

American Masculinities¹

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Abstract: This article suggests that American men typically articulate their masculinity in relation to other bodies. Despite popular representations of American heroes as rugged individualists roaming literary, political, and sexual landscapes on their own, American males depend on differently gendered and racialized bodies to anchor their own identities and masculinities. In a survey of American writers from Ernest Hemingway through African American ghetto autobiographies and contemporary drama and film, the article explores the bodies that together communicate notions of American masculinity. It concludes that American masculinities are open to suggestion and interpretation as unexpected constellations of gender and race take over familiar American spaces.

Key words: American literature – American film – Ernest Hemingway – John Dos Passos – African American autobiography – gender studies – masculinity – body – uncanny.

Masculinity does not necessarily involve Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bill Clinton, Russell Crowe or other hunks who sweeten our lives. Judith Halberstam asks in her introduction to *Female Masculinity* (1998): “What is masculinity? ... If masculinity is not the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness, then what is it?” (1). In her view, masculinity in the John Wayne or George W. Bush tradition depends on the suppression of alternative masculine modes. Halberstam claims that female bodies might enact masculinity as perfectly as the “heroic masculinities” we recognize, fear or trust. Female masculinity operates not as imitation, she argues, “but actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity.” She finds that masculinity signified by women’s bodies “are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant

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masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing. But what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies" (1-2). Halberstam ignores the American heroes we love to hate and focuses instead on female articulations of masculinity. She argues provocatively that masculinity without men highlights the naturalized correlation between maleness and power. Masculinity, in short, becomes readable the moment it leaves the white, male, privileged body. Halberstam is bored by studies of patriarchal dominance, of Elvis, of male feminism, and of men and marriage. She goes looking for Elvis only among female impersonators such as Elvis Herselvis (3).

Those with a higher threshold for indifference or nausea still find rewards in looking at Rhett Butler, Ernest Hemingway, Elvis Presley or Bill Clinton, but these heroes never turn up alone. Though Rhett doesn't give a damn and Ernest goes fishing, American male bodies – masculine, heroic or not – cannot escape the other bodies crisscrossing American landscapes of gender and race. Hemingway represents not just a writerly masculinity but travels across complicated textual and sexual terrains. His co-traveler, John Dos Passos, turns to working-class and racialized bodies, and to Hemingway, to find his manhood. Sanyika Shakur, an L.A. gang member turned autobiographer, kills hostile ghetto monsters to become an Original Gangster and a man, but other bodies get in the way. In Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), teenage boys merge with the five appetizing sisters across the street in order to grow up, and in Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Angels in America* (1992), AIDS-plagued gay men call forth other masculinities and other monstrosities. In American literature and film men articulate themselves, their bodies and their masculinities through other bodies, who gatecrash their texts if they have not received an invitation.

Ernest Hemingway was good at playing the King Kong of American masculinity. Dos Passos remembers him in Key West days as "the famous author, the great sportsfisherman, the mighty African hunter," though he and his wife Katy tried to keep their friend "kidded down to size." In his autobiography, *The Best Times* (1968), Dos Passos confesses: "We played up to him some at that." When the famous author and host retired early, "we'd all bring him drinks and eat our supper on trays around the bedroom. We called it the *lit royale*" (BT 219). This bedroom

scene, with Hemingway encircled by other bodies, remains less than titillating, but in *Hemingway's Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood* (1998), Carl Eby writes the Hemingway hero into more transgressive sexual territory, where "el nuevo Hemingway" resides. In their introduction to *Hemingway and Women: Female Critics and the Female Voice* (2002), Lawrence Broer and Gloria Holland explain that this new Hemingway is "a writer whose androgynous impulses not only contradict the machismo Hemingway of myth but also whose complex female protagonists and problematic treatment of gender relations demand a reevaluation of Hemingway's entire literary output" ([ix]-x). The gender-segregated subtitle of the anthology and the list of contributors reveal that a woman's body serves as the passageway to *Hemingway and Women*, where Hemingway is immersed in gender trouble. The new Hemingway is everywhere. Susan Beegel, the editor of *The Hemingway Review*, revises critic Philip Young's famous question, "what makes a man a man?" She asks in her "Conclusion": "what makes a man a woman? what makes a woman a woman? what makes a woman a man? what makes men and women heterosexual? homosexual? bisexual? Where are the boundaries of gender? And what importance does gender have in our make-up?" (qtd. Broer and Holland x).

The *Hemingway and Women* cover photograph offers a few responses to Beegel's many questions. It depicts the Hemingways as a harmonious married couple, with Papa towering over the petite, seated Mary, the fourth Mrs. Hemingway. His look of benign patriarchal affection meets her adoring gaze. Behind them, a symbol of roaring masculinity, the black-maned lion killed during Hemingway's second African safari in 1953-54, indicates masculine prowess in the bedroom and on the savannah. But contours of *el nuevo* Hemingway hover in the photo. Husband and wife have similar haircuts and wear similar clothes, white shirts and all. Readers of Hemingway's fictional memoir of the African safari, *True at First Light* (1999), will recognize the trophy on the wall as "Miss Mary's lion," first shot by Mary and then by Ernest. It is an ambiguous symbol of prowess and courage, since these traits associated with masculinity reside in both the male and the female Hemingway photographed.

The lion also suggests darker bodies, of both genders. For one thing, Hemingway tried to go native during this second safari in Africa. In *True at First Light*, the Great White Hunter fantasizes about blackness:

Walking in the early morning watching Ngui striding lightly through the grass thinking how we were brothers it seemed to me stupid to be white in Africa and I remembered how twenty years before I had been taken to hear the Moslem missionary who had explained to us, his audience, the advantages of a dark skin and the disadvantages of the white man's pigmentation. I was burned dark enough to pass as a half-caste. (201)

Also Hemingway's African fiancée, the nubile Debba, invades the marital scene through the lion. Fond of putting her hand on his gun holster, she helps the Hemingway persona through his mid-life crisis and the long days and nights in the camp. In fact, Hemingway invites a rainbow of bodies into his tent to sustain his anxious masculinity:

I lay in my cot with the old shotgun rigidly comfortable by my side and the pistol that was my best friend and severest critic of any defect of reflexes or of decision lying comfortably between my legs in the carved holster that Debba had polished so many times with her hard hand and thought how lucky I was to know Miss Mary and have her do me the great honor of being married to me and to Miss Debba the Queen of the Ngomas. (281)

Hemingway writes that fear "is a child's vice and while I loved to feel it approach, as one does with any vice, it was not for grown men ..." (283). The Great Hunter needs other warm bodies on the cot, and his African brothers soon join those already there. In short, Hemingway becomes or remains Hemingway through other bodies and genders, as in the photo of Miss Mary, Miss Mary's lion, and Papa himself.

Even dead bodies enter the story, because the photograph itself dramatizes time and mortality. *True at First Light*, which Patrick Hemingway edited and published, came out almost forty years after Papa's death in 1961. Robert W. Lewis and Robert E. Fleming have recently edited a new and fuller edition of Hemingway's African notebooks, *Under Kilimanjaro*, published in October 2005. In some contexts a dead white male, Hemingway lives on in his fiction and in the stories that critics and buffs preserve and circulate. He even turns up on the Internet as a paper doll, dressed in a Tarzan suit or a tuxedo, ready to club or toast whoever will sustain his troubled masculinity. Biographer Carlos Baker stresses Hemingway's "capacity for friendship" and sees in his letters a constant need for male companionship (xviii).

John Dos Passos came in handy. Stuttering, myopic, and balding he sought Hemingway's approval with a more masculine persona. Dos Passos writes to Hemingway about fishing, hunting, skiing, and sailing,

and when travelling to Russia, outside of his correspondent's territory, he chooses topics Hemingway would enjoy: food, alcohol, parties, but no politics. He litters his travel accounts with four-letter words, and when he cannot impress Hemingway with action, he talks tough, as in 1933 during a bout with rheumatism at Johns Hopkins Hospital: "This is a hellishly disagreeable disease, but it is not chronic arthritis, in which I am damn lucky – according to the big boss medic here it always eventually leaves your carcass free" (Ludington, *14th Chronicle* 426). Dos Passos spices up his masculine language with references to a surplus of "drawing room bitches" and other undesirables – "it's like fairies getting into a bar – ruin it in no time" (Ludington, *14th Chronicle* 408). Together the two are men's men, drinking in a real guys-only environment. Dos Passos writes to Hemingway that all his reading might lead to a college diploma and invents himself as a working class hero, less privileged than his Harvard degree would suggest. Obviously, he tries to mirror his friend, who did not go to college and was a bit touchy about it.

As in the photo of Hemingway and Miss Mary, other bodies trouble the Dos Passos-Hemingway bond. Like Jake Barnes, the Hemingway hero in *The Sun Also Rises* (1924), Dos Passos needs the "drawing room bitches" and the barroom "fairies" to assert his own masculinity, and other marginal bodies join his own, as they did *el nuevo* Hemingway. In several autobiographical novels, and in the poem "Lines to a Lady" (1927), Dos Passos fantasizes about a red-haired working girl, and also darker female bodies stimulate his senses: "From the shanties down the beach came gruff gusts of niggersmell womensmell clung in the hot reek of the wind of the marsh" (455). In a Camera Eye segment of *The 42nd Parallel*, the first volume of his *U.S.A.* trilogy (1939), a lily-white minister's wife is open to suggestions, but young Dos's desires take other directions:

wishes you had the nerve to hug and kiss Martha the colored girl they said was half Indian old Emma's daughter and the little redheaded Mary I taught how to swim if only I had the nerve breathless nights when the moon was full but Oh God not lilies ... (239)

In *Chosen Country* (1951), the redhead swims into Jay Pignatelli's dreams, but Dos Passos's autobiographical hero now slides his hands "up towards her little breasts slippery with seawater and down past her belly-button that's the same in girls as in boys ..." As in earlier versions of the fantasy, he sees her naked in the bathroom after a swimming lesson, but

this time “she’d let the door open on purpose maybe while she pulled off her wet bathing suit. From under the drawn shade a hot bolt of sun caught her white legs and shone bright on the goldred fur between them” (37). Then his imagination takes over.

In *Century’s Ebb*, published posthumously in 1975, the same red-haired temptress falls into Danny DeLong’s competent hands. This 15-year-old toughie takes a shine to the cook’s daughter, Mary Healy, during a summer at Bay Head. The usual manoeuvres take place under water, but Danny handles the bathroom scene more efficiently than earlier Dos Passos heroes:

She must have left that door open on purpose. And the summer light coming in through the window lit up that red flag between her legs. Before I knew what had happened I’d locked the door behind me and was grabbing her to me. “No, no,” she said. She wrestled a little but not very much ... All she would say was “No, no” but she ended up spreading her legs on the bathmat. I did all right for a virgin. (25)

Afterwards, the redhead loses her enchanting powers: “The rest of that summer was horrible. I had to keep loving up Mary to keep her from raving on me ... But I sure was sick of her. She was the dumbest girl I ever met” (26). Danny has found his manhood in the bathroom embrace of the red-haired girl, but he moves on: “Sometimes I wonder what she’s like now, a fat Irish biddy with a flock of kids, I guess” (27). At this point, Dos Passos dismisses the female body from his text and concentrates on his hero, whose working-class vigor has reinforced his own. But the “throwaway body,” in Patricia Yaeger’s terminology, speaks from the margin of the culture that discards her. From inside her fat and her flock of kids, the redhead rats on the men she has known.

The sexualized and racialized female bodies bolster the masculinity inscribed on their skins. They also serve as gateways to the more proletarian, more instinctual, masculinity Dos Passos ascribed to Hemingway. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick finds that the least travelled axis in an erotic triangle yields most information about those involved. In this case, Dos Passos’s sexual interest in working-class or dark-skinned women is incidental to the true object of his desire: a masculine other. Though his attraction remains homosocial rather than homosexual, Dos Passos edges up to Hemingway in order to become a man. But another throwaway body comes between the two writers and tears them apart. In September,

1947, Dos Passos was driving along Route 28, with his wife nodding off on her side of the front seat. Squinting to avoid the sun, Dos Passos did not see the truck parked ahead, crashed, and lost consciousness. He woke up later with his wife's decapitated body next to him. And Hemingway never forgave Dos Passos. Katy Dos Passos was a childhood friend and maybe his first love, another one he could or would not hold. With her death, Hemingway lost a part of himself, of the Michigan landscape, and of his own writings. Dos Passos had killed it all. He had joined a community of "one-eyed Portuguese bastards who wrote lies about their friends" and been excluded from the company of real men (Baker, *Life* 495). In a 1947 letter to William Faulkner, Hemingway dismissed Dos Passos with comments on his inferior writing, his inferior boxing, and his inferior civil and racial status (Baker, *Letters* 623-24).

In *Soul on Ice* (1968), Elridge Cleaver also performs his masculinity on racialized and sexualized American bodies. Writing in California's Folsom State Prison, this convicted rapist explores binary oppositions of black and white, male and female, in shaping four kinds of American bodies: The Ultrafeminine white woman and the Amazon black woman, as well as the two masculinities they exist to define, the Omnipotent Administrator and the Supermasculine Menial. The white Omnipotent Administrator is Mind and Master, whereas the black Supermasculine Menial is Body and Slave. Omnipotent administrators struggle among themselves for higher positions in the dominant culture hierarchy. They deny the component of "Brute Power" in themselves, which they project onto men further down the social and racial ladder. Nonetheless, Cleaver argues, they envy those furthest removed from administrative corridors and perceive black men as the most splendid manifestations of physical masculinity. In a passage from "The Primeval Mitosis" in *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver substitutes class for race in defining the mirrored manhoods:

Weakness, frailty, cowardice, and effeminacy are, among other attributes, associated with the Mind. Thus the upper classes, or Omnipotent Administrators, are perennially associated with physical weakness, decay, underdeveloped bodies, effeminacy, sexual impotence, and frigidity. Virility, strength, and power are associated with the lower classes, the Supermasculine Menials. (180)

In this passage, the white Omnipotent Administrator becomes a woman, because a gendered hierarchy bolsters Cleaver's definitions of authentic masculinity. Frail, frigid, underdeveloped, weak, and feminine, the

Omnipotent Administrator epitomizes True Womanhood, though less cheerful than the nineteenth-century domestic Angel. In contrast, black men like Cleaver become supermales, again with a nineteenth-century echo in the dichotomy of masters and slaves. The discourse of masculinity itself evokes precursors such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois, who all cast their arguments for citizenship and equality in the language of men.

Sanyika Shakur, the author of *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (1993), presents himself as the Supermasculine Menial living in an underworld inhabited by males. He is Monster, after all, the Original Gangster spreading fear in South Central L.A. and among middle-class American readers, whom he titillates with raw violence, undisputed virility, and total commitment to gang banging. Nonetheless, he resembles the Omnipotent Administrator or Ben Franklin in blackface. Monster shares Franklin's work ethic: "Only when I had put work in could I feel good that day; otherwise I couldn't sleep. Work does not always constitute shooting someone, though that is the ultimate. Anything from wallbanging (writing your name on a wall, advertising) to pitting on someone to fighting – it's all work. And I was a hard worker" (52). Like Franklin, Monster is a gifted educator, as the explanatory parenthesis about gang life suggests. He is enterprising and, like a good entrepreneur, he dreams of rising in the world. At fourteen, he aims at a promising career: "I had as much ambition, vitality and ruthlessness to succeed as any corporate executive panning a hostile takeover – a merger was out of the question" (15). He moves about the hood with a gun, much like the businessman who always leaves home with credit cards. The gun, Monster explains, is part of the dress code (89). He also shares important PR work with the Founding Father: Franklin wears his mask; Monster, his cool pose. Monster loves to negotiate and takes an active interest in law and foreign policy. In fact, he compares himself to a successful lawyer operating in Beirut or Vietnam. Like Franklin, he sees himself as colonized, a young American eager for independence and the overthrow of tyrants.

But Monster is Douglass. Though he shares American dreams and longs for manhood and freedom, he is a slave on the auction bloc, a historical and textual body circulated for profit among the powerful. Despite his physical strength, Monster's body is as captive and mutilated as the

enemies he guns down at his gang initiation. After emptying his gun, he sees “bodies in abnormal positions and grotesque shapes, twisting and bending in arcs that defied bone structure. The actual impact was on my return back past the bodies of the first fallen, my first real look at bodies torn to shreds” (13). He kills to become a man and a citizen, but like his own victims, he inhabits an abject body, on whose torn skin the dominant culture has recorded its crimes. Hospitalized, just surfacing from a coma, Monster describes at length the wounds and aches of racial encounters:

My stomach resembled railroad tracks that in some areas had been blown apart by saboteurs. The sight of this alone caused lumps in my throat. To the left and slightly below my navel was where the bullet had entered. There was just a hole there, uncovered and open. I could see pink inside. My pain in this area came from under my navel and around the staples. The tube in my nose, which ran down into my stomach, was attached to a pumplike machine next to my bed. Looking at it caused pain. It was extracting green slime from my stomach and storing it in a clear jar. The nurse called it poison. I couldn't comprehend that and just assumed I had been hit with poison bullets. The catheter in my maleness ran from under the covers over the side of the bed and into what, I don't know. I never looked. This was also very painful. My left hand had been broken by the impact of the second shot and was in a cast. It, too, throbbed with pain. (101)

In a study of mid-nineteenth-century American sculpture, Michael Hatt discusses “the visual economy of slavery” that also this hospital scene activates. Monster's body remains horizontal and out of control, exposed to a standing, and dominant, spectator's gaze, invited also by his scanty clothing and cover. The softness of his body – as suggested by the reference to green slime and pink flesh – further distances Monster's body from the smooth surfaces and the hardness Hatt associates with masculine inviolability and power (27). Cleaver's Supermasculine Menial is less than masculine, and his body carries the marks of his social mutilation. Like strange fruit on southern trees, Monster writes the embodied history of American race relations. He haunts his oppressors' America in the tradition of lynched men with genitals in worse condition than his own invaded “maleness.” He is dead Emmett Till, scary and familiar.

In “The Uncanny” (1919), Sigmund Freud maps our primal fears, all related to something we know. Freud focuses on the gaze, and on its role in the family romance we try to escape. A boy looks at his sister and discovers that she has been less fortunate than he has, in that she lacks a crucial body part. Seeing this absence, the boy gets uneasy and anxious,

afraid to lose his own advantage. Thus, in Freud and elsewhere, looking signals castration anxiety. Certainly for Monster and his homies, looking leads to castration or death within seconds. His own Mad Dog stare helps him stay high in the ghetto hierarchy and survive with his manhood and status intact. When his school bus enters a hostile Sixties neighbourhood, for example, Monster defends himself with his gaze:

I mad dogged every occupant of every car that came next to us, giving everyone a deliberately evil stare. I had perfected this look and no one except another serious soldier could hold my stare. I now overstand the look. It's not *how* you stare at someone, but *what* you've been through that others can see in your eyes and that tells them you're the wrong one to fuck with. Some refer to this as the thousand-yard stare. (71-72)

White America does not "see" Monster but looks at him with fascination and terror.

Freud finds that both multiplication and repetition, significant aspects of Monster's world and text, fill those who come upon them with horror. Multiplication dissolves ego boundaries, as the film *Being John Malkovich* shows, and ultimately means death. Repetition also suggests something inescapable: fate or dissolution. Monster plugs into this primal terror when he multiplies into homeboys with names such as Lil' Monster and Lil' Bro. These names repeat themselves, as do the shootings, the murders, the prison sentences, the words. Freud further argues that animism scares us, in any situation when we cannot tell what is alive from what is not. Certainly Monster's gun comes alive and his homies drop dead. His bicycle lives, his brother dies. Parted bodies increase the terror, we learn from Freud, and body parts litter both Monster's pages and his own body. His gun grows like an extra limb on his chest. His homeboys part with arms and legs. Monster is indeed monstrous. He is Frankenstein, uncannily familiar to his creators and readers.

Monster inhabits a world of African American men, but other bodies sustain his masculinity. Cleaver's Omnipotent Administrator hovers in the margin of Monster's vision in the flabby shape of the LAPD. These white police officers, or pigs, with big guts and big guns, like to strip juvenile prisoners naked, have them kneel down, and search their orifices by any means necessary. In a passage less explicit than is usually the case, Monster writes: "the resisters were made to leave the chow hall naked, walk through a gauntlet of pigs in full riot-repression gear for their well-deserved whack with the P-24 baton, and directed into 4800. The

seventeen stayed naked, no visits, no showers, for three days.” The prisoners wanted to “be treated as men” and reaped their rewards (284). The policemen rely on their combat gear to bolster their own bodies, feminized throughout *Monster* with soft white flesh and homosexual leanings.

Monster’s homegirls resemble Cleaver’s Amazons. Strapped with guns, they are phallic women, six feet tall and ready to shoot, like Monster’s girlfriend China. But one body has been erased from Monster’s life and text. Off-limits to African American men, the Ultrafeminine white woman makes no appearance in his autobiography. Monster himself may have chosen to put blackness center-stage – he joins, after all, the New Afrikan Independence Movement at the end of his career. Like Freud in “The Uncanny,” he may simply overlook the feminine figure so visible to other readers (Todd). Or Monster may cast himself as a writer-trickster, one who knows his audience well. He offers to white Americans a glimpse of an underworld, but he does not force them to face white women with black men. Finally, Monster might distance himself from anything feminine because of his self-admitted fears of a “damaged masculinity, or what I perceived as such” (98).

In Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), masculinity moves away from men’s bodies and onto five white American girls. A Greek American writer living in Berlin, Eugenides chose for his second novel *Middlesex* (2002) a hermaphrodite as narrator, thus gesturing towards gender trouble. His first novel was taken up by Paramount Pictures and released in 1999, with Sophie Coppola as script-writer and director. Both the text and the film adaptation of *Virgin Suicides* explore troubled American masculinities. The Lisbon sisters live across the street from a group of adolescent boys in a quiet American suburb somewhere in the 1970s. The five girls are young and beautiful, but they scare the boys who watch them, as if these blond teenage girls were Original Gangsters in Monster’s L.A. The opening of Eugenides’s novel sets the stage:

Cecilia, the youngest, only thirteen, had gone first, slitting her wrists like a Stoic taking a bath, and when they found her, afloat in her pink pool, with the yellow eyes of someone possessed and her small body giving off the odor of a mature woman, the paramedics had been so frightened by her tranquillity that they had stood mesmerized. (3-4)

The passage moves from stoic masculinity to witchcraft – yellow eyes in a body possessed. The body in the bathtub smells of woman and blood, size notwithstanding, and transfixes the paramedics. Eugenides invites

his readers back into Freud's uncanny universe, with its exploration of strange familiarity, and again, the gaze, with its associations of castration anxiety and horror. The frozen paramedics watch a castrated version of themselves, a witch who has signed the Devil's book and now activates their fear of femininity.

Behind the paramedics, the neighbourhood boys are on watch. Throughout the text and beyond the ending, they spy on the Lisbon girls day and night. The boys photograph them, videotape them, stare at their house and their pastel bras on the clothesline. They scrutinize the girls' developing bodies, guess at menstrual cycles, and hunt down sanitary napkins. What they notice includes the Lisbon girls' teeth, sharp and imperfect and crowding their mouths: *vagina dentata* or vaginas with teeth. The opening movement from stoicism to blood and smell and womanhood suggests that feminized parts of the boys have left them and now live displaced across the street, since to grow up American and male means leaving or killing the woman inside, or rather, outside. In short, the Lisbon girls are men. They are the debris of American manhood, or Judith Halberstam's "rejected scraps of dominant masculinity" (1). Their femininity frightens the boys, who at fourteen aim for adult, heroic masculinity. To them, the Lisbon girls are killers: vaginas with teeth. The Lisbon girls must die.

Like *Monster*, the sisters activate primal fears in those who watch them. They call up what Freud in "The Uncanny" identifies as horror in the patients he examines. The Lisbon girls tend to merge or multiply, with fluid ego boundaries from one sister to the next. Who is Bonnie? Who is Thérèse? Through their hybridity, they suggest dissolution and demise. They repeat not only their blond hair, their outfits, and their attitudes, but also their frightening suicides, with death, then, an inescapable, fateful reality in the neighbourhood. They look like Barbie dolls, maybe alive, maybe dead, and force us to confront an ancient nightmare, in which dead matter takes on life or living beings turn up dead. In fact, it is hard to tell whether or not the Lisbon girls exist in any sort of reality – all those garden hoses, all that liminal mist – or whether they are simply products of the boys' adolescent imaginations.

The boys use binoculars to observe Lux Lisbon's repeated promiscuity, with a series of men well entertained on the roof of the Lisbon house. Her lithe body and those of her sisters seem both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Various body parts appear in windows – an arm, a leg, a

back, a head – and again induce our primal horror. Most uncanny is the ordinariness of Eugenides's fictional world, with all the suicides committed within a suburban safety. The deaths of the Lisbon girls become a part of the neighbourhood routines, as inescapable as leaves in the fall or trash put out Wednesday nights. Ultimately, *The Virgin Suicides* enacts femiphobia. The novel portrays American adolescent boys growing up and needing to distance themselves from aspects of themselves that will impede adult masculinity. It also portrays the cost of this choice. The boys tell the story of the five virgins in Greek chorus fashion, and both groups of teenagers embody a fatal reluctance to change. At the end of *The Virgin Suicides*, the boys have grown into middle-aged men with disappointing lives, reduced to custodians of what they have lost. Caught in adolescence forever, they belong in an outmoded America that ultimately becomes not a Greek, but an American tragedy.

The girls embody what Hélène Cixous calls a feminine "chaosmos" (258). Chaos both waits outside the suburban borders and pounces from within. The respectable community in which the Lisbon girls (did not) live concludes in the 1970s:

[Their suicides] had to do with the way the mail wasn't delivered on time, and how potholes never got fixed, or the thievery at City Hall, or the race riots, or the 801 fires set around the city on Devil's night. The Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens ... (231)

This diagnosis is as feeble as the cure: to donate a bench commemorating the girls to the local high school. The world outside the suburbs ensures that gender and race trouble awaits tree-lined streets and existences. Boys turn into girls, and people of color move into white middle-class American neighborhoods. American men encounter bodies not their own, unruly bodies demanding attention.

The Lone Ranger no longer patrols frontiers of civilization to gun down outsiders and troublemakers. Other bodies, other genders, and other colors hover at the borders of traditional masculinities and make their way in. In Tony Kushner's 1992 drama, *Angels in America*, now an HBO miniseries, gender, race, and ethnicity crisscross Kushner's map of Reagan's America. Set in an AIDS-ridden, homosexual world, the play investigates subjects positioning themselves along race and gender lines open to change and interpretation. It rambles through American history to

examine topical social issues, moral dilemmas, and spiritual worlds in the late Twentieth Century, combining apocalyptic despair with hope against hope. This history gets written on infected male bodies, articulating the social diseases transmitted by Reaganomics.

These bodies have eliminated or absorbed the dichotomies of earlier decades. In one memorable scene of Kushner's play, the hospitalized Prior Walter appears with Belize, an African American nurse and ex-transvestite. Abandoned by his lover Louis Ironson, Prior suffers alone until Belize enters his room and takes care of his AIDS-invaded body, covered with lesions and penetrated by tubes. After the treatment, Belize cuddles Prior's abject body in the position of a *pietá*. The two men have fused the four bodies Cleaver invented in *Soul on Ice*. Prior traces his WASP lineage to the early Puritan settlers and epitomizes the privileged white male who lives off a trust fund, but his diseased, homosexual body exudes as well Cleaver's ultrafemininity and frailty as he sinks into Belize's arms. Wrapped in a red feather boa, Belize hardly suggests supermasculine physicality, also due to a name that calls up poverty, darkness, and something un-male. Instead, s/he combines the strength of Cleaver's Menial with the nurturing of a Mammy figure and the theatricality of a Billie Holliday. Both bodies, in short, elasticize established categories of gender and race. Though the patient is white and the nurse black, Belize takes charge and looms large above his subservient and agonized friend and patient. In a reversal of position and power, the two bodies transcend biological restrictions in a gesture of transcendence, the only salvation possible in *Angels in America*.

Problematized masculinities populate contemporary American politics. In Steven C. Ducat's *The Wimp Factor: Gender Gaps, Holy Wars, & the Politics of Anxious Masculinity* (2004), masculine Republicans interested in war and military matters mingle with feminine Democrats discussing the environment, welfare, integration, and gay rights. Ducat explores "girlie men," "the nanny state," "castrating first ladies," "an ideological apartheid of pink and blue," "gender gaps," "primitive masculinity," "femiphobia," and more. Was 9/11 a castration attempt? Did Bush need to reinforce an emasculated nation through a new hypermasculinity and the language of men, as Arthur Bruzzone argues in his "Masculinity Returns to Politics"? Is the Speaker of the California State Senate, John Burton, as Bruzzone writes in October 2003, "one of the

Democrat's [*sic*] last red-blooded alpha males"? And why did *Fox News* attempt to label John Kerry "metrosexual"? "Why," as Stephan Ducat asks, admittedly from his own psychologist's office, "is masculinity so unstable an aspect of identity that men must constantly prove it?" (24).

The heroes and villains roaming American literary landscapes need other bodies to anchor their masculinity. Only killing makes men, as W. E. B. DuBois observed and Bush may still uphold. Hemingway and Dos Passos searched and found themselves in the wake of World War I, while Cleaver and Monster took up weapons in the streets and prisons of America. Eugenides's adolescents eliminate less conspicuously and less efficiently suburban threats, real or imagined. In Kushner's *Angels*, the threat lives inside and outside male bodies – biological and political bacteria with the power to infect America as a whole. And since manhood constitutes itself as process, as something to be proven and won continuously, other bodies co-author scripts of American masculinity. Hemingway needed his trophies – friends, lions, and wives – to become Hemingway, and Dos Passos needed working-class men, women of color, and Hemingway to constitute himself as the famous author of *U. S. A.* and Proletarian Writer *extraordinaire*. Cleaver invented male and female, black and white bodies to establish his sexual hegemony, and Monster used and abused the abject bodies of everybody, including his own and the white woman who screams *in absentia* from his life and text. At the millennium, male and female bodies merge, as in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Angels in America*, where genders fluctuate in unexpected constellations that include the transsexual and transvestite bodies that intrigued *el nuevo* Hemingway. American masculinities are open to suggestions and interpretations in the shape of women, men, cowards, killers, and lions that are never alone.

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