



**CULTURE, SOCIETY &
MASCULINITIES**

1941-5583 (PRINT)
1941-5591 (ONLINE)

**VOLUME 4
ISSUE 2
2012**

MEN'S STUDIES PRESS, LLC
PO Box 32
HARRIMAN, TN 37748 USA
WWW.MENSSTUDIES.COM
423-369-2375 (PHONE)
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Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.mensstudies.com/content/121105/>

TOC OF THIS ISSUE:

<http://www.mensstudies.com/content/n8g37815r86k/>

TO LINK TO THIS ARTICLE

Suffix the DOI of your article to the URL <http://dx.doi.org/>

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CONFERENCE REPORT:
MASCULINITIES BETWEEN THE NATIONAL AND THE
TRANSNATIONAL, 1980 TO THE PRESENT:
AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
(KENT STATE UNIVERSITY, AUGUST 5-7, 2011)

Phyllida Lloyd's recent award-winning film, *The Iron Lady* (2012), which depicts former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her rise to power, features a montage in which Thatcher is seen dancing with U.S. president Ronald Reagan. The short sequence is an eerie yet fitting emblem of the 1980s and a fascinating (gender) image on a number of levels, not just because both political leaders are impersonated by actors in this *danse macabre*, but because their individual political careers have been read as masculinity performances—on the one side, the B-movie Cowboy-turned-President, and on the other the “Iron Lady,” whose alleged lack of femininity was constantly levelled against her and became part of her public image. A conference on British and American Masculinities since 1980 inevitably has to deal with the long shadow cast by the Thatcher and Reagan years, and many of the papers presented during the three-day conference, *Masculinities Between the National & the Transnational, 1980 to the Present*, held at Kent State University, August 5-7, 2011, indeed addressed the diverse cultural and political ramifications of this era. It was the second of three conferences to emerge from the ongoing research project, *Towards Comparative Masculinity Studies*, a transatlantic cooperation initiated by Prof. Stefan Horlacher (Dresden University of Technology) and Prof. Kevin Floyd (Kent State University), sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and Kent State University. Having already welcomed scholars from three different continents in Dresden in 2010 in order to offer transnational perspectives on masculinity and the intersections between literary production and gendered

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identities in the post-war era up until the beginning of the Thatcher/Reagan years, this time, global developments in masculinities of the past thirty years were interrogated by scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, Estonia, New Zealand, and Germany.

In his opening address, conference co-organiser and host KEVIN FLOYD (Kent State) summarised the current state of research in the field of Masculinity Studies which has undergone both diversification and differentiation in recent years, moving from the groundbreaking work in the 1980s which focused on (monolithic) masculinity as a response to feminism towards post-1990s differentiation, which is dominated by a pluralised conceptualisation of masculinities. With a number of influential studies on male images, representations and embodiments of male identity having been published in recent years, Floyd stressed that there was an increased need not just to re-address traditional questions, but to interrogate masculinities from a transnational and international perspective in the political climate of the past thirty years. He argued that the emphasis of this conference would also have to include perspectives outside the strictly delineated field in order to examine how the neo-liberalist movement which started with the rise of Thatcher and Reagan in the U.K. and in the U.S., respectively, has shaped male identity politics in contemporary narratives. Following a short welcoming address by TIMOTHY S. MOERLAND, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Kent State University, the first conference panel (entitled "Handle with Care") invested much thought into the fragility of male identity constructions, but also addressed the perception of monstrous embodiments of masculinity in popular media. SETH FRIEDMAN (DePauw University) dealt with the disguises of male movie villains in "Constructing the Perfect Cover," focusing on the way contemporary misdirection films—narratives with twist endings—force the viewers not only to reinterpret the events they have been presented, but also to question their beliefs about gender. Characteristically, the protagonist of misdirection films is male and finds out that he has been living a dream or a hallucination. The villains in both Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000), on the other hand, reveal a paradoxical constellation at the heart of these narratives. Behind the mask of a sick man, a dangerous type of virility is revealed, which proposes a spiritual bond between the figure of the criminal mastermind and contemporary anxieties about disempowered masculinity. The monstrous acts and murders committed by psychopathic villains were also at the heart of KERRY LUCKETT'S (Purdue University-Calumet) paper, "'In Just Seven Days': The Frankenstein Image and the Making of Queer Identity through the Male Body", which applied queer readings to Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* (1995), interpreting them as contemporary adaptations of the Frankenstein Myth. As the serial killer characters in both texts cultivate their queer selves through their victims' bodies, it could be argued that the thriller genre challenges the common conceptualisation of queering as a monstrous cultivation of sexual identity; however, these texts still remain ambiguous about the disturbing agendas of their protagonists. The first panel was concluded with observations on "Borderline Personality Disorder and Black Masculinity in Mainstream U.S. Hip Hop" by MERRI LISA JOHNSON (University of South Carolina-Upstate). Johnson presented findings from inquiry into current medical discourse on schizophrenia, a diagnosis often falsely assigned to Black male subjects, and linked this debate with the controversy surrounding U.S. Hip Hop artists like Kanye West, whose lyrics reveal clusters of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Johnson referred to critics like Judith Halberstam, whose readings of popular texts celebrate the monstrous as a subaltern voice, in order to show how West's rhetoric of protest addresses gendered and raced prejudices. However, these complex sub-texts are often sidelined by the general audience, who prefer to read West's lyrics as ultimately superficial, violent, and dangerous statements of a racial minority.

Friday's second panel ("Scripting Manliness") put recent developments in western masculinity scripts under scrutiny: ERIK PIETSCHMANN (University of Tuebingen, Germany) examined the confessional first-person narratives of two celebrated Generation X books in his paper entitled "Violence as a Male Narrative." Whereas Alex Garland's *The Beach* (1996) depicts the drug-fuelled explorations of European backpackers in Thailand, Bret Easton Ellis' infamous *American Psycho* (1991) tells the story of yuppie serial killer Patrick Bateman, who seems more affected by questions of etiquette and taste than he is by his cannibalistic murder sprees. Pietschmann showed how the talkative "rhetoric of confession" which has become so characteristic of late 20th century novels is not only instrumental in translating outrageous incidents to the readers, but does also affirm the fragile masculinity of autodiegetic narrators. The idea that a significant amount of recent cult books and films essentially revolve around fragile and deformed masculinities was also at the heart of "Working Bodies, Dislocated Identities," presented by RAILI MARLING (University of Tartu, Estonia). Marling argued that the portrayal of men in American and British films of recent years has undergone a shift from the hegemonic "musculinity" (Tasker) of the late 1980s towards powerless working class males, who experience social mobility as a threat to their self-image. Marling demonstrated that a transnational perspective on male identities in British and American film culture hints to some parallels with regard to economic realities and the way these are reflected in gendered notions of power: both the male strippers in *The Full Monty* (1997) and the blue-collar protagonists in *Blue Valentine* (2010) try to compensate for economic powerlessness and their fear of femininity by resorting to archaic ideas about masculinity. KEISHA LINDSAY (University of Wisconsin-Madison), in "Neoliberalism, Feminism, and Ethnic Authenticity in the Black Atlantic," widened the scope of the conference even more in order to include a different class of narrative altogether: the common perception of a crisis occurring amongst Black males is shaped by crisis authors in different media. Many of these texts share characteristic features in the way they portray Black men as an obsolete group that always seems to be in crisis. Crucially, blame is bestowed not so much on the effects of neo-liberalism, but on professional Black women and Black feminism, as the media construct an over-simplified image of Black women as overachievers. Lindsay furthermore elaborated on the idea that the crisis narratives themselves do not only diagnose the problem, but also contribute to it by sticking to commonplaces of gendered racism.

The opening day concluded with two papers on "Gendered Inversions," delivered by NADYNE STRITZKE (Justus-Liebig University Gießen, Germany) and Mirjam Frotscher (Dresden University of Technology, Germany). In her socio-cultural take on "The Manly Art of Pregnancy," Stritzke examined the *topos* of male pregnancy from its biblical roots in the Genesis myth (for what is the story of Eve, who was allegedly made from Adam's rib, if not a fantasy of a male giving birth?), up to contemporary examples (such as U.S. trans* man Thomas Beatie, who has given birth to three children) and located it within different critical realms. Evidently, the idea of male pregnancy is no longer just the exclusive domain of comedies (like the 1994

Arnold Schwarzenegger-vehicle, *Junior*, the tagline of which boasts that “nothing is inconceivable”), feminist science fiction texts (such as Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 1976) and Internet hoaxes, but has transformed into a politically heated subject in trans* and intersex debates. Stritzke’s emphasis on the performative dimension of fiction was shared by MIRJAM FROTSCHER’s take on contemporary British and American novels, “Gaining Visibility/Undoing Maleness: Non-Normative Masculinities since the 1990s.” Once more, the transnational framework made it possible to draw conclusions regarding the developments on both sides of the Atlantic: By analyzing four contemporary novels (including works by Jackie Kay and Jeffrey Eugenides), Frotscher demonstrated that the last two decades saw an increase in literature where gender is presented as negotiable and where the norms of those who exclude non-conformists are questioned. Frotscher drew upon Judith Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity in order to examine masculinity as a performative phenomenon that is not merely limited to the male body, in order to include female as well as intersex bodies. Frotscher pointed out the irony one can find at the heart of these queered narratives: if masculinity can be performed simply by enacting a few key markers and donning some clothes, then the whole (binary) gender system is eventually revealed as frail, always in danger of being exposed by apt performers.

Saturday’s first panel (“Pater Familias”) dealt with the presentation of different concepts of father figures presented in U.S. and British fiction and film. In the first paper SONJA SCHILLINGS (Free University of Berlin, Germany) focused on mostly absent fathers and the figure of the pirate in her talk “Hypermasculine Fatherhood and the Public-Private Divide: Absent Fathers and Outlaw Dynasties in *Pirates of the Caribbean*”. As the pirate motif has seen a renaissance following the success of Disney pirate movies, this renewed interest also sheds light on popular masculinity scripts: the split between hypervisible fathers and invisible mothers, the role of pirates as public agents who serve as male gate keepers of public life, and, of course, the way their parasitical business life-style represents an afterglow of the 1980s “Greed is good”-attitude as a form of freedom. NATALIA GEORGIEVA (Kent State University) focused on the absent father and the paternalist system in “Fatherhood and *Fight Club*,” linking the perceived psycho-emotional trauma the protagonist experiences to the figure of the absent father. Palahniuk’s book illustrates the importance of the father-son bond and the disastrous consequences of its disruption, which ultimately results in violence and anarchy in the novel. While Schillings and Georgieva focused on mostly absent fathers who cause their offspring to look for surrogates, DANIEL LUKES (New York University) turned his attention to those fathers who are cut off from the reproductive agreement and are left with little to no control or connection to their offspring, in his paper “The Omega Male: Fatherhood in Contemporary British and U.S. Fiction.” Using novels by Will Self and Cormac McCarthy, Lukes expanded on how the role of the father has undergone changes due to the breakdown of the nuclear family unit and how contemporary literary texts articulate, assert, and grapple with models for fatherhood based on nurture, domesticity, and protection.

The second panel (“Drama Queens”) that day was kicked off by a presentation of the many filmic incarnations of the shady character of Tom Ripley. In his talk entitled “Mr. Ripley’s Renaissance: Adaptable Masculinities for the New Millennium,” WIELAND SCHWANEBECK (Dresden University of Technology, Germany) examined how the non-specified, shape-shifting nature of this literary character,

who lacks any real core, motivation, and clear sexual identification, invites opposing and non-stringent filmic interpretations, including depictions of Ripley as a tragic 1950s closet homosexual, as a sadistic sociopath, and as a dilettante upstart. What provides common DNA for these shifting adaptations is their transnational perspective and their subversive potential: Ripley's parodies of stereotypical masculinities provide a fitting critique of a major dilemma both in adaptation theory and masculinity studies: the persistent idea of the original that must not be betrayed. In the second paper of the panel, entitled "At Home in the Battlefield: Mercenaries and Paramilitary Patriotism in *The A-Team*, 1983-87," CHARITY FOX (University of Baltimore) examined the function of the mercenary figure that appears cyclically in popular American discourse, parallel to times of war, crises in White patriarchal masculinity, and redefinitions of American exceptionalism. Set against the backdrop of a nation still recovering from the Vietnam War, shows like *The A-Team* offered a combination of serious, isolated, and alienated warrior figures in primarily homosocial battlefield situations, metaphorically highlighting paths for recovery for both "regular" (White male) Americans and the nation as a whole, from the crisis of confidence. The last paper of the panel was delivered by E. ANNA CLAYDON (University of Leicester, U.K.) on "Masculinity and the Crime Drama in Britain and the U.S.: The Transnationality of the Detective and His Nemesis." Starting with the assumption of crime drama being the one genre which crosses national boundaries with the most ease, Claydon substantiated this claim by marking the crossovers that have occurred between the U.K. and the U.S., focusing on the inclusion of British masculinities in contemporary U.S. detective shows (such as *The Mentalist* and *House, M.D.*) in particular. All of these texts formulate the detection of crime within a field of references and pre-existing ideas of masculinity which enable them to re-frame what a "successful" man is or can be.

The last panel on Saturday, entitled "Manning the Nation" broadened the transnational perspective with the papers delivered by Davinia Thornley (University of Otago, New Zealand) and Ed Madden (University of South Carolina-Columbia). DAVINIA THORNLEY interpreted Robert Sarkies' film *Out of the Blue*, a searing recount of New Zealand's largest mass-murder (the 1990 killing of thirteen residents of an isolated seaside community) in her talk, "A Case of 'National Genre Confusion'." Instead of lingering on the perpetrator and his failed masculinity, *Out of the Blue* focuses on the community affected by this volatility and emphasizes a psychological rather than a physical narrative development instead. In this regard the film inverts the established relationship between cinematic categories by providing art house narrative and aesthetic conventions while employing subject matter firmly encoded as "Man Alone." In his paper "Exploring Masculinities: Intimacy, Affect, and Masculinity in Ireland, 1998-2002," ED MADDEN focused on the award-winning short film *Chicken* (2001) to sketch the changing public attitude toward portrayals of masculinity and male intimacy. Madden traced the evolving cultural representation of masculinity in the 1990s and pointed out how this representation was influenced by historical shifts in Irish culture (both social and economic). In his reading of *Chicken*, Madden demonstrated that the level of intimacy depicted in the film represents the affect associated with male-male intimacy as the very limit of cultural intelligibility.

Sunday saw one final panel, dedicated to "Transnational/Transactional Masculinities." DEBORAH COHEN (University of Missouri-St. Louis) presented some findings from her field work in the milieu of Mexican migrants living in Chicago. Some

of the results outlined in her paper, "Sex and Betrayal: The Long Arm of Patriarchy in a Transnational U.S.-Mexican Social World," strongly emphasised the resiliency of patriarchy as a social form: Having encountered and interviewed several Mexican men who entertained both relationships with their wives in Mexico and with White, female American women (positing a major tension between reliable, traditional kinship systems and the idea shared by many migrants that extramarital affairs outside of their hometown did not count), Cohen suggested that migrants who had experienced numerous subordinations—with regard to their ethnicity, race, nationality, and class, respectively—often resorted to transnational patriarchal ideology in order to stabilise their disrupted biographical backgrounds. The last text to be illuminated in the conference was a controversial slasher spoof by one of the most celebrated contemporary directors. In "Beyond Gender: Praxis, (Post) Marxist Aesthetics, and Tarantino's *Death Proof*," WILLIAM WHALEN (University at Albany-SUNY) argued that Tarantino's film resorts to a post-Marxist aesthetics and moves beyond conventional means of representation. By employing Freud's topographical model of the psyche and a Derridean terminological framework, Whalen analysed a number of scenes from Tarantino's film in which a multi-racial assemblage of women defend themselves not only against the serial killer, Stuntman Mike, but (on a symbolic level) also enact the re-united fragmented body which Marx draws upon in order to conceptualise the division of labour under capitalism.

During the concluding roundtable discussion, key ideas of the past three days were summarised and re-examined. It became clear that the impetus of many papers pointed to the necessity to move beyond the traditional framework and to offer an even more systemic glance at the gendered political framework; these aspects were readdressed and elaborated on in the final conference of the transatlantic cooperation project in Dresden in June, 2012. For more information on *Bodies—Systems—Structures: Masculinities in the UK and the US, 1945 to the Present*, see <http://tu-dresden.de/slk/bodies-systems-structures> and <http://www.comparativemasculinities.com>. Selected papers from the proceedings of the Kent conference will be published in 2013.