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Introduction

Writing Male Bodies in Britain and the United States

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The body is “a site of masculine proof, the ultimate testing ground for identity,”² and as such, it has become central to the study of men. Nancy Tuana argues then that men’s studies are “incomplete without the addition of perspectives on male embodiment.”³ Tuana’s claim originates in Susan Bordo’s hypothesis that men are not one dominant and indivisible category, but plural and problematic beings. For Bordo, “actual men are not timeless symbolic constructs, they are biologically, historically, and experientially embodied beings.”⁴ Such an analysis is helpful insofar as it creates a distinction between men as a category and masculinity as the physical embodiment of a specific gender.

Drawing upon the work of Judith Butler, whose “genealogical approach” of the human body insists on “the social and discursive origins of what we think about the body,”⁵ men’s studies scholars have redefined the way they study male bodies, not so much as “objects of a process of social construction,” as active participants in “social processes.”⁶ Sociologists particularly have investigated the way “masculinity is brought into action through [physical] practices.”⁷

The six articles that make up this special issue all address these notions of “embodiment” and “embodied masculinity” in Britain and the United States across disciplines. It is our contention that, as noted by Juan G. Etxeberria, “an

interdisciplinary approach" (Etxeberria, p. 32) will help us better grasp the complex nature of the male body, as well as allow us to uncover part of "the pattern of embodiment involved in hegemony."⁸ What the articles demonstrate is that, while "dominant notions of embodied masculinity speak of force, hardness, toughness, physical competence,"⁹ the study of the male body is irremediably linked with that of the female body and apparent threats of feminization.

The best way "to study, so as to transform, the reproduction of the masculine in men," Calvin Thomas writes, consists in shedding light on what he calls the "scene of visibility" provided by "the matter of writing."¹⁰ For Thomas then, "one possible productive way to analyze male power and hegemony, and to reconfigure male identification and desire involves a specific sort of attention to the "matter" of the male body and to the materialization of that body *in writing*..."¹¹

In all six articles, the male body appears as a locus of power, sometimes lost, sometimes regained, where the problematic of authority and domination is always at stake. New discourses on men as identified by Whitehead have shown "growing concern about men's health" as bodies appear "to be eroding and changing."¹² However new these perspectives are, they definitely help us understand the long-time anxieties that have been affecting male bodies for centuries, as shown by Gilbert Pham-Thahn's analysis of the image of the dandy in eighteenth-century British society. Our perspective thus deviates from the tension inherent to masculinity as a whole set of cultural and social practices to deal more specifically with the physical embodiment of masculinity and its latent anxiety towards perceived feminization processes as perceptible in the "scene of visibility."

Critic Terrance MacMullan has called for male scholars to adopt a feminist gaze on men's studies for according to him, feminism is not only about women and male domination, it has become an "advocate on behalf of all people suffering socially imposed domination due to categories of class, race, caste, sexuality, ability, age and gender."¹³ While the authors of this issue do not overtly take up this "feminist gaze," the presence of women is felt surreptitiously throughout their study. In "The Soft American, Jack Kerouac's Muscular Prose and Cold War Poetics in *Vanity of Dulooz*," Pierre-Antoine Pellerin takes up on this perspective, showing how

American writer Jack Kerouac responded to the perceived Cold War “crisis of masculinity” famously identified by Arthur Schlesinger in 1958. The American historian not only identified a crisis but suggested that women’s emancipation was partly responsible for the growing distress of men. Indeed, the American man of the sixties was suddenly forced to question his domestic authority. Women thus represented a threat and seemed an “expanding, aggressive force, seizing new domains like a conquering army, while men, more and more on the defensive” found it difficult to accept orders from their “new rulers.”¹⁴ Pellerin thus demonstrates that Kerouac used his literary work as a weapon to fight against the emergence of “softer” masculinities, “bringing the war on softness and effeminacy into literature” (2). Quoting from President Kennedy, who warned that “softness” was to “destroy the vitality of the nation,”¹⁵ Pellerin shows that Kerouac saw it as an emergency to fight against the feminization of society, and dispel suspicions of homosexuality. Kerouac’s “muscular prose” thus gave a choice position to the male body as he considered writing and the mimicry of sports it involved to be both an athletic and literary performance. It is Pellerin’s contention that Kerouac partly failed in perpetuating his muscular and masculine ideals as the writer mainly harked back wistfully to past models of masculinity expressing “his bitterness before his own softness as well as his nostalgia for a vanishing performance of masculinity” (Pellerin, p. 26). As evidenced by the strict definition of the word, a crisis “implies a deviation from a previous state of health and stability,”¹⁶ a period, as the example of Kerouac indicates, that seems to belong to a distant and imaginary past for men.

The perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity and hyper-masculinity because of perceived threats of feminization is analyzed in its most radical form by Juan G. Exberria. In “Heuristic Mutilation As a Male Tool: From Epistemophilic Sadist Voyeurism to Necrophilic Onanistic Masochism,” Exberria investigates the representations of male sexuality in some of its most extreme practices, namely the “reaction of some men to women’s corpses as an auto-erotic experience,” (Exberria, p. 31) in British and American movies and novels from the 1980s and 1990s, from Martin Amis’ *Money, Money* (1984), to Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), and Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (2000). For the author, transgressive sexualities

are in fact “political weapons” aiming at perpetuating the “status quo,” (Etxeberria, p. 30) associated to hegemonic masculinity, or what he calls “hyper-masculine ideology” (Etxeberria, p. 44) and its crisis. According to Etxeberria, such forms of male sexuality are to be understood within the context of the ubiquitous crisis of masculinity already studied by Pellerin and the irrational desire to make up for feelings of insecurity. But they are also symptoms of capitalism’s “violent discourse about the body and sexuality” (Etxeberria, p. 39).

The continuation of hegemonic masculinity is described in a milder form by Brendan Gough, who demonstrates how, in the field of men’s health, feminized practices have been in fact remasculinized. In “Reconstituting Feminised Practices As Masculine: Discourse Dynamics in the Field of Men’s Health,” Gough draws on practical research in the field of men’s health in order to show that in an increasingly healthist society such as Britain, where men as well as women are now concerned about their health and appearance, mass media representations and men themselves tend to reinforce hegemonic masculinities when they discuss men’s health and men’s bodies. Linking the broader social discourse of the media with men’s individual experiences, Gough first notes the growth of media coverage of men’s health, addressed in general newspapers such as *The Observer*, in dedicated websites and in magazines. In those media, masculinity is seen as a fixed essence, while even the Men’s Health Forum publishes a “man manual” where the male body is treated as a car-like machine. Indeed, when concern for food, health and diet is expressed in the media, Gough points out, it is minimized or reframed within a masculinized discourse. This remasculinization of health practices echoes the discourse of men who self-identify as “healthy,” although they distance themselves from actively pursuing a healthy lifestyle. Healthy lifestyles are linked by the interviewees to masculine fields and values, such as sport or self-control, while the kitchen is reframed by participants of a health forum as “a factory for the manufacture of masculine bodies” (Gough, p. 57). Addressing the recent phenomenon of metrosexuals, Gough also analyzes how beauty practices are accompanied by more traditional masculine goals, such as getting attention from the “ladies” or gaining self-respect. In a way, however, Gough’s analysis suggests as well that “[p]atriarchy

is therefore not a simple question of men dominating women, as some feminists have assumed, but it is a complex structure of gender relations in which the interrelation between different forms of masculinity and femininity plays a central role.”¹⁷

The feminization of the male body, however, has also been used in literature in order to subvert dominant notions of masculinity, as evidenced in Delphine Cadwallader’s contribution entitled “The Half of a Man”: Wilkie Collins and Victorian Medical Discourse on Gender.” Cadwallader focuses on the representation of men and the male body in the work of Wilkie Collins, an English nineteenth-century writer. A close friend of Charles Dickens’, Collins was as popular with the public as he was unpopular with critics—his novels earned him such epithets as “vicious” and “perverse” (Cadwallader, p. 67)—and it is that very tension Cadwallader analyzes. The author’s thesis is that both the appeal and controversy surrounding Collins’ work can be explained by what she calls “the blurring of gender” in the way he described his male and female characters (Cadwallader, p. 64). Collins’ male characters, Cadwallader points out, “are often a strange mixture of both genders” (Cadwallader, p. 65), which can be associated with a systematic and almost “obsessive” undermining of the dominant “masculine model” (Cadwallader, p. 65), so central to the development of medicine as a science and of the medical profession in the nineteenth century. It is Cadwallader’s contention that Collins’ feminized male characters were a response to the quasi invisibility of men in the developing medical science and its corollary discourse on gender, which pervaded the whole Victorian society. The transition from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century medicine was based on the creation of two main categories of patients: the poor and women (Cadwallader, p. 68). Sickness was said not only to feminize, but also to dehumanize men (Cadwallader, p. 69). It was this absence that Collins contradicted in his own novels by indulging in systematic descriptions of male sickness and weakness, thus undermining hegemonic discourses on masculinity.

In “Male after a fashion: Post-Genital Masculinity in Question,” Gilbert Pham-Thahn examines the figure of the dandy—also known as fops, *Incroyables*, coxcomb, Beaux (butterfly or not), Exquisites or fashionables—in eighteenth-century English society. Based on anonymous poems and songs, his study illuminates the

representation of men whose narcissistic behavior condemned them in the eyes of their contemporaries, who emphasized “the incompatibility of manhood and fashion” (Pham-Thahn, p. 85). Because they challenged “the unquestioned paradigm of masculinity” that lay on authority and “preconceived superiority” (Pham-Thahn, p. 81), dandies were depicted as a threat to masculinity and they were often compared with “sensuous aesthetes,” who “display[ed] the un-masculine in men” (Pham-Thahn, p. 81). As a consequence, the dandy was largely perceived as being the embodiment of weak, deviant, and “pathologized” (Pham-Thahn, p. 85) masculinity, while his sexuality was associated with that of women or even children.

The interest of the article lies in the variety of the sources examined and although the dandy is not often the writing persona, he does always appear, voluntarily or not, as “threatening the coherence of the phallographic system” (Pham-Thahn, p. 84). Pham-Thahn’s minute analysis of focalization thus unveils a constant tension “between visible and invisible forms of masculinity in the textual configurations” (Pham-Thahn, p. 82). Finally, according to Pham-Thahn, the corpus under study bears witness to an emerging pattern of masculinity that is to be understood as a new convention of masculinity whose ambition is to unsettle the “artificiality and arbitrariness of the gender line of divide” (Pham-Thahn, p. 91) and reject the “binary approach to identity” (Pham-Thahn, p. 92). As a consequence, it seems that escaping the heteronormative model did not so much endanger traditional masculinity as it allowed it to evolve, leading to a new masculine model, one that refused uniformization. Such description is consistent with the idea developed by Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, who defines hegemonic masculinity as “a hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy.”¹⁸

The dandy thus performs masculinity, just as the drag kings studied by Xavier Lemoine do. In “Proliferating Masculinities: New York Drag King Shows,” Lemoine develops Judith Halberstam’s analysis of “female masculinities,” drawing on the specific example of Dred’s show at the Wow Café but also analyzing classic elements of drag king shows, such as bodily performance and the use of dildos. Halberstam has illuminated the status of “the drag king as a performer who pinpoints and

exploits the (often obscured) theatricality of masculinity.”¹⁹ Unlike Halberstam, who remains doubtful of the drag kings’ subversive intent and privileges the figure of the butch, Lemoine insists on the subversive potential of drag kings “as a form of masculinity that challenges the dominant narrative” (Lemoine, p. 96). His article focuses on the representation of masculinity by a female body, a performance which undermines the binary system of genders and their essentialization, while also challenging the invisibility of dominant masculinity and of the “unmarked male body” (Lemoine, p. 102). The main tool for this subversion is, according to Lemoine, parody. Drag kings’ parodic performances of masculinity indeed echo Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performance, an imitation without original.²⁰ By using the theatricality of performance, the drag king can play with the dominant sex/gender fiction, refusing to answer the ontological questions s/he raises (Lemoine, p. 103). In this way, performance can deregulate gender, by offering multiple masculinities through different angles of representation. This proliferation of masculinities is another way through which drag kings subvert dominant masculinity. Lemoine’s specific example, Dred, is a well-known African-American drag king performing in New York City. The author examines how her show uses exaggeration and parody to mock masculinity but also conflates the two genders, as the use of dildos enables drag kings to question the equation between penis and phallus. Lemoine also examines the connection between gender and race through an analysis of Dred’s use of the Afro wig and her references to black popular culture. According to him, Dred’s production of black female masculinity generates a proliferation of identities which goes against the dominant binary logic (Lemoine, pp. 107-108). Indeed, drag kings offer multiple bodily enactments of gender, also addressing the question of sexuality by incorporating gay masculinity and lesbian desire – the drag king shares commonalities with the gay man but also with the butch lesbian. Thus, female masculinity opens up possibilities that derail the dominant fiction of sex/gender/sexuality.

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NOTES

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- ¹ Five papers of this special issue were originally presented at the international conference "Performing the invisible: Masculinities in the English-speaking world," organized at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 on September 25-26, 2010. The editors of this special issue wish to thank the other organizers of the conference, namely Ariane Blayac, Claire Conilleau, Raphaël Costambeys-Kempczynski, Claire Delahaye, Claire Hélie, Marie Moreau, Pierre-Antoine Pellerin, and Emilie Piat. The video of the conference is available online <<http://www.men.univ-paris3.fr>>.
- ² Michael S. Kimmel, "Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1920," in *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005) 58.
- ³ Nancy Tuana, "What's a Nice Girl like You Doing in a Text Like This?" in Nancy Tuana (ed.) *Revealing Male Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. x.
- ⁴ Susan Bordo, "Reading the Male Body," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32, No.4 (1993), p. 696.
- ⁵ Susan S. Stocker, Susan S. "Problems of Embodiment and Problematic Embodiment," *Hypatia*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer, 2001), p. 31.
- ⁶ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, N°6 (2005), p. 851.
- ⁷ Jon Swain, "How Young Schoolboys Become Somebody: The Role of the Body in the Construction of Masculinity," *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July, 2003), p. 311.
- ⁸ Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 851.
- ⁹ Stephen M. Whitehead, "Materializing Male Bodies," in *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions*, Malden: Blackwell, 2002, p. 189.
- ¹⁰ Calvin Thomas, "Reenfleshing the Bright Boys; or, How Male Bodies Matter to Feminist Theory," in Judith Kegan Gardiner (ed.) *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 63.
- ¹¹ Thomas, p. 62. Emphasis in original
- ¹² Whitehead, p. 182.
- ¹³ Terrance MacMullan, "Introduction: What is Male Embodiment?" in Nancy Tuana (ed.) *Revealing Male Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 3.

¹⁴ A. M. Schlesinger, "The Crisis of American Masculinity," in *The Politics of Hope and The Bitter Heritage*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008 (1958), pp. 293.

¹⁵ J. F. Kennedy, "The Soft American" in *Sports Illustrated*, December 26, 1960, p. 16.

¹⁶ C.E. Forth, "Men and Masculinities in Anglophone Scholarship," in J-J. Courtine (ed.) *Histoire de la virilité de l'Antiquité au XXIe siècle. Vol. III: XXe siècle*. Paris: Seuil, forthcoming (2011).

¹⁷ Demetriou, p. 343.

¹⁸ Demetriou, p. 337. In his study of "bear masculinity," Peter Hennen shows a similar process through which "Bears challenge hegemonic assumptions about male sexuality," while "recuperat[ing] gendered hierarchies central to the logic of hegemonic masculinity." Peter Hennen, "Bear Bodies, Bear Masculinity: Recuperation, Resistance, or Retreat?" *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Feb., 2005), p. 27.

¹⁹ Judith Halberstam, "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene," *Social Text*, No. 52/53, *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender* (Autumn - Winter, 1997), p.104.

²⁰ In her analysis of drag, however, Butler does not mention drag kings.

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