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1 Maggie McKinley, *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75*.
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The two books under review are examples of American literary criticism’s continued concern with non-normative gender and sexual identities and identifications in relation to race, ethnicity and nationality, and in the registers of authorship, content, conception and reception. They are, therefore, parts of a genealogy that not only pluralizes representations of gendered and sexual lives, but also contributes to a more democratic politics of what matters as livable life.

In *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75* (Bloomsbury, 2015), the author Maggie McKinley offers an analysis of multiple and liminal masculinities in their literary enactments across the historical settings of the 1950s up to 1970s in America, and in their intersections with cultural and historical formations of violence, race and ethnicity. She explores the shaping of masculine identity and more particularly the formative aspect of aggression in construction of racialized masculinity in the fiction of Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*), Richard Wright (*The Outsider* and *The Long Dream*), Norman Mailer (“The White Negro” and *An American Dream*), Saul Bellow (*Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*), James Baldwin (*Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*), and Philip Roth (*Portnoy’s
Complaint and My life as a Man). The author analyses the interconnection between masculinity and violence in the fiction of her study in conjunction with political events and affects of the times such as the Civil Rights movement, the second-wave feminism and the Zionist sentiment due to the Six-Day War. Against the backdrop of feminist interventions as those of Simone de Beauvoir’s and Angela Davis’s critique of conventional gendered social matrices but also of masculinist enactments as those of the anti-racist Black Power movement and the Judaism of Zionist ideology, the political stakes are critical. In these critical times, idealized and normative masculine images and imaginaries of heroes, self-control masters and breadwinners are put in question, as considerations of race, ethnicity and sexuality work to complicate and undo the sovereign status of white heteronormative masculinity. Importantly, McKinley explores masculinity as a layered field of critical inquiry in major American fiction, whereby a suggestive paradox plays out: as violence is figured as integral to the establishment of a culturally and politically powerful and liberated masculine identity, the very employment of this violence often reaffirms, reifies and occasionally re-enhances the emasculating cultural scripts that these literatures and their protagonists seek to unsettle.

McKinley draws on the theoretical resources of French existentialism in order to grapple with African-American and Jewish-American literatures that depict, perform and trouble post-WWII American masculinities in their racial and ethnic implications and complications. Based on Sartre’s existential idea of a “man” as “nothing other than what he makes of himself” (Sartre qtd by McKinley, 3), the author analyses masculinity as an existential figuration premised upon the humanist paradigm of self-sovereign subjectivity, wilful agency and individual freedom. She also refers to Beauvoir’s theorization of women’s gender subordination: “the drama of woman lies in the conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) -who always regards the self as the essential- and the compulsions of a situation in which the self is the inessential” (Beauvoir qtd by McKinley, 5). More particularly, she invokes Beauvoir’s connection between women’s conflicted experience with that of blacks and Jews. In the literary works she focuses on and brings in an intertextual dialogue, the African-American and the Jewish-American male protagonists become the terrain for their black and Jewish authors to raise existential questions about masculinity in crisis. And so, in line with McKinley’s analysis, the male central characters fail to replicate conventional standards of masculinity because of their race, nationality and sexuality and so they are in an internal conflict against the social order that emasculates them. Further, as they are deprived of the sovereignty akin to gender capital, they find themselves in an anxious effort to persuade that they are still masculine enough despite the normative standards; faced with a faltering sense of masculine power, they aspire to be “essential” while they are treated as “inessential.” In their fictional space, these male characters demand their existential freedom to choose and create themselves by transcending their current oppressive situation. Following Beauvoir, McKinley suggests that these fictional subjects employ “creative” violence as a means to cope with oppression and gain freedom, existential transcendence and sovereignty: “For a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty” (Beauvoir qtd by Mckinley, 9). Sartre, as McKinley also quotes, treats violence as a reparative medium that can “efface the marks of violence” (9). Men in these novels make the choice to use violence as a liberatory means against their emasculation, but that violence (misogynistic and physical aggression, or homicide and suicide) suppresses others and ultimately works against them. A question that could be raised here is what this proposed psycho-graphy of the
reparative violence of the male protagonists whose masculinity is marginalized does politically and socially to nonconforming masculinities. Are precarious masculinities whose race, ethnicity and sexuality is pathologized inescapably associated or compensated with violence? Furthermore, could the non-conforming masculinities be explored not only as being dehumanized by hegemonic norms but also as shifting and destabilizing regimes of white heteronormative masculinity?

McKinley argues that the protagonists’ violence reproduces the normative conceptualizations and power dynamics of aggressive masculinity which is, after all, socially produced, accepted and embedded. So the male protagonists feel compelled to imitate the ways of their oppressors; they repeat the patriarchal modalities of aggressive behaviour that in fact have marginalized and criminalized them. And yet, the hyper-masculine men of these novels are ambivalent or uncertain in retrospect of their use of violence. The exploration of such ambivalent enactments of marginalized masculinities might fruitfully resonate with contemporary theoretical discussions in feminist and queer theory regarding the iterative and differential character of gendered performative mimicry, despite the author’s focus on existential frames of theorizing gendered crises. Gender, as the philosopher Judith Butler has articulated, is a performative site for both the sedimentation of social norms and regulatory fantasies but, also for the enactment of possibly disruptive re-articulations. Such performative situatedness of gender regulatory fictions and failures would further illuminate the ambivalences, anxieties and ironies of racialized masculinity that McKinley’s analysis attempts to interrogate.

In illuminating such gendered crisis and such longstanding associations between violence and masculinities, McKinley seems to take for granted that freedom is equated with personal liberty. But would personal freedom ever be realizable or even claimable without a political sphere that allows subjects to be/come free? Hannah Arendt, whom the author invokes in her discussions on the political significance of violence, and a contemporary of the writers in questions, has argued that freedom can only happen as a condition of relationality through which spaces of appearance are brought into being. An engagement with this problematic of personal liberty and social freedom vis-à-vis the existentialist script of “sovereign subjectivity” would have benefited the careful analysis that the book undertakes and would perhaps have offered a more nuanced critical reconsideration of what matrices of power and subjectivation account for an “existential crisis of masculine identity” as it is portrayed in these works of fiction.

Overall, the book responds to a continued urgency to interrogate gender, sexual, race-based, and ethnic social norms that keep oppressing, discriminating and devaluing human lives that do not meet these unattainable but idealized standards. In so doing, it offers a reconsideration of existential epistemic frames of masculinity. Focusing on contradictory definitions of manhood and marginalized American masculinities portrayed in some of the most important twentieth-century Jewish-American and African-American novels, the book contributes to pluralizing the notion of masculinity but also as to critically decentering the deeply entrenched gendered formations that account for what counts as American masculinities.

The Cambridge Companion to American Gay and Lesbian Literature (Cambridge UP), edited by Scott Herring, traces the connections between American literature and LGBTQ discourses from the late eighteenth to twenty-first century. The main pursuit of the volume’s transdisciplinary survey is to identify (and archive) American gay, lesbian and queer literature (including narrative fiction, poetry, autobiography and memoir, but also film,
and live performance) but also to unravel the current cultural critique in the U.S.-based LGBTQ studies and other critical practices in American literary studies.

For philosopher Jacques Derrida, archiving incorporates a contradictory process that involves both a commitment to remembrance and an abandonment to oblivion. In that respect, history and fiction are haunted by the impulse to archive. In his probing introduction, Scott Herring steers such critical questions regarding the “archive fever” underlying the history of the American gay, lesbian and queer literature: How do we archive an institutional history of the American gay and lesbian literature as it is developed in the American academy? How do archival omissions and exclusions based on sexuality and its complex interrelations with race and ethnicity are addressed and recuperated? What does it mean to canonize and standardize subversive books on sexuality that do not belong to official histories of literature? How does our understanding of American gay, lesbian and queer literature and its history and theory change when viewed through a more diverse archive? How do concepts such as sexuality, gender, sex, male and female, or race overlap or signify differently as they move from one theoretical framework to another?

What both the introduction and the volume as a whole significantly achieve is to problematize both the terms “American” and “Gay and Lesbian,” which come to qualify “literature” in the context of this particular inquiry. Queer theory’s emphasis on non-normative subjectivities that do not fit into a dichotomous scheme as either gay or lesbian and thus perform a critical displacement of solidly defined sexual identities is variously and malleably deployed as a theoretical and analytical apparatus by the authors of this volume. To recall Travis Foster’s formulation in the volume, queer “indicates that which undermines taken-for-granted social structures and misalignment with the normal” (90). Queerness, importantly for the explorations of the present volume, refers to subjects, affects and bodies, but also to texts and art. Despite and beyond normative identifications, queerness crosses with matters (and materialities) of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, region, and able-bodiedness. Textualities that foreground queer sexualities and come from hemispheric, oceanic, postcolonial, transnational and diasporic standpoints set the stage of the critical analytics that the volume grapples with. The queer critique of identity politics informs the theoretical framework of the volume and enables drawing attention to marginal literary works of experimental aesthetics and subcultural themes. In its multiple encounters with cosmopolitan lineages and queer critique, American gay and lesbian literature becomes for Herring an “ongoing and malleable concept” (5). It is indicative that the index of literary works that Herring archives for the purposes of the anthology performs such a fluidity, instability, and futurity precisely in its being unnamed (that is, not labelled as either gay and lesbian or queer or as other fixed named combination). For Derrida, the archive’s structure and operation is informed by its archived materials together with external frameworks of recording knowledge. The archive, for the philosopher, is never fixed but a way of imagining the future: “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”

The volume is divided in three parts: The first focuses on different genres of textuality, the second on historical contexts, and the third on critical frames of analysis. The first part implies the question of politics and imaginaries of dissent as they play out in the purview of the queer. Eve Sedgwick’s theorization of queer reading as speculative and
adventurous, which alerts us to sexual amateurism, and Judith Butler’s conceptualization of gender identity categories as sites of necessary trouble and of emerging pleasure produced by such troubling, prompt Michael Cobb’s analyses of queer novel in his essay “Queer Novelties.” Reading into novels by James Baldwin, Djuna Barnes, Michael Cunningham, Ann Carson, Cobb suggests that queer novel writing upsets normative sexual categories and typical desires, disturbs notions of time as discrete and sequential chronological periods, and destabilizes literary canons. In producing intensity and unpredictability, the queer novel provokes erotic pleasure and frustratingly atypical desire and thus it “astonishes rather than explains” (27). In a similar vein, Eric Keenaghan, in his essay “Queer Poetry Between ‘As Is’ and ‘As If,’” drawing from the poetry of Walt Whitman, the Harlem Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and Angelina Weld Grimké, the San Francisco poet Jack Spicer, the DC-based lesbian feminist collective The Furies, the transgender poet Kari Edward, and the Beat-affiliated poet John Wieners, proposes that queer poetry promotes a subjunctive imagination to be shared with the readers. In his reflections, an ethico-political viability is to be traced in the productive tension between representations of LGBT identities and a universal transcendent ethic in queer poetry. Such writing exposes queer vulnerability in a homophobic and discriminating world and calls for transformative acts against social injustices. In her chapter “Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography and Memoir,” Julie Avril Minich focuses on the memoir writing of Gloria E. Anzaldúa and argues for the queer racialized autobiography and memoir as a means of resistance. In representing marginal life stories and devalued bodies, such writing brings forth alternative knowledges of human sociality.

But what about queer textualities and queer aesthetics that embody the registers of negativity and loss? As the texts of this part showcase, such “failures” and negative ruptures can be productive in creating space for critique but also pointing to non-teleological historiography of queer art. In his essay entitled “Queer Theater and Performance,” Sean Metzger explores how a queer Asian American critique destabilizes canonical conceptualizations of identities as well as myths of American liberal multiculturalism even as it maintains the norms that structure mainstream Broadway’s profitable productions. In his critical treatment, Richard Greenberg’s 2002 Tony-award winning Broadway play Take me out also provides, in addition to stereotypical gay male representations, a theatrical space for a male subjectivity in crisis; a subjectivity that unsettles hegemonic narratives of American history that have eradicated Japanese/ American affective and political standpoints. In his piece “Queer Cinema, Queer Writing, Queer criticism,” Lucas Hilderbrand analyses films whose scripts are based on literary texts, such as The Boys in the Band by William Friedkin, The Brokeback Mountain by Ang Lee, and Looking for Langston by Isaac Julien, while paying attention to the distinct grammar of their film form. The author argues significantly that these films’ counter-narratives “from community to the closet, from speech to silence, from life to death, and from gay audiences to straight ones” (75) run against gay affirmation and liberation.

In its second part, the volume further investigates the histories of gay, lesbian and queer literature in liberal and non-progressive times and relates these histories with Scientia sexualis and sexology, racialization, racism, and imperialism. In his chapter “Nineteenth-Century Queer Literature,” Travis Foster studies the passage from the anti-identitarian American queer literature of nineteenth century to late nineteenth-century epistemologies of specific sexual subjects in works by Herman Melville, Rose Terry Cooke,
Richard Bruce Nugents, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tayler, and Djuna Barnes. In her text "Literary and Sexual Experimentalism in the Interwar Years," Daniela Caselli focuses on how queer American modernist texts, in using formalist experimentation, do not only question their own literary traditions but also proper sexuality. Sexuality, in the form of a provocative stylistically textuality in texts by Richard Bruce Nugent, Charles Henry Ford and Parker Tyler, and Djuna Barnes, becomes uncanny and is problematized: "Homosexuality [...] does not become an already-known critical object to be observed in its past incarnations. It is a problem, but it is not a moral one [...]" (108). Michael P. Bibler, in his chapter "The cold war closet," examines cold war-era of 1950s and 1960’s LGBTQ literary texts by Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, Patricia Highsmith, Ann Bannon and Christopher Isherwood. While secrecy and shame characterized the literary and cultural discourses of the time, there is a subversive appropriation of the stereotype of the closet in queer avant-garde genres such as pulp fiction and the southern gothic novel. The author illustrates the ways in which this new demand for the right to privacy ultimately promotes sexual freedom. Guy Davidson, in his chapter “The time of AIDS and the Rise of ‘Post-Gay’,” surveys antithetical trends from the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis, which asserted gay and lesbian politics to the twenty-first century post-gay assimilationist discourse. The range is from literature (i.e., shorter forms, such as lyric poetry and short stories, which seem to respond more effectively to the epidemic) that interweaves individual experience of the syndrome with the collective experience of the gay community, as in the work of Rafael Campo, Allan Barnett, Rebecca Brown, and Jewelle Gomez, to post-gay assimilationist discourse, as in the work of David Leavitt and Michael Cunningham.

The third part of the volume undertakes the task of addressing the ways in which queer literature has been transformed and reclaimed by theory and new political research questions. It asks: how has queer theory been complicated by queer literary narratives, experimental textualities and other critical approaches? L. H. Stallings, in the chapter “Gender and Sexuality,” forms a genealogy of convergences between different critical approaches, literature and literary criticism. Feminist theory along with Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and his renditions of oppressive forms of power/knowledge regimes interrogated notions of authorship, authority and subjectivity and so contributed to the formation of lesbian and gay studies. From the 1970s onward, gender, sexuality and difference has been a subject of inquiry in American literary studies, and has been transforming the discipline in critiquing “elitist class origins that privileged the masculinity, rationality, and written literacies” (171). With the additional contribution of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism (exemplified in the work of Judith Butler), queer theory, queer of color critique, disabilities studies and crip theory, and transgender studies emerge as paradigms of critique to hegemonic white heteronormative discourses and politics. While sharing common political, academic and intellectual lineages and demands, the encounters between these critical interventions also indicate notable points of departure. Put it differently, these different but intersecting critical epistemologies share points that they need further meditation and ongoing negotiation. In the chapter “Intersections of Race, Gender and Sexuality: Queer of Color Critique,” Kyla Wazana Tompkins reflects on queer of color critique as a resistance to mainstream Euro-American queer theory and the violence against racialized queers; the author inquires on the “political value in the courage that queers of color contribute to everyday aesthetic practices [...] to the movement of bodies in the space and time of everyday life” (186). Significant theoretical interventions in such discussions have been made by Sara Ahmed,
Gloria E. Anzaldúa, David L. Eng, José Esteban Muñoz, Jasbir Puar. Judith Roof, in her text “Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism of Gay and Lesbian American Literature,” pays attention to the negotiation and rearticulation of common terms that take place in the intersections of psychoanalysis, literary criticism, and feminist and gender theory. Such encounters pertain to a wide spectrum of concerns, such as conceptualizations of subjectivity and sexuality, subjectivity and the sociopolitical, desire, pleasure and sexual relations. In a similar vein, Martin Joseph Ponce, in his chapter “Transnational queer Imaginaries, Intimacies, Insurgencies,” pursues the convergences between the transnational analytic and queer theory and the ways in which they form a critique of American exceptionalism and homonationalism. In her chapter “Post-Structuralism: Originators and Heirs”, Melissa Jane Hardie focuses on the genealogies of poststructuralism to claim that the relationship between originators and heirs in histories of thought is informed by the contextualizing moments out of which critical debates emerge.

Overall, the volume brilliantly and systematically traces the textualities and discourses of sexuality in American literature and literary and cultural criticism beyond and despite patriarchal, homophobic, racist and imperialistic epistemic, historical, and political regimes. Furthermore, it traces the political significance of queer textual and cultural practices in performing a more democratic and inclusive future beyond normative typologies and hierarchies. As aptly quoted in the volume, Hortense J. Spillers’s conceptualization of sexuality as not a matter per se but as a global restoration and dispersal of power emblematizes the commitment of this collected work to the inquiry into the new political and reflective possibilities of queer literature, theory and practices.

NOTES