



## INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP REPORT

“BETWEEN THE NATIONAL AND THE TRANSNATIONAL, 1945-1980:  
MASCULINITIES IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE BETWEEN  
WORLD WAR II AND THATCHER/REAGAN”  
(JUNE 9-11, 2010, DRESDEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, GERMANY)

If current trends in popular entertainment are anything to go by, it seems that gender concepts of 1950s and 60s culture are currently heading for a comeback. Successful TV series like *Mad Men* have been focusing on renegotiations of masculinity after the Second World War and its epitome, the “man in the gray flannel suit,” to cite the title of Sloan Wilson’s novel and subsequent film adaptation. Even then, “a normative masculinity functioned on screen to mask the social differences that stratified U.S. society” (Cohan, 1997, p. x), and the narrative constructions of masculinity have been indicative of this dialectic ever since: normativity on the one hand, challenging concepts and the notion of pluralism on the other.

The shadow of the “man in the gray flannel suit” was also one of the major themes to provide food for thought during an international workshop on masculinities that took place in Dresden in June, 2010. Organized by Professor Stefan Horlacher (Dresden), the workshop “Between the National and the Transnational, 1945-1980” was part of the ongoing research project “Towards Comparative Masculinity Studies” by Professors Stefan Horlacher and Kevin Floyd (Kent State), sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and Kent State University. Dedicated to in-depth analyses of national masculinities in British and American literature and culture, the project seeks an understanding of the larger context for the emergence of more plural, culturally differentiated, and ultimately transnational masculinities. The analytic methods employed show both diversity and commonality, with regard to redefinitions of “Britishness” and “Americanness” as well as masculine identities. At the heart of nationhood and gendered identity lies, we believe, the notion of narrative, crucial in conceptualizations of both rubrics, given that “masculinity, like femininity, is a fictional construction” (Murphy, 1994, p. 1).

In this workshop designed to facilitate conversation about the impact of globalization, migration, “new” subaltern subjects, and social mechanisms on different narrative forms, literary scholars from three different continents met in Dresden to discuss changing notions of masculinity as reflected in postwar British and American literature and culture, with the explicit goal of providing comparative analy-

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ses and exchanging perspectives on gender-oriented interpretations of texts, plays, films, and photographs.

After the welcome address by THOMAS KÜHN, Dean of Studies of the Faculty of Linguistics, Literary Studies and Cultural Studies at Dresden, representatives of the two cooperating universities shared their perspectives on the transatlantic framework and the aim of the workshop. Thus, RONALD J. CORTHELL (Kent State) stressed the importance of transatlantic cooperations as opportunities for comparative studies. According to Corthell, the Humboldt Partnership is treading on new territory, not only as far as the regular exchange between Dresden and Kent State is concerned, but also with regard to a transcultural dialogue on masculinities and interdisciplinary work, outside of the monolithic, one-sided framework of traditional scholarship. It was up to STEFAN HORLACHER (Dresden) to provide the "Theoretical and Cultural Framework" for such a comparative approach toward Masculinity Studies (see also Horlacher, 2006). Horlacher not only pointed out the social necessity of such a discipline in light of the perceived crisis of manhood, but also highlighted the importance of literary studies, that is, their potential to question seemingly immovable, essentialist models. By locating masculinity at the intersection of literary and cultural studies, works of literature (to give but one example) become accessible as parts of the symbolic order where culture reflects on itself. This in turn emphasizes the transgressive potential of art. Horlacher concluded with an appeal to pluralized notions of masculinity in order to open the web of power relations for inspection (compare Matus, 1995), while simultaneously extending the borders of what is possible and imaginable.

The opening session of the workshop, dedicated to *visualizations of masculinity*, was chaired by Stefan Horlacher and featured CHRISTOPH RIBBAT's (Paderborn) keynote address, a look into "The Colors of Masculinity" in contemporary photography. After hinting at the direct impact of second-wave feminism on photography (like Laurie Anderson's "Fully Automated Nikon," where the mechanisms of the medium are out for revenge against voyeurism), Ribbat introduced a diverse array of color photography of the 1970s and 1980s. Notable American photographers (like Diane Arbus and William Eggleston) were compared to their British counterparts (like Paul Graham and Martin Parr) with respect to the way their work evolved out of an exclusive "boys' club" of White heterosexual perspectives with rather naive notions of the authentic body, adapting to the changing sociopolitical climate of the early Thatcher years. Effectively, this change of perspectives meant that men in photographs were suddenly far from delivering a successful performance of hegemonic masculinity. On the contrary, the works of Eggleston and his contemporaries feature unemployed, marginalized men who have their picture taken while waiting at the unemployment office, or leave a rather desperate impression when featured in staged holiday snaps: the void is evident.

Moving on from photography to the narratives of feature films, KATHLEEN STARCK (Osnabrück) gave an impression of her ongoing research into "The Cold Warrior in British and American Early Cold War Films." Choosing from a selection of propagandistic movies of that era (like the John Wayne vehicle *Big Jim McLain*) as well as elaborate satire and subversive thrillers (like John Frankenheimer's original *Manchurian Candidate*), Starck demonstrated how the "war of ideologies" left no area of society untouched by the struggle for superiority. The degree of hyper-

masculinity exhibited in many British and American films of the 1950s, she argued, is motivated by the witch-hunt against communism, the cold warrior being modeled as an aggressive, tough weapon against the Soviet enemy. The foe may come from the outside (as in classical British films like *High Treason* or *The Prisoner*), or he may take the shape of the fifth column (as in the U.S. examples), in either case he is associated with weakness, homosexual subtexts, and effeminate behavior unlikely to hold up in a fistfight. The genderedness of this ideological theme is taken to an extreme in Stanley Kubrick's classic satire *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), where lunatic, cigar-smoking general Jack D. Ripper causes atomic disaster in his disastrous attempts to defend the hypermasculine American body against a suspected communist infiltration.

DIRK WIEMANN (Potsdam) proposed an intermedial reading of the fiction of Booker prize-winning British author John Berger, whose contemporary "Bildungsroman" *G.* (1972) corresponds closely to Berger's own theoretical reflections on Cubism. Reworking the Don Giovanni motif, *G.* offers a multi-faceted portrayal of a type of hyperseductive heteromascularity that is both dependent on and subversive of the patriarchal social arrangements into which it is embedded. In addition, the protagonist appears to represent a Deleuzian tension of the molar and the molecular which finds its textual equivalence in the frisson of a generically conventional macrostructure pitted against a thoroughgoing auto-fragmentation. Thus, cubist fragmentation is implemented as a narrative strategy: most of the pages consist of short, isolated stanzas of prose; consequently, Berger's protagonist is forced to "see fields where others see chapters." Against this background, masculinity emerges as another sex that is not one; heteronormative models of masculinity effectively putting themselves out of order in the process.

The second (and most comprehensive) thematic section of the workshop was taken up by literary analyses within the realm of the transnational and the global (chair: Ronald J. Corthell). Fittingly, the first contribution drew parallels between two of the most influential postwar novels on masculinities in crises on both sides of the Atlantic. In her paper entitled "Anxious Domesticity and Consumerism," CLAUDIA FALK (Heidelberg) focused on the 1950s as a period of affluence and improved living conditions, where the notion of male anxiety can be detected beneath the shining surface of suburban households (in the U.S.), and in feelings of inferiority within the social hierarchy (in the U.K.). In both popular and academic writing of the 1950s, domestic harmony and equality between the sexes were celebrated, yet at the same time, the contrast between men's wartime experiences and civilian life introduced feelings of crisis in masculine self-perception. Triggered by popular culture, different types of masculinity surfaced, such as the Angry Young Man who had little in common with the prevailing male ideal of the breadwinner. Both Joe Lampton, the protagonist in John Braine's *Room at the Top*, as well as Frank Wheeler (a rather troubled version of the "man in the gray flannel suit" in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*), were examined with regard to their suffering from the tensions between conformity and nonconformity—the former character driven by his desires to overcome class restrictions and pursuing women like prize trophies, the latter bored and unsatisfied after having settled down with wife and children. At a loss for alternatives, their insecurity leads to a fallback on traditional gender roles; consumerism offering the means for establishing a stable, yet contradictory, concept of (domestic) masculinity.

The crisis of the domestic experience was also the basis for LISA FELSTEAD (Portsmouth) in her examination of “Male Anxiety and Consumerism” as a specific experience of White middle-class America. Drawing upon iconic American literature of the period, Felstead subjected James Dickey’s novel *Deliverance* (later to be made into the controversial film of the same title by director John Boorman) to a close reading with regard to its subtext of a “feminized” nature serving as a realm of reaffirming masculinity. Dickey’s protagonists—four friends living in the city who seek their lost manhood on a wilderness trip, in spite of homoerotic tensions within their group—fail to alleviate the problematic relationship between masculinity and the consumerized culture of post-war American society. Instead, the male subject is presented in this Cold War period as an anxious figure, constantly seeking a masculine identity that is purged of feminine influence. The motifs and themes of these perversions of the fabled “American dream” are not only present in many other novels and films of the same period (like *Midnight Cowboy*), but also in narratives at the end of the Cold War period, like Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996).

Whilst *Deliverance* ends in acts of violence and traumatizing experiences for just about all involved, there is one model of masculinity during the same era which always seems to come away unindicted from the scene of the crime. In their joint paper, CHRISTOPHER BREU (Illinois State) and ELIZABETH HATMAKER (Illinois State) presented Patricia Highsmith’s infamous anti-hero Tom Ripley as an important mutation in the representation of noir masculinity. Constantly remaining resistant to the “other-directed” ethos of Fordism and bourgeois consumer conformity, Ripley’s individualist (and violent) behavior emerges as almost fully pathological in its refusal to adapt to the increasingly other-directed imperatives of corporate life. Thus, Highsmith’s novels are fully in line with other contemporary noir writers like Cornell Woolrich, whose protagonists act out their resistance through the obsessive destruction of individual (or privatized) others and/or themselves. Ripley’s malleable masculinity, in particular, enables him to elude the conventional fate both of the noir anti-hero and of the culprit in most detective fiction. Ripley becomes a transnational success story, constantly remaining in the liminal zone, never taking sides, parodying the figure of an American tourist in Italy, whose interest in travel and superficial relationships render him a perverse reconfiguration of the “other-directed” company man so celebrated by high Fordism—in mirroring the needs of others, he also literally annihilates them and takes their personalities for his own. This flexible masculine figure moves in an international landscape new to the genre, suggesting that Ripley represents a form of masculinity adapted to the international theater of the post-war era of the *pax Americana* (Wallerstein)—rather ironic, given the way Ripley came back to cause mayhem without ever being convicted in four more novels by Highsmith.

INES DETMERS (Chemnitz) extended the field of discussion to one of the major works of world literature, looking for interfigural “‘Quixotecentric’ Masculinities” in selected novels of the postwar era. On the basis of Cervantes’s unique creation of the highly defective chivalric (anti-)hero, who must be read as an allegory for a nation (and normative *machismo*) in decline and lacking virility, Detmers presented a number of examples where the (historical) socio-discursive qualities of Don Quixote’s masculinity were revisited in the form of successor figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century writing who reinvent their respective national masculinity.

Moving from one of the major texts of the literary canon to a rather forgotten text of African-American writing, KEVIN FLOYD (Kent State) introduced Sam Greenlee's satirical novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* in his paper dedicated to "Black Manhood as Technique." In Greenlee's book, a U.S. senator makes protagonist Dan Freeman [sic] the first Black member of the CIA, in order to secure Black votes and to stage visible evidence of his liberal politics. Freeman, however, uses his CIA training in order to coach some inner city youths to become a gang of "Black urban guerrillas" ready to fight for themselves. The narrative locates the struggle in the streets, where Freeman's training program turns the "Cobras" into a judo-fighting, bomb-building gang of snipers. At the same time, there is a subversive quality to the writing, since the reading process will inevitably provide some degree of manhood training for the reader, too. Thus, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* corresponds to Judith Butler's understanding of gender as multi-leveled, locating gendered knowledge mainly in the shape of skills that can be acquired and performed. As soon as the acquisition of these skills lies no longer exclusively in the hands of the White governmental body, Black manhood is constructed as the superior form of masculinity, finally able to overcome oppression. However, both in Greenlee's book as well as in the subsequent film adaptation, Black manhood is characterized as sexually predatory, dominated by a patriarchal value system that totally excludes women from the revolutionary struggle.

In "Accounting for a Crisis," ERIK PIETSCHMANN (Tübingen) returned to the comparative angle that had opened this section, in order to bring it to a close. His paper focused on the language of crisis in male first-person narratives with regard to how they model identity constructions within a gendered framework. The narrators in the two controversial novels presented by Pietschmann (Martin Amis's *Money* and Evan S. Connell's *Diary of a Rapist*) present their gendered selves as severely affected by their inability to live up to normative ideals. In the case of Earl Summerfield, the narrator in Connell's book, this becomes manifest in the gap between the "American Dream" and the experience of a corrupt world that erodes his male identity. Within their heterodiegetic accounts, both characters attempt to reassert their gendered selves by employing strategies of the "engaged narrator" (Robyn Warhol), addressing their readers directly and drawing them into their twisted minds. By making use of the narratological tools supplied by Genette and Bakhtin, Pietschmann traced tensions and fears of failure at the heart of the novels, demonstrating how the crisis inevitably takes its toll on the narrative itself. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the endings in both books imply suicide attempts on behalf of the narrators.

The penultimate section was chaired by Kevin Floyd and comprised three papers examining relations between masculinity and ethnicity. MIRJAM FROTSCHER (Dresden) added dramatic texts to the scope of the workshop, as part of her discussion of "The Reclaiming of Asian American Masculinities since the 1970s." While orientalist and sexist stereotypes regarding the perceived "Otherness" of Asian Americans, and the pejorative portrayals in popular literature (like the *Charlie Chan* books), had gone almost uncontested in the preceding decades, the 1970s saw a shift in the visibility of Asian Americans, with young writers starting to discuss the divisive power of blatant misconceptions. Frotscher addressed the controversy between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston regarding the problematic role of

orientalist sentiments and feminized writing styles. In addition to reflection on Chin's play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and Hong Kingston's novel *China Men*, she offered an analysis of David Henry Hwang's deconstructive reworking of *M. Butterfly* which features a unique take on mimicry and its crucial role in subverting the stereotype of the effeminate Oriental. This myth was shown to have been instrumental in strengthening the image of a virile American national identity through exclusions of the racialized "Other" as a gendered "Other."

ANGELIKA KÖHLER (Dresden) revisited the Frank Chin play discussed by Frotscher, yet she embedded it within the framework of her approach to "Male Identity Constructions" and ethnic dilemmas addressed in three literary creations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The texts presented by Köhler share the notion that masculinity is a performative construct, whilst mediating the complex subject matter through highly diverse literary techniques. The best-known out of these three is certainly Philip Roth's controversial *Portnoy's Complaint*, where the protagonist's desperate lament ("Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me whole!") echoes fundamental uncertainties regarding masculinity. Portnoy blames his excessive sexuality exclusively on his repressive upbringing as a "nice Jewish boy," neither coming to terms with his overprotective mother nor with his failure to suppress his Jewish values and forms of cultural positioning. Köhler's analysis was completed by her interpretation of Ishmael Reed's antebellum slave narrative, *Flight to Canada*, which problematizes the dependency of Black manhood on White concepts by constructing a meta-narrative of African American self-liberation that includes a rewriting of Uncle Tom stereotypes and the incorporation of the Native American trickster myth.

The last contribution in this section showed effectively that discussions of masculinities in literature should not be limited to the works of male authors: JAMES TSAAIOR (Lagos) dealt with the "(De)Construction and (Re)Imag(in)ation of Masculinities in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta and Toni Morrison," thus throwing light on two major authors of Black British and African American women's writing respectively. Tsaior introduced different feminist strategies of writing as literary means to interrogate the gender politics willed into existence by dominant regimes of masculinist power, stressing the focal need to revise such power structures and testify against them.

The final session, again chaired by workshop host Stefan Horlacher, featured two contributions on *Femininelist Juxtapositions*. In her examination of science fiction narratives, PAVLA VESELA (Prague) addressed the topic of "The 'Female Man' in British and American Women's Utopias from the 1970s." Vesela gave a brief survey of the notion of utopia as a male-dominated sphere, quoting classic examples from Thomas More and Francis Bacon. In contrast, books like Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) or Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three* (1975) attempt to redefine conventional femininity within scenarios beyond the heterosexual norm. In these imaginary societies, gender roles are altered and wishfully bettered, going so far as to include visions of a "new and improved" masculinity. Ironically, this means that one of the four parallel worlds in *The Female Man*, for instance, excludes men entirely. In Mitchison's novel, on the other hand, the heterosexual norm is held responsible for all injustice and violence in the world, causing the social order to rely solely on cloning in order to procreate. A bold alternative was suggested in the

shape of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), where even physical differences between the sexes are deconstructed and a type of emasculated manhood takes part in the birth and nurturing of children. Here, ideal masculinity consequently results from men's acceptance of traditionally female roles and qualities.

The articulation of underlying male anxieties (like the fear of giving up biological uniqueness in Piercy's book) was readdressed by CHRISTA GREWE-VOLPP (Mannheim) in her paper on seminal American plays, titled "'It's One Hell of a Mess in Here': Masculinity, the Myth of the Frontier and the Renunciation of the Mother." Looking at texts by Arthur Miller, David Mamet, and Sam Shepard as representative of the dark undercurrents of the contemporary White middle-class family (a consistent topic in American drama since the 1940s), Grewe-Volpp read the domestic scenarios in these plays as symptomatic of the ills of American society at large. Set against the backdrop of the unfulfillable American dream and the frontier myth, a play such as *Death of a Salesman* emphasizes an idealized image of a rugged, often violent masculinity, closely connected to a boy's oedipal rejection of the maternal and his entrance into the patriarchal order. Willy Loman tries to flee from the realm of the feminine and idealizes both his father and brother in order to assert a masculinity freed from the restrictions of a domestic, female world. However, as Grewe-Volpp convincingly demonstrated, the fear of the maternal leads all of the characters in these plays to self-destruction (the mild ending of Mamet's *American Buffalo* being a notable exception), and the position of marginalized women in these texts, outside the myth of a masculinized frontier, can be interpreted as the only hope for a more mature American male identity.

Inevitably, the concluding remarks pointed towards the need for extended discussion, as the workshop program could but throw a brief glance at many aspects of literary and other cultural representations of masculinity and the way they may question and deconstruct received notions in order to testify to their fluidity and transitoriness. The proceedings of "Between the National and the Transnational, 1945-1980" will be published in 2011 with an American or German publisher. Moreover, there will be further periods of joint research between Dresden and Kent State, including a co-taught graduate seminar in the United States and a follow-up workshop at Kent State University in August 2011, focusing on the era between 1981 and 2011. Dresden will then, in turn, host a final international conference in June, 2012.

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