Steele and Shores read these displays as examples of “a compensatory masculinity” because stereotypically masculine traits “are used to hide the failure of these men to live up to the heroic masculine savior ideal; that is, to be able to end trafficking” (106). The authors acknowledge that celebrity participation could play a role in a campaign designed to influence buyers’ behaviour, but they point out that such campaigns are more likely to work if they engage with, and learn from, on-the-ground activism.

Steele and Shores’s argument is couched in a broader discussion of the celebrity phenomenon and of consumerism. This focus fits the campaign in question, but also seems a bit arbitrary insofar as other potential approaches seem equally relevant; for example, embedding a discussion of trafficking in the context of workers’ rights and of child labour is a distinct possibility.

Brigitte Georgi-Findlay examines the series *Deadwood* (2004–2006) for its treatment of masculinity in the setting of a late nineteenth-century gold-mining town. The storyline illustrates “the destruction of the economic order of self-employed, individualist miner-entrepreneur, an order to be replaced by the political economy of corporate state capitalism” (128). Although the show features female characters and underscores their self-empowerment, it focuses primarily on its male characters. While these individuals engage in objectionable behaviour, including racist and misogynistic acts, they “still attract our interest and sympathy” by virtue of being shown as “both victims and perpetrators at the same time” (128). Moreover, *Deadwood* “contains a powerful message of the redemptive possibilities of human interaction and community ... that also pertains to the performance of masculinity” (129). The show thus offers a glimpse of a political alternative to the statist capitalism whose onset it portrays and it ties this more hopeful vision to a presentation of gender roles, especially of masculinity.

Velina Manolova reads James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) “as a tragic narrative, where tragedy tells us something about gender” (131). She distinguishes between immature performative masculinity and a more complex and more mature manhood, adding the third possibility of a theatrical gender queerness. The way Baldwin’s gender performativity differs from Judith Butler’s lies in his valuing of

the second option, which assumes that a mature masculinity is expressive of an inner manhood and which implies an ethical dimension that is difficult to locate in Butler's position on gender:

In Butler's terms, if the performative is not something a "subject elects to do," but that [sic.] the "performance constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express" ..., how can the subject be held responsible for the performance? (138)

Manolova attempts to resolve this difficulty by turning to one of the founding moments of British cultural studies. The narrator David's guilt-ridden response to his lover Giovanni's sentencing and execution exemplifies what Raymond Williams called "liberal tragedy": "the struggle of individual desire, in a false and compromising situation, to break free and know itself" (147). Manolova points out that "David, in a sense, usurps Giovanni's position as a tragic hero" (148) even though Giovanni's fate is controlled by external forces, such as racism and class prejudice, which play a part in his sentencing, in contradistinction to David's self-inflicted psychological conflict. David thus embodies "white male liberal guilt" (139), which we are invited to read as a psychological defense mechanism.

Alexandra Schein discusses the politics of Irish-American masculinity in recent movies and TV series. She reads the presentation of Irishness as a guise enabling the filmmakers to engage in a more general reflection on masculinity, in line with Robyn Wiegman's argument that "white male identity is fashioned as a minority identity denied public representation" (169). Schein speaks of the "alleged crisis" of masculinity in a manner similar to Haschemi Yekani in an earlier chapter, suggesting that the "crisis" is a gimmick helping to foreground and privilege masculinity. Describing a range of strategies used to render (and bolster) traditional masculinities, Schein points out that "(t)he coded resuscitation of the working-class hero in some of the narratives bespeaks a continued yearning for simpler and less problematic forms of male identification in US culture" (171).

Michael Kimmel discusses White Supremacists in the US as responding to the presumed "emasculatation of the American White man" (189). Based on interviews and other sources, he contends that the movement draws on such disgruntled demographic groups as war veterans and descendants of farm and business owners who have lost, or have experienced their parents' loss, of long-held family property. These men construe their downward mobility as emasculation at the hands of "what they call a Wal-Mart economy ... and a nanny State that doles out their birthright to ungrateful and undeserving immigrants" (188). Their trumpeting of their metaphorical emasculation is accompanied by their criticism of "the masculinity of the Other—Jews, gays, Blacks, Latinos, women ..." (189), which typically oscillates between the poles of hypo- and hypermasculinisation of the Other. In this overtly racist and misogynistic discourse, race and gender function as proxies for class.

Kimmel is not unsympathetic towards the economically disenfranchised, even though he disagrees with their political positions:

The White Supremacists are at least half right, they *have* been forgotten in the rush to the global marketplace. They may have some legitimate gripes, though they are delivering their mail to the wrong address, the right address being neoliberal economic policy ... Today, racist movements are “about” many things—anti-globalization, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, racist, sexist, and homophobic—all in one go. Underneath it all is the seething resentment of a lower middle class that finds itself utterly disenfranchised, dispossessed of their entitlement, threatened by new competition. (196)

Katja Kanzler reads William Gaddis’s *A Frolic of His Own* (1994) as allegorizing the postmodern condition in which there is no master narrative and no possibility of a totalizing coherence. She does this by calling on LeClair’s concept of “systems novel”, which elaborates and transforms the historically earlier category of the encyclopedic novel. The “systems novel” represents, in the sense of portraying and of formally reenacting, a world constituted by a complex web of systemic interrelations. The system—the law in Gaddis’s novel—implies both a fatalistic determinism and an emancipatory potential, rendering individual agency problematic without simply dismissing it. In some respects, Kanzler’s reading is similar to Kimmel’s argument and to Schein’s contribution because Kanzler focuses on the protagonist Oscar Crease’s sense of downward mobility and his inadequately nostalgic response to it. Her discussion of the motif of “ghostly suicide”, reflected in Oscar’s play but also in his lawsuit against himself, introduces the figure of inner conflict and outright contradiction, as well as immaturity, discussed by Malonova. Ultimately, “(t)he novel juxtaposes the impossibility and deadness of the patriarchal mastery for which Oscar strives.” It offers, however, glimmers of hope in characters tentatively embodying “postmodern manhood ... as well as [in] its own decentered literary form” (215).

Ulfried Reichardt focuses on the representations of Wall Street and masculinity in contemporary American film and fiction. His argument is based in part on Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation in *Democracy in America* that money has become the primary medium of distinction “in the absence of inherited differences in rank and status” (221) and on Niklas Luhmann’s contention that money “can be understood in a modern, functionally differentiated society as a symbolically generalized medium of communication,” which makes it “functionally equivalent in terms of exchange to power and love” (222). Reichardt comments on a range of fictions ranging from Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and including William Gaddis’s second novel *J.R.* (1975), another “systems novel” focused on the circulation of “paper money”, to Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), and Oliver Stone’s film *Wall Street* (1987). He notes a mesmerizing fascination with a quickly turned profit and the narcissistically invested masculine performance which financial success can engender before moving on to Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Marta McPhee’s *Dear Money* (2010), partly to observe that tradesmen’s stereotypical masculinity is also adopted by women.

The special importance of *Cosmopolis* for this reading comes from DeLillo's focus on a narrowing temporal horizon. DeLillo suggests that an economy based on short-term profit all but eliminates a sense of the past and conflates the present with the future by amplifying risk. (Notably, the central financial activity in *Cosmopolis* is the short sale.) Reichardt reads this systemic effect (or systemic flaw) of modern finance as effectively demolishing the presumed rationality of the *homo oeconomicus*: Wall Street masculinity is characterized by irrationality in its

(a)ffinity to risk and overconfidence, rituals and competition within a rather tightly-knit network based on relationships linked to personal acquaintance and spatial proximity (in contrast to the usual assumptions regarding finances as a radically globalized sector) ... (229)

Reichardt is not the only one to describe masculinity with figures of homosociality (e.g., "rituals and competition ..., personal acquaintance and spatial proximity") without invoking Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term. Indeed, her name fails to appear in *Contemporary Masculinities*. This seems surprising and somewhat disappointing because, while Sedgwick is more frequently read in the context of queer theory, *Between Men* (1985) is one of the cornerstones of masculinity studies and it informs at least some of the analyses in *Contemporary Masculinities*. Homosociality is a powerful analytical tool for understanding patriarchy and masculinity, not only where homophobia is being addressed (e.g., briefly in Kimmel's contribution), but more generally as the paradigm of men harbouring interest in and looking after the interests of other men. As a system determining the interactions of (male) bodies, homosociality seems to fall directly within the purview of the project outlined by the volume's editors. Sedgwick's erasure therefore seems unfortunate.

That is a minor complaint, however. The volume offers a number of illuminating readings and it reports on fascinating ethnologic work. It is also remarkably coherent in the selection and arrangement of individual chapters, which are inter-linked by recurring themes and lines of argument that include discussions of gender nostalgia, the figure of a masculinity in crisis and its universalizing portrayals, and the intersections between masculinity and race, as well as between masculinity and class. Systems such as the finance economy, the law, and the phallic symbolism of political power are directly addressed, and Luhmann's systems-theory approach is invoked, as is LeClair's "systems novel". The contributors' broad range of intellectual strategies fulfills the editors' ambition to present (male) bodies caught up in a spectrum of systemic interdependencies.