

**GENDERING MEN :**  
**THEORIZING MASCULINITIES IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND**  
**LITERATURE**

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## CHAPTER 1. STUDIES OF MASCULINITIES IN THE UNITED STATES: AN INTRODUCTION

Whether we love men or hate them, we -as feminists- have no task more necessary than understanding them.

—Deirdre English *Mother Jones* (1980)

The present chapter sets out to provide a general theoretical introduction to the study of men and masculinities in the United States. It begins by tracing the origins of the discipline -which are mainly related to the American feminist and homosexual movements of the 1960s, both of which grew confident and strong thanks to the liberationist message of the Civil Rights Movement- and continues by analyzing its development, which seems to have gone through two main waves. The chapter then goes on to explore the politics of American studies of masculinities, arguing the necessity of a feminist approach to masculinity. After studying the specific question of men's adoption of a feminist approach to masculinities, chapter 1 concludes by highlighting the challenge that poststructuralism poses to the latest trends of masculinity studies in the United States.

## 1. 1. Origins

Current interest in the study of men and masculinities has resulted from several social factors. A consensus is emerging that interest in the subject awakened in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s thanks to two main social movements: the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement, both of which were inspired by the liberationist language of the Civil Rights Movement. The feminist and gay liberation movements tried to give visibility to women and gay people, respectively. In so doing, they began, indirectly, to question the hegemony of the heterosexual male in the 1960s. As Carabí indicates:

En los países occidentales, el sistema patriarcal, basado en el predominio del varón...heterosexual y cuya ideología ha sido transmitida por la filosofía, la literatura, la arquitectura, el cine, la historia, la medicina, la política, los medios de comunicación, etc., fue puesto en tela de juicio por los movimientos sociales de los años sesenta y sus valores, dichos universales, sujetos a revisión. (“Construyendo” 15)

The first of these social movements, the feminist movement, led women to rethink themselves. In so doing, feminism did not only help

women question traditional conceptions of femininity, but also the gender division itself. In asking for social and political changes, women were challenging most patriarchal assumptions, which would eventually contribute to the development of a critique of hegemonic gender norms. Similarly, the birth in 1969 of the gay movement set out to question normative heterosexuality. Having been discriminated against for many years, gay men united to fight for their cause, claiming freedom of sexual choice as an unalienable right. As Carabí notes in this respect, “el colectivo gay se manifestó en Stone Wall para defender la libertad de opción sexual y con su acto invalidó la exclusividad del modelo heterosexual normativo” (“Construyendo” 5).<sup>20</sup> Like the feminist movement, then, the gay movement would in the following years prepare the ground for the development of the analysis of hegemonic/heterosexual masculinity.

Besides these two main social movements, current interest in men and masculinities also stems from the Civil Rights Movement, which took shape in the United States at the end of the fifties, and became extremely active in the following decade in America and other countries. The participants in the

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<sup>20</sup> However, the American Psychological Association did not remove homosexuality from the category of illness until 1973.

Movement denounced racism and asked for racial equality between whites and nonwhites. As several scholars have shown, masculinity and whiteness are not only interdependent, “they are overdetermined and articulated in such a way that each becomes more complex by association with the other” (DiPiero 5). In defending non-whiteness, then, the Civil Rights Movement was as well planting the seeds for the critique of hegemonic/white masculinity.

Focus on men and masculinities resulted as well from the widespread disillusionment over the Vietnam War, which led to a questioning of patriarchal power structures, traditional male roles, and the male behaviors encouraged by World War II and the Cold War (Kidder 1). Traditionally, the male body had been understood as physically strong, impenetrable, unreachable by illness, age, or exhaustion. Thus, the American soldier had been represented as fit and healthy, strong, muscular, potent, virile, aggressive, determined, loyal, and courageous. Nevertheless, Johnson’s defeat in Vietnam -as well as the recurrent images of mutilated, castrated, and/or wounded war veterans- called into question the American soldier’s

masculinity and virility (Jeffords *Hard; Remasculinization*).<sup>21</sup> Together, then, all these social movements and events in the 1960s and 1970s helped problematize masculinity, especially white heterosexual masculinity, and contributed to awakening an interest in analyzing men and masculinities.

Besides these social origins, current interest in masculinity has identifiable academic roots as well (Brod “Case” 44-6).<sup>22</sup> Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, women’s studies in the United States has been trying to revise traditional academic curricula by incorporating the study of gender into most American colleges and universities. Women’s studies has created, therefore, much of the vocabulary for academic discussions of gender inequality and gender constructs -namely, the cultural constructions of both femininity and masculinity. Inspired by feminist scholarship, then, masculinity studies extends and stresses the analysis of masculinity within gender studies.

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<sup>21</sup> While Vietnam helped problematize hegemonic masculinity, in the 1980s post-Vietnam President Ronald Reagan set out to “remasculinize” America, promoting a national feeling of international responsibility and leadership. Films such as the Rambo Trilogy (*First Blood*, 1982; *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, 1985; *Rambo III*, 1988), whose *mise-en-scene* coincided with the “Reaganite Revolution,” also helped to remasculinize America through “hard bodies” and the figure of the invincible American warrior, as well as the ideological principles of neoliberal conservatism (Jeffords *Hard; Remasculinization*).

<sup>22</sup> Though we have distinguished between social, political, and academic origins, it is important to note that in masculinity studies any theoretical challenge is a personal challenge. For profeminist men, “the objects of analysis are our own lives as men” (Brod and Kaufman Introduction 3).



Studies of masculinities in the United States are also related to gay/lesbian/queer studies, both methodologically and substantively (Brod “Case” 61). In a fashion similar to that in women’s studies discussed earlier, gay studies has moved from simply providing information to/about gay people to questioning the nature of the heterosexual/homosexual binarism. So, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between gay and masculinity studies in the United States. In fact, both share a number of common interests, such as the effects of homophobia on the general population. Moreover, gay studies has been very helpful, as Brod elaborates, in correcting the “unfortunate tendency” in American studies of masculinities to assume too much commonality and similarity among men (“Case” 61).

Much recent work on men and masculinities is increasingly incorporating race into the analysis of gender.<sup>23</sup> Linking masculinity to ethnic studies, scholars such as Michael Awkward (*Negotiating*), Robyn Wiegman (*American*), David Eng (*Racial*), Alfredo Mirandé, and Mrinalini Sinha, among many others, have argued that masculinity is inflected by ethnicity in a number of important ways. In this sense, then, much

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<sup>23</sup> See section 1.2.

masculinity scholarship derives as well from critical race studies, which emerged in the United States in the 1970s and has long described race as one of the main axes around which our lives revolve.

Even though American studies of masculinities have originated thanks, mainly, to (the intersections between) feminist, gay, and ethnic studies, all of which have a history of at least three decades, masculinity studies is itself, especially by comparison with more established fields such as women's studies, a recent addition to the academy (Brod Introduction 1). While it is true that a number of courses focusing on men and masculinities began to appear at some of America's most liberal institutions in the mid-1970s,<sup>24</sup> masculinity studies did not emerge as a legitimate field of academic inquiry until the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Many progressive academic heterosexual men began to do scholarly work on gender in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when masculinity studies provided them with a validating professional context (Newton). They have since contributed to the development of a

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<sup>24</sup> The University of California at Berkeley led the way by incorporating this field of study into its curriculum in 1976 (Kidder 1).

<sup>25</sup> Harry Brod (Introduction 1) refers to a number of texts that could be considered precursors of masculinity studies, such as C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1953) and William Whyte's *Organization Man* (1956). To these, one could add the works of social historians like Irvin Wyllie's *The Self-Made Man in America* (1954) and John Cawelti's *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (1965), who dealt with the self-made man themes, the American Dream, and the idea of success. Nevertheless, most masculinity texts, like most masculinity courses, originated in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

scholarship that is profeminist, gay affirmative, and dedicated to the improvement of both women's and men's lives.

Since the early 1990s, then, masculinity studies has increasingly become the focus of several U.S. college courses, programs, and journals. While there is no department of studies of masculinities,<sup>26</sup> several former women's studies departments in the United States have been re-named departments of gender studies over the last decade, since both gay/lesbian/queer and masculinity studies have already been included in their curricula.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, many U.S. departments of sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, English, etc. have been incorporating the analysis of masculinity into their courses and programs. Thus, the subject of masculinity is not, and should not be, limited to (departments of) gender studies, but is increasingly becoming an interdepartmental and interdisciplinary object of study.

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<sup>26</sup> Personally, I agree with Harry Brod that it is neither necessary nor convenient. As he explains, "men's studies calls for qualitatively different, not quantitatively more, attention to men...men's studies is a complement, not a cooptation, of women's studies. For these reasons it seems best to eschew the conceptualization at the field as gender studies" ("Case" 60).

<sup>27</sup> That is the case, for example, of the former women's studies departments and programs at Indiana University (Bloomington); at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; and at UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles). While Indiana University has created a new "Department of Gender Studies" - offering courses on women's, gay/lesbian and masculinity studies-, Rutgers and UCLA have simply added the term gender to their pathbreaking women's studies programs, thus creating departments of "Women's and Gender Studies." Both options appear equally useful to underline the relevance to the academic curricula of both women's and gender (masculinity/gay/lesbian/queer) studies.

## 1. 2. Development of American studies of masculinities

Studies of masculinities in the United States seem to have gone through two discernible waves (Kidder 1-4; Kimmel and Messner Introduction xiii-xv). Influenced by feminist texts, the first wave runs roughly from the mid-1970s to the 1980s. Among the key texts that resulted from this first period, one should make reference to books such as Marc Feigen-Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1974); Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1975); and Joe I. Dubbert's *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (1979). Although these texts were inspired by feminism, they focused on the costs to men of traditional gender roles, rather than on the question of men's privilege over women. As Kimmel and Messner (Introduction xiii) have noted in this respect, these works "discussed the costs to men's health -both physical and psychological- and the quality of relationships with women, other men, and their children of the traditional male sex role." There are other important feminist texts of this first wave of American studies of masculinities, such as Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer's *Men and Masculinity* (1974); Deborah David and Robert Brannon's *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (1976); and

Elizabeth Pleck and Joseph Pleck's *The American Man* (1980).<sup>28</sup> This group of texts explored *both* the costs and the privileges of being a man in modern U. S. culture (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xiv).

The early research on men and masculinities in the 1970s proved extremely valuable because it made masculinity visible as a gender category for the first time. Moreover, it analyzed both the advantages and disadvantages of being a man in American society. However, masculinity studies of the 1980s had to deal with a number of theoretical challenges. At the beginning of the decade, women's studies in the United States began to show how femininity is experienced differently by women in various social groups. Gradually, then, the notion of universal womanhood—based on the white middle-class Victorian notion of female passivity, beauty, and emotionality—was replaced by an analysis of how women and femininities differ depending on aspects of race, class, age, sexuality, nationality, and so on. Thus, the research on women laid the foundations for subsequent work on men and masculinities in the United States (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xiv-xv). Indeed, American research on men and masculinities is

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<sup>28</sup> Scholars like Carol Gilligan, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Barbara Ehrenreich also made significant contributions to the field, which, as Kidder notes, points to “the field's early indebtedness to women's studies and feminist thought” (2).

now entering a new stage, in which the variations among men are seen as central to the study and understanding of men's lives. As Kimmel and Messner insist, the unexamined assumption in the first generation of research on masculinities had been that one version of masculinity—white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual—was the sex role into which all men were trying to fit in our society. So, men of color, younger and older men, working-class men, and gay men were all regarded as departing from the traditional definitions of gender and embodying “problematic” or “deviant” versions of masculinity. In Kimmel and Messner's own words:

Such theoretical assertions, however, reproduce precisely the power relationships that keep these men in subordinate positions in our society. Not only does middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual white masculinity become the standard against which all men are measured, but this definition, itself, is used against those who do not fit as a way to keep them down. The normative definition of masculinity is not the “right” one, but it is the one that is dominant. (Introduction xiv-xv)

Since the 1990s, then, studies of masculinities in the U.S. seem to have entered a new major phase. This second wave of masculinity studies is characterized by two main features (Brod and Kaufman Introduction 4-5). First, it places special emphasis on the fundamental feminist insight that

gender is a system of power and not simply a set of stereotypes, sex roles, or observable differences between women and men. Second, the newer masculinity studies sees masculinity as a plural and dynamic entity, and is particularly concerned with showing how masculinity varies according to ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and age, among other factors. At present, then, most American scholars in masculinity studies seem to share the view that we cannot speak of *masculinity* as a singular term, but must analyze *masculinities* in the plural,<sup>29</sup> the ways in which different men construct different models of masculinity.<sup>30</sup>

Despite its increasing focus on ethnic, gay, and working-class men, contemporary American research on men and masculinities also analyzes hegemonic masculinity. Since white heterosexual masculinity remains largely invisible in specific gender terms, and since invisibility only helps reinforce its oppressive power, making white heterosexual masculinity visible is essential for questioning its power and hegemony. In this sense,

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<sup>29</sup> Harry Brod ("Some" 82-3) provides a genesis of the term *masculinities* in its present usage.

<sup>30</sup> Such a perspective can be seen in several recent works, such as Harry Brod (*Making*); Michael Kimmel (*Changing; Gendered*); Bob Connell (*Gender; Masculinities*); Jeff Hearn's (*Gender*); and Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (*Men's*). Probably, Connell's *Gender and Power* (1987) and Jeff Hearn's *The Gender of Oppression* (1987) represent "the most sophisticated theoretical statements of this perspective" (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xv). For example, in his seminal *Gender and Power*, Connell put forward the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which implies the subordination of both women and homosexual men. Furthermore, he argued that the oppression of women is a mechanism that links the various masculinities.

Elaine Tyler May has noted, for example, that the persistence of hierarchies of race and gender requires that we continue to acknowledge and investigate the structure and hegemony of white masculinity (xiv). Peter Middleton holds a similar view, arguing that a valid political project can only emerge if Western men analyze ourselves and our history more deeply than we have done. In his own words:

To do that it is important to speak of what we know and to recognize that this is a dialogue as well as a struggle. Other men, other cultures, will have other things to say to which we need to listen. Our ability to hear those men will be much greater if we understand our own masculinities more clearly. (*Inward* 12)

While it is true, as has been suggested, that first-wave masculinity studies already focused on white men, there is a key difference between first-wave and second-wave masculinity studies in their treatment of white manhood. The first wave analyzed white men as the standard and the norm, often neglecting “Other,” non-white masculinities. On the other hand, the second wave theorizes and re-conceptualizes white manhood as just *one* version of American masculinity, though the *dominant* one (Kimmel *Manhood* 6). It might also be argued, therefore, that second-wave



masculinity studies focuses on white manhood's cultural specificity, as well as on the social mechanisms that afford it privileges. To put it simply, while the first wave of men's studies analyzed (white) masculinity, the second analyzes white manhood as a specific, rather than normal or universal, gender (and racialized) construct, paying special attention to its hegemonic status within current power structures. Moreover, the second wave insists on the view of white masculinity as contradictory and shifting, rather than stable and uniform. Since society is always in flux, and white maleness is a social construct, it follows, then, that white manhood is always in flux as well (Kidder 2).

In its multiple and varied research areas, then, masculinity studies in the United States has shown signs of evolution and growth since the 1990s, as is suggested by the expansion of Eugene August's 1985 annotated bibliography *Men's Studies*. "Originally including about 600 entries, the book contained over one thousand when it was updated as *The New Men's Studies* less than a decade later" (Kidder 2). The themes explored within masculinity studies have also expanded. In 1989, for example, Harry Brod referred to five key areas of research on men and masculinities: work and family (especially how men's supposedly essential public roles have an

impact on their private fathering functions); violence (particularly the connection between masculinity and militarism); health (for example, “what are the percentages of miscarriages and birth defects among offspring of males working with genotoxic substances?” “how are codes of masculinity and Type A cardiovascular disease personalities related?”); sexuality (heterosexuality, homosexuality, and pornography); and culture (the male hero and the changing representations of masculinities in literary genres such as adventure and detective stories) (“Case” 41-2).

While Brod originally referred to five main areas of research on men and masculinities, today the list is significantly longer. Indeed, Michael Flood’s annotated bibliography on men and masculinities (*The Men’s*), which has become increasingly voluminous since its inception in 2002, includes a wide variety of masculinity-related topics, such as race/ethnicity, whiteness and white studies, men’s friendships, social class, the media, age, body-building, sports, culture and representation, feminist theory, queer theory, language, emotions, schooling, men’s movements, among many others. Moreover, Flood’s list suggests not only an increase in the number of masculinity-related topics, but also in the different perspectives on each of these issues. For example, while Brod’s 1989 bibliography associates

cultural representations of masculinity only with literature, Flood's updated section on "Masculinities in culture and representation" includes such varied perspectives as literature and literary theory, film, photography and television, advertising, men's fashion and clothing, etc.

There is further evidence of the rapid growth of masculinity studies. For example, in the last decade there have appeared in the United States several new organizations and academic journals dedicated to the study of men and masculinities, such as the *American Men's Studies Association* (1991), the *Journal of Men's Studies* (1992), and *Men and Masculinities* (1998), among others. One should also make reference to other key works in the field, such as E. Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993), "the first published history of American masculinities" (Kidder 2); Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996); and Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson's co-edition of *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia* (2003), one of the first (and most complete) interdisciplinary encyclopedias dedicated to the study of masculinities.

Most recent books on men and masculinities in the United States seem to share three main premises: social constructionism, variations among men, and the life course perspective (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xv-xvii).<sup>31</sup> In other words, most contemporary works on masculinity studies suggest that one is not born a man, but becomes one.<sup>32</sup> Masculinities are constructed within a specific social and historical context. The social constructionist perspective argues, therefore, that the meaning of masculinity varies from culture to culture and within any one culture over time. So it can be defined as both historical and comparative.

Second, most contemporary studies of masculinities suggest that masculinity also varies within any one culture according to the various cultural groups that compose it. In the contemporary United States, masculinity is shaped differently by class, race and ethnicity, and age, among other factors. And each of these aspects of masculinity modifies the others (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xv-xvii). So, the questioning of a

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<sup>31</sup> This does not mean, though, that there has been a decrease in biological and transcendental approaches to masculinity. On the contrary, many studies still refer to masculinity as eternal, a timeless essence that resides in the body of every man. As Kimmel indicates, “either we think of manhood as innate, residing in the particular anatomical organization of the human male, or we think of manhood as a transcendent tangible property that each man manifests in the world, the reward presented with great ceremony to a young novice by his elders for having successfully completed an arduous initiation ritual” (*Manhood* 4-5).

<sup>32</sup> Clearly, such a statement is indebted to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) that one is not born a woman, but becomes one.

singular definition of masculinity as the normative definition is the second axis around which much contemporary American masculinity scholarship revolves.

Finally, much contemporary American work on masculinity acknowledges that the meaning of masculinity is not constant throughout any man's life, but will change as he grows and matures. Of course, different issues will emerge for men at different times of their lives since men's lives, themselves, change over time in their development from boys to adult men (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xv-xvii).

### **1. 3. The politics of masculinity studies in the United States**

As has been suggested, much masculinity scholarship in the United States stems from the ideological premises of second-wave feminism. However, it becomes important to recognize that not all American studies of masculinities can be considered feminist. For example, by the late 1980s, the same questioning of American manhood that had produced feminist studies of masculinities had also triggered the emergence of a number of American pop texts on men's lives, such as Robert Bly's best-selling *Iron*

*John* (1990), which is considered the foundational text for the mythopoetic movement in America.<sup>33</sup> The mythopoetic movement contends that American men have been feminized by social and historical changes connected to the Industrial Revolution. In the early part of the nineteenth century, American men did some work around the home, such as grain processing, leather work, gathering fuel, etc. Thus, fathers kept in touch with their sons. With the Industrial Revolution, however, men started to work in factories, away from home. As a consequence, boys began to be raised exclusively by their mothers and became, in Bly's view, increasingly "feminized." He suggests organizing all-male resorts, for example in the forest, where men could be "remasculinized" by engaging in traditionally masculine activities such as hunting, fishing, and other warlike games.

Though increasingly popular, Bly's ideas prove equally problematic, especially from a feminist viewpoint.<sup>34</sup> Whereas most feminist approaches to men and masculinities aim to question and rethink manhood, Bly attempts

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<sup>33</sup> Although the images from this movement have had a negative influence on both popular and academic responses to masculinity studies, they have had little influence on the academic analysis of men and masculinities (Kidder 2).

<sup>34</sup> Besides its masculinist bias, Bly's text is flawed for several other reasons. For example, he relies on essentialist approaches to gender differences, forgetting that masculinity is socially constructed.

to reconstruct and reaffirm it.<sup>35</sup> In trying to remasculinize American culture, which Bly and his followers see as feminized by the overdominance of women and the absence of fathers in boys's lives, the mythopoetics seek to recover the power that comes from being a man, the power of patriarchy. It is true that men in Bly's movement often claim to feel powerless, insecure, and/or feminized by women's increasing social relevance. However, the mythopoetic movement is centrally concerned with making men feel powerful again. Men do not feel patriarchal power (yet), but they want to. As Kimmel and Kaufman have concluded, "we believe that the mythopoetic quest is misguided because it reproduces masculinity as a power relation - the power of men over women" (283).<sup>36</sup>

While Bly himself insists in *Iron John* that his book "does not constitute a challenge to the women's movement" (x), it certainly moves away from feminism in several respects. It is true that the mythopoetic

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<sup>35</sup> Organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan, the massive Million March of 1995 (which was at least twice the size of the historic Martin Luther King march on Washington in 1963) represented another call for a renewed patriarchal masculinity. The leaders of the march, which encouraged black women to stay at home, argued that at the root of the difficulties facing African Americans was "a certain male lack -an inability, or unwillingness, to take responsibility *as men*, to stand up for community and self" (Rheid-Pharr qtd. in Segal New xvii). As Segal notes, the march did not only neglect the needs of black women (and gay men), but diverted attention from the pernicious racism that still dominates life in the USA (New xviii). Such attempts to reaffirm patriarchal masculinity often become the cause of, rather than the solution to, men's problems.

<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the mythopoetic movement does not explain why most men feel powerless and insecure, despite their privileges (Segal New xxii).

movement, like most profeminist men's movements,<sup>37</sup> encourages men to redefine their own "feminine" side as "deeply masculine."<sup>38</sup> However, the mythopoeists, unlike profeminist men, do not question their male privileges. So, occasional display of so-called "feminine" skills and attributes may serve to modernize patriarchy, rather than undermine it. As feminist psychologist Lynne Segal insists, the feminist fight for gender equality can only take place through conscious collective and institutional practices challenging sexism, not simply by reeducating individual men into greater emotional flexibility and sensitivity (New xxiii, xxv).

While texts such as Bly's *Iron John* thus seem to evince that not all masculinity scholarship can be considered feminist, there exist many studies of masculinities, including this thesis, which are grounded in feminist theory and which share, therefore, several assumptions (Gardiner Introduction 11-5). First, a feminist approach to masculinity studies argues that men are also gendered beings, showing how both men and women have undergone historical and cultural gendering processes that distribute power unevenly.

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<sup>37</sup> The issue of profeminist men's groups, particularly their attempts at re-discovering the emotional component of men's lives, will be discussed in chapter 3 (section 3.3).

<sup>38</sup> For instance, men are encouraged to cry in each others' arms, read poetry, and/or dance together in the forest (Bly 34).



Second, it argues that masculinity is not monolithic, but varies according to differing individuals, groups, institutions, and societies. Although hegemonic patterns of masculinity attempt to maintain an appearance of stability and naturalness, the masculinities in every society are fluid.

Moreover, a feminist approach to masculinity studies shows how both genders can and should cooperate both intellectually and politically. As Gardiner (Introduction 12) elaborates, women may contribute to masculinity studies, men to feminist theory as well as to masculinity studies, heterosexuals to queer theory, and gay scholars to the study of heterosexuality, even though the views of differently situated scholars will not be identical.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, masculinity studies and feminist theory should be seen as complementary, rather than contradictory, fields. From this perspective, masculinity studies can be, not the betrayal or appropriation of feminism, but rather “one of its valuable and necessary consequences” (Thomas “Reenfleshing” 62).

Furthermore, a feminist conception of masculinity studies tends to reject essentialist conceptions of gender and sexuality as fixed by nature

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<sup>39</sup> Gardiner notes that although this might seem contradictory, the scholarship and pedagogies of masculinity studies actually reproduce the contradictions within contemporary gender relations (Introduction 14).

and/or immutable psychological or sociological theories. As Gardiner insists in this respect, such an analysis combines the poststructuralist critique of universal truths with queer and postcolonial theories about the dangers of categorical exclusions and cultural universalisms. It also agrees that the critique of essentialist categories and agendas is politically necessary, since belief in traditional binary genders as static, inevitable universals precludes social change by claiming that change is impossible and/or unnecessary (Gardiner Introduction 12).

Moreover, analyzing masculinities from a feminist perspective implies a critique of limited binaries, which sometimes also define feminist and masculinity studies and which present a world of dominance and difference, of oppressors and victims. However, the rejection of a clear binary between victims and oppressors does not preclude investigations into dominance. Rather, differences between genders, within genders, and outside of the standard gender binary should always be analyzed in relation to social hierarchies (Gardiner Introduction 13).

Finally, a feminist approach to masculinities argues that masculinity and femininity play neither parallel nor complementary roles, that masculinity and femininity affect male and female bodies differently, and

that the relationship between gender (masculinity/femininity) and sex (maleness/femaleness) depends on cultural factors. As Gardiner concludes in this respect, “masculinity and femininity have differing meanings and uses in male and female bodies and in differing cultural contexts” (Introduction 15).

#### **1. 4. Men in feminism**

While feminist approaches to masculinity are being adopted by both women and men in the United States, a number of scholars insist on the impossibility of men doing feminism. This puts the present project, written by a man and grounded in feminist theory, under severe pressure. So, another question seems pertinent at this point. Can men also adopt a feminist approach to masculinity studies?<sup>40</sup> For many (male) scholars, myself included, who see (gender) equality as a fundamental democratic principle, the answer is simply “yes, of course.” After all, feminism, like the struggle for racial equality, becomes, ultimately, a matter of civic and ethical

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<sup>40</sup> Some scholars also wonder if men in feminism should be referred to as *antisexist*, *profeminist*, and/or *feminist* men. Although the term *feminist men* often meets opposition from the most radical feminist quarters, I agree with Harry Brod’s contention that, as long as men strongly believe in the need for gender equality, the three terms are equally appropriate (“To”).

responsibility. As intrinsically democratic values, then, feminism and the belief in gender equality may be, should be, and have often been, embraced by both women and men. As Bob Connell has argued, there seems not to be anything in itself admirable about being a (feminist) dissident. In his own words:

I look forward to the day when a majority of men, as well as a majority of women, accept the absolute equality of the sexes, accept sharing of childcare and all other forms of work, accept freedom of sexual behavior, and accept multiplicity of gender forms, as being plain common sense and the ordinary basis of civilized life. (*Gender* xii)

Nevertheless, the subject of men in feminism has long been the focus of a controversial (and ongoing) debate within feminist and masculinity scholarship in the United States. It thus seems necessary to devote some pages to this discussion, which, as Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (Introduction 8) have suggested, brings up questions and problems which go right to the heart of feminist theory and masculinity studies.

Men's involvement in feminism keeps finding resistance for several reasons. First of all, the number of men in feminism is still small. Collective anti-sexist initiatives by men still occupy only a small place in the social

structure of most Western countries. Moreover, feminism seems to have been embraced by only some specific groups of men. As Lynne Segal has argued, anti-sexist men tend to be

the men who are least affected by threats to their own social status as professional men, men who occupy spaces where there is already greater equality between women and men, and where women moving into formerly predominantly male areas make them more interesting places to be. (New xxvii)

Furthermore, men's active participation in feminism seems difficult because their traditional ways of thinking have to be questioned, and this is not necessarily easy to do. As Connell (*Gender* xii) elaborates, the slow progress in getting issues of gender recognized in the mainstream of academic disciplines like history, economics, sociology, psychology, or literary theory, traditionally dominated by men, illustrates this resistance. Finally, some (feminist) scholars, male and female,<sup>41</sup> are themselves reluctant to men's participation in feminism, and there is indeed "a fine line to tread between intruding on women's business and sharing the work on common problems" (Connell *Gender* xii). No wonder, then, that men's involvement in feminist theory and political practice has often been

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Heath; Braidotti; Showalter.

distrusted. As Paul Smith suggests, “it can be understood as yet another interruption, a more or less illegal act of breaking and entering, entering and breaking, for which these men must finally be held to account” (“Men” 33).<sup>42</sup>

That is, indeed, the view held by several scholars. For example, Stephen Heath claims that men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one. In his view, the relation between feminism and men is necessarily one of exclusion, since feminism is a matter for women, it is their voices and actions that must determine the shape and future of feminism. Women are the “subjects” of feminism; men are its “objects” (Heath 1). In Heath’s opinion, men’s desire to become the subjects of feminism is another instance of male domination, appropriation, and colonization:

No matter how “sincere,” “sympathetic” or whatever, we are always also in a male position which brings with it all the implications of domination and appropriation, everything precisely that is being challenged, that has to be altered. Women are the subjects of feminism...the move and the join from being a woman to being a feminist is the grasp of that subjecthood. Men are the objects, part of the analysis, agents of

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<sup>42</sup> Despite their influence, Paul Smith’s ideas can be, and have been, questioned from different perspectives. For example, Joseph Allen Boone has argued that, rather than a critical analysis of men’s complex (and often contradictory) relationship with feminism, Smith’s views in *Men in Feminism* (1987) promote an unfruitful separatism. In his own words, “*Men in Feminism* becomes a territorial battlefield, reproducing the discursive thrusts of its title, when the very issues at stake have been so clouded, disguised, or otherwise silenced” (“Of” 171).

the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of the patriarchal mode; and my desire to be a subject there too in feminism -to be a feminist- is then only also the last feint in the long history of *their* colonization...I am not where they are and...I cannot pretend to be. (1)

Like Heath, Rosi Braidotti also contends that although there is something both appealing and suspect in the idea of men in feminism, men cannot, and should not, be in feminism. "Somewhere along the line," Braidotti elaborates, "I am viscerally opposed to the whole idea: men aren't and shouldn't be IN feminism; the feminist space is not theirs and not for them to see." Insisting further, she concludes that "a sort of impatience awakens in me" at the thought of a whole group of men who are "fascinated, puzzled and intimidated by the sight of a pen-handling female intelligentsia of the feminist kind" (233).

Both heterosexual and homosexual men are often distrusted when they identify themselves as feminists. In "Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism" (1987), Craig Owens argues that if the treatment of male homosexuality as crime and disease is a product of the same legal and medical apparatus that "castrates" women (by regarding them as always already castrated), then the gay male has a fundamentally different place in feminism than his

heterosexual counterpart. However, some feminist scholars contend that homophobia and sexism are different types of patriarchal oppression. It has been argued that gay men, despite their oppression, are still men, which excludes them from the feminist enterprise as well.<sup>43</sup>

Even though men's participation in feminism thus keeps being diminished, one should bear in mind that the history of anti-sexist men in the United States may be traced back many years ago. In the nineteenth century, several men, as Brod ("Case" 49) indicates, were equally active as feminists and as abolitionists. Among these, one should mention William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Parker Pillsbury, and Samuel Joseph May. Some husbands of suffrage leaders, such as Henry Blackwell, husband of Lucy Stone, and James Mott, husband of Lucretia Mott, were activists for women's rights in their own right as well. The approximately one-third proportion of men happens also to be the percentage of male signatories to the landmark 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. Reclaiming this history is

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<sup>43</sup> Personally, I believe that, today, it is clearer than ever that combating gender inequality, combating misogyny, and combating homophobia are all part of the same struggle against an oppressive gender system. It is true, as Sedgwick reminds us, that since the alliance between feminism and antihomophobia is "not automatic or transhistorical," it will be better if it is "analytic and unassuming" (*Between* 20). However, it is equally true, as she herself acknowledges, that male homophobia against men is misogynistic, "and perhaps transhistorically so (By 'misogynistic' I mean not only that it is oppressive of the so-called feminine in men, but that it is oppressive of women)" (*Between* 20).



crucial for profeminist men to go on with their work. Moreover, antisexist men have as yet been insufficiently written into women's history, although the history of profeminist men is an essential part of the history of feminism (Brod "Case" 49).<sup>44</sup>

While men's involvement in feminism has not always been sufficiently recognized, several feminist women are increasingly acknowledging and welcoming men's participation in the feminist struggle. Men's exclusion from the second wave of feminism of the late sixties and seventies was probably necessary for the feminist movement to emerge and grow strong, and for women to find their own voices and spaces. Nevertheless, the separatist moment that defined radical feminist practice twenty-five years ago does not seem to make sense any longer. Sandra Bartky (xii) has provided several arguments that seem to lend support to this view. First, many men have been politically effective allies, whereas many women have made crude and uniformed criticisms of feminism. Second, because we are at a different historical moment now, younger feminist scholars do not appear to have the same need for separation of the sexes that feminists of the previous generation needed so badly. Finally, the imposition

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<sup>44</sup> See Kimmel and Mosmiller in this respect.

of male gender identity can also be painful and ambiguous. Thus, the pain inflicted by masculinity is an “entirely comprehensible motive for their active support of the women’s movement” (Bartky xii). Besides these main reasons, Bartky (xiii) explains that there are also “practical reasons” for abandoning a completely separatist politics. Because of the antiquity and power of patriarchy, it is doubtful that women alone can undermine it. “We need ‘gender traitors,’” as Bartky (xii) concludes.

Like Bartky, I believe that there are important reasons for promoting male feminism. On the one hand, there is the belief in gender equality. Men, like women, have their own work to do on gender relations, participating actively in the feminist struggle for gender and social equality. As Tom Digby has suggested, “for me, it is as easy to explain why I am a feminist as it is to explain why I am an antiracist, or why I oppose economic injustice. In all three cases, the reason is my belief in the need for equality” (Introduction 3). Besides the belief in equality, another fundamental reason for male feminism is the damaging or back-wash effect of patriarchy on men’s own lives. Although it is women who suffer the worst consequences of patriarchy, it also exacts a price on men. For example, patriarchy has traditionally defined men as rational and unemotional. While this

conventional definition of masculinity has helped to reaffirm men's "superior" rationality over women's emotional (and hence "irrational" and "inferior") nature, patriarchy has also obliged men to repress their emotional inner selves. As a result, men often remain estranged from the world of nurture and emotions, which are an essential component of *human* life (Seidler *Unreasonable*).<sup>45</sup>

It would appear, then, that there exist (at least) two main reasons for men to adopt feminism. While the first reason (belief in gender equality) is an ethical imperative, the second (detrimental effects of patriarchy on men's own lives) suggests that feminism, as Michael Kimmel (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*) has argued, is necessary for enriching men's own lives as well as their relationships with women, children, and each other. While it is true that heterosexual men benefit from the patriarchal system, even the beneficiaries of an oppressive system can come to see its oppressiveness, especially the way it damages areas of personal life they share. For example, many (profeminist) men have come to feel the patriarchal burden of emotional repression and would like to establish closer, more nurturing, more affectionate relationships with their sons. After all, heterosexual men

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<sup>45</sup> See chapter 3 in this respect.

are not excluded from the basic human capacity to share experiences, feelings, and hopes. Although heterosexual men are often asked to deny such a capacity, it is not intrinsically inimical to men's nature. Some men strive daily to become better fathers and partners, and many also participate in environmental and peace movements. Thus, men, as Connell (*Gender* xiii) has concluded, could also join the feminist struggle for gender and social equality.

It is high time, then, that we rejected essentialist approaches to feminist theory and political practice, since what is important about being a feminist is not that someone perceives and understands as a *woman*, but that they perceive and understand as a *feminist*. Moreover, feminism is not essentially opposed to men's interests. After all, the question is not (only) what privileges men should *give up* on behalf of feminism, but (also) what they could *gain* from actively engaging in it. As Kaufman puts it:

Whatever privileges and forms of power we will certainly lose will be increasingly compensated by the end to the pain, fear, dysfunctional forms of behavior, violence experienced at the hands of other men, violence we inflict on ourselves, endless pressure to perform and succeed, and the sheer impossibility of living up to our masculine ideals. (160)

### **1. 5. Masculinity studies: new directions**

It would appear, then, that while men's involvement in feminism has been the subject of a long (and ongoing) debate, most of the latest American studies of masculinities, by both male and female scholars, seem to be increasingly accepting, and even encouraging, men's participation in the feminist struggle for gender equality. Nevertheless, as some old issues within American masculinity scholarship seem to begin to be settled, new questions arise. As more and more work is being done in the name of masculinity studies, it thus seems necessary to analyze some of its latest directions and future challenges. As has been suggested, masculinity studies in the United States seems to have entered a new major phase, usually described as a second wave of masculinity studies. It has also been pointed out that this second phase places special emphasis on analyzing how masculinity is inflected by race and ethnicity, sexuality, and class, among other factors. Thus, more and more attention is being paid to ethnic, gay, and working-class men, among others, whose specific identities and experiences were largely ignored by first-wave masculinity studies.

Yet, while many masculinity scholars in the United States seem to be paying increasing attention to all these identities, others insist on the dangers of any identity construction. For example, American scholar Alan Petersen (61) argues that social science conceptions of identity -originally developed in the 1950s- tend to rely on one of two oppositional views, one a psychological reductionism, the other a sociological reductionism. The first treats identity as a relatively fixed and stable characteristic of the person. The second treats identity as acquired, socially constructed, and/or socially imposed. These two basic conceptions, Petersen explains, have dominated thinking about identity up to the present and have greatly influenced the development of so-called identity politics.<sup>46</sup>

Identity politics has traditionally assumed that there is a causal relationship between identity and politics, with the former determining the latter. This is particularly evident in the gay and lesbian literature, where there is a common tension between a conception that identity is something that is always present (but has been hidden and repressed) and that which

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<sup>46</sup> Petersen (61) himself acknowledges, however, that there are in-between positions. For example, psychoanalysis often intersects with socially informed theories. Though grounded in social constructionism, the present study will itself rely on different disciplines (see chapter 2, section 2.7), including psychology and psychoanalysis. It does indeed seem both possible and desirable to move away from psychological and/or sociological reductionism, since psychological and sociological approaches to gender often complement each other and are not always mutually exclusive.

has never been socially accepted (but remains to be invented or achieved). In Petersen's view, this has often meant the reduction of the political to the personal, and the limitation of political activity to self-discovery and personal growth and transformation. In feminist psychology, in particular, the dictum "the personal is political" has usually implied that the political is personalized, as can be seen in the use of the ideas of empowerment, revolution from *within*, and the focus on validating women's reality (Petersen 61-2). Thus, identity (politics) may be "arbitrary" and "exclusionary," acting as a normative and regulatory system. For example, in many works about men and masculinities, masculine identity is often understood as being simply a composite of various natural and socially constructed attributes. Therefore, one can be a homosexual man, a black man, a white heterosexual man, an able-bodied young man, and so on. The problem with using this additive model of identity is that no matter how detailed the description, there will always be exclusions and disjunctions between imposed identity labels and categories and personal experiences. In Petersen's own words:

There is literally an infinite number of ways in which the components of identity can intersect or combine to make up

masculine identity. There is an arbitrariness about any identity construction, which will inevitably entail the silencing or exclusion of some experiences. (62)

Petersen's critique of traditional (mis)conceptions of identity as stable and fixed is clearly indebted to the growing influence of poststructuralism on the American social sciences and humanities in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, poststructuralist thought has played a key role in questioning fixed notions of ethnic, national, and sexual identity, among others. The emergence of poststructuralist approaches to the social sciences has radically questioned established beliefs and categories, especially those that assumed the existence of fixed and mutually exclusive identities, such as man and woman (Petersen 66).

Thus, one of the most significant (and controversial) debates in the academy these days concerns itself with the coexistence on the one hand of the poststructuralist challenge to subjectivity and identity and on the other of the work of several scholars who continue to see identity (whether sexual, ethnic, and/or national) as central to our lives (see, for example, Gilmore; Robinson; Braidotti). The debate impinges directly on the present work. After all, this study centers on the analysis of (American) white heterosexual



masculine identity. However, poststructuralist thinkers like Petersen have set out to question the very existence and internal coherence of concepts such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity/maleness. Thus, it now seems necessary to deepen into the repercussions of poststructuralist thought on the analysis of white heterosexual masculinity, the focus of this study.

## CHAPTER 2. POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND THE DISSOLUTION OF (AMERICAN) WHITE HETEROSEXUAL MALE IDENTITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS STUDY

If the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed, then it follows that the critique of the...subject is crucial to the continuing *democratization* of...politics.

—Judith Butler *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993)

It [poststructuralism] involves a fundamental questioning of established categories and concepts, especially those that assumed the existence of fixed, homogeneous, and mutually exclusive identities, including man and woman.

—Alan Petersen “Research on Men and Masculinities: Some Implications of Recent Theory for Future Work” (2003)

The category “men” needs to be exposed as a modern invention which nonetheless draws its legitimacy from appeals to a historical continuity supposedly guaranteeing its universality.

—Peter Middleton *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (1990)

We have a designation of human identity - white male- that apparently has no real referent in the world in which we live.

—Thomas DiPiero *White Men Aren't* (2002)

The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.

—Judith Halberstam *Female Masculinity* (1998)

Philosophically, Western culture has traditionally revolved around a number of binary oppositions generated by the Cartesian assumption of a radical division between knowing subject and passive object of knowledge (Waugh 1-6). Thus, one finds a number of dualisms resulting from the subject-object split, such as mind/body, spirit/matter, reason/emotion, white/black, man/woman, masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, etc. Western culture and philosophy have recurrently used these binary oppositions to define identity and difference. For example, whiteness has long been defined as the opposite of blackness, just as masculinity has traditionally been defined as the opposite of femininity (Segal *Slow* 173).

Although the term *poststructuralism* has been defined in different ways, most poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, and

Lacan seem to share the view of language and meaning as fluid and contingent, rather than stable and fixed (Waugh 1-6; Dinshaw 1-10; Butler “Contingent”; Oliver 56). As poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (*Of*) has argued, meaning results from what he calls *différance*, a simultaneous process of differentiation and postponement. In his view, then, meaning is produced not only by using difference as a means of self-affirmation, but also by a process of deferral. In this respect, Derrida contends that meaning keeps being deferred, is able to slide and, therefore, cannot be fixed. In (re-)defining language and meaning as slippery and indeterminate, then, most poststructuralist thinkers have also set out to question fixed meanings and established concepts, especially those that assumed the existence of clearly limited and mutually exclusive (sexual) identities. Challenging dualistic (mis)conceptions of identity, poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (*Of*), for example, has shown how the two elements in any binary opposition are unequally weighed. More often than not, there is an imbalance of power between the two terms. Any attempt to define an identity always depends on excluding some elements. In other words, identity converts difference into “Otherness” in order to secure its own self-certainty. For instance, the traditionally accepted

perception of men and women as “opposite sexes” (with corresponding “genders” -masculine/feminine) implies that one is either a man or a woman and that these two categories are mutually exclusive. As Gutterman notes:

This sense of difference then becomes the demarcation of otherness when gradations of value are placed on the two distinct domains. In Western culture, of course, that which is usually associated with men (activity, culture, reason) is usually held in higher esteem than that which is associated with women (passivity, nature, emotion). (221)

Poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and Gutterman have thus played a key role in rethinking supposedly fixed meanings and oppositions, particularly those that relied on clearly defined binary identities, such as man/woman, masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, whiteness/non-whiteness. In questioning fixed ethnic, sexual, and gendered identities, then, poststructuralism has also challenged the very existence of an (apparently) unitary concept of (white heterosexual) masculine identity, the specific subject of this study. Thus, poststructuralist theories and approaches to masculinities appear to put the present work under severe pressure, since it might very well be grounded in a fluid, changing, contradictory, and perhaps even inexistent object of study. So, much of the

present chapter focuses on the effects of poststructuralist thinking on the analysis of white heterosexual masculinity, the focus of this thesis. Whereas much poststructuralist thinking has called into question the existence of supposedly unitary and fixed (white heterosexual male) identities, many scholars keep emphasizing, however, the relevance of identity (gendered, sexual, and/or racial) to our daily lives. Thus, the debate between poststructuralist and identity-based analyses of (white heterosexual) masculinity has become one of the most controversial issues within current American masculinity scholarship. While poststructuralist and identity-grounded approaches to gender and masculinity have often been regarded as antithetical, I will try to demonstrate how it is possible to start rethinking the discussion from a number of new theoretical perspectives. Using the latest work of different contemporary American thinkers, much of the present chapter will, in effect, be centrally concerned with combining poststructuralist and identity-based studies of masculinities. In so doing, I also attempt to reconcile feminist identity politics with the poststructuralist analysis of (American) white heterosexual masculinity's internal fissures and contradictions, which are the focus of the following sections of this chapter.

## 2. 1. Interrogating maleness and masculinity

The traditional view of the concept of maleness (and femaleness) as a fixed and stable biological/essentialist identity may be, and has been, questioned from different theoretical perspectives, most of them inspired by poststructuralist theory. One of the first (and most influential) challenges to the conventional biological distinction between the sexes came from the work of Michel Foucault.<sup>47</sup> In the last chapter of the *History of Sexuality* (1976), volume I, Foucault suggests that we should give up looking at “sex” as both univocal and causal, and that we should begin treating it as an effect, rather than an origin.<sup>48</sup> In his view, “sex” is nothing but an effect of power and, more specifically, of the hegemonic discourse of (hetero)sexuality. In his own words:

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<sup>47</sup> As Rafael M. Mérida notes, Foucault’s analysis of “sex” is indebted to a number of earlier studies on the subject, most notably Vern L. Bullough’s “Sex in History: A Virgin Field” (1972), which “destacó la importancia de un ámbito apenas explorado de manera sistemática y que sólo tangencialmente había ocupado el norte de los intereses académicos” (Prólogo 8).

<sup>48</sup> As Dinshaw points out, “it is...Foucault’s analysis in *The History of Sexuality*, volume I, of the production of sex as the truth of the modern liberal subject that has broken the ground for many queer historical projects over the last twenty-five years” (15).

The notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (1: 154)

Thus, Foucault seems to consider that morphology is itself the effect of a hegemonic epistemology and that power constructs what it purports simply to represent. In his view, the body is only “sexed” through a number of discursive practices and gendered power relations which endow it with an idea of biological or “natural” sex. Thus, the body is only meaningful in the context of power relations.<sup>49</sup> Of course, this has a number of far-reaching consequences (Butler *Gender* 6-7). First of all, if the immutable category of sex is contested, then perhaps “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender. Probably, sex had always been gender(ed), so that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. Moreover, if there is no sex, only gender, then gender itself becomes a free-floating construct, with the result that *man* and *masculine*, as Butler (*Gender* 6-7) herself concludes,

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<sup>49</sup> In this context, Margaret Mead’s early comments on American masculinity become particularly insightful: “Maleness in America is not absolutely defined; it has to be kept and reearned every day” (qtd. in Dubbert 1).



might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.

Thus, men are not (necessarily) males, and vice versa. There is a number of reasons for this fact, such as cultural specificities in men and males; distinctions between boys, men, young males, and males; the different forms of inter-sexuality (that do not conform to XX or XY chromosomal patterns); the various physiological and cultural forms of gender change, whether temporary or permanent; and, finally, the differential relation of men and males to history and trans-history respectively (Hearn and Collinson 101).<sup>50</sup> Little wonder, then, that most queer scholars insist that we need to dissociate masculinity from maleness. As Judith Halberstam, for example, explains, “there is still no general acceptance or even recognition of masculine women and boyish girls” (15). Thus, it seems both possible and desirable to dissociate masculinity from maleness, gender from sex. In effect, the transition from affiliation marriages to romantic marriages, the development of the feminist

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<sup>50</sup> Hearn and Collinson insist, however, that these (sociological) distinctions are not necessarily in keeping with other social usages of the terms *men* and *males* -as, for example, in government and other official statistics. For example, in the Anglo-American context, births, deaths, and much other demographic information are unambiguously classified for males and females, although much, though not all, information on economic activity is classified by men and women (Hearn and Collinson 101).

movement, the social upheaval caused by World War I, and the development of the sexological models of sexual definition at the turn of the century all played a key role, as Judith Halberstam (15, 48) explains, in breaking apart the traditional links between gender, sex, and sexuality.

If “sex” is itself a product of the dominant (hetero)sexual discourse, the category of “sex” might itself disappear through the challenge of heterosexual hegemony. Indeed, there is no reason to divide human beings into male and female sexes except that such a division meets (and naturalizes) the economic needs of heterosexuality/heterosexism. Gendered binary oppositions such as masculinity/femininity, maleness/femaleness are the product of patriarchal gender relations. In fact, they are the naturalized terms that keep patriarchy concealed and, hence, protected from a radical critique.<sup>51</sup> As Judith Butler herself elaborates:

No longer believable as an interior “truth” of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not “to be”), one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings. (*Gender* 33)

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<sup>51</sup> As is known, Wittig suggests that lesbians are not women because they do not form part of the heterosexual matrix.

Although many American scientists and scholars keep trying to find irreducible biological/genetic/hormonal<sup>52</sup> differences between the sexes,<sup>53</sup> as well as between homosexuals and heterosexuals (Kimmel *Gendered* 21-46; Segal *Slow* 61-4), it seems both possible and necessary to question the sexual binary. One way of going about it is to emphasize the social construction of the sexual organs.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu has shown how the social conception of the sexual organs is not simply a ratification of physiology or “nature” but the product of a construction which stresses some differences at the same time as it diminishes some similarities. For example, the representation of the vagina as an inverted

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Laqueur (5-6) insists that, before the Enlightenment, sexual inequality depended on differences of social hierarchy and rank, but had nothing to do with biological dualisms. However, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, supposedly biological differences were increasingly invoked to justify sexual inequality. In 1803, for example, Jacques-Louis Moreau argued not only that the two sexes were different, but also that they were different regarding every single aspect of both body and soul, that is, physically and morally. Similarly, in 1889, biologist Patrick Geddes argued that women’s cells were different from men’s, the former more passive and conservative; the latter more active and energetic.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, two recent best-selling books like *Why Men Don’t Iron* (1999) by Ann and Bill Moir and *Why Men Don’t Listen and Women Can’t Read Maps* (2001) by Allan and Barbara Pease. Both texts keep insisting that gender differences exist because men and women’s brains work completely differently and their biological differences mean that they can never think or behave in the same way. John Gray’s long-time bestseller, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992), provides a similar view. Petersen (64-6) warns against the dangers of the biological approach to (gender) difference, which can work as a regulatory practice. As he says, “there needs to be greater sensitivity to the history of the deployments of natural knowledge for the control and/or annihilation of that which is deemed to be different and to the potential for such knowledge to be used to delineate boundaries between the normal (i.e., included) and the abnormal (i.e., excluded)” (66).

<sup>54</sup> See Petersen; Schiebinger; Bristow; or Haraway, who argues that although the concept of gender appeared within a liberal context in the first decades after the Second World War, it “failed to interrogate the political-social history of binary categories like nature/culture, and so sex/gender, in colonialist western discourse” (134).

phallus, which recurs in several medical texts of the Middle Ages, is itself a product of a social construction. Such a representation relies on a number of binary oppositions -such as positive/negative, superior/inferior, activity/passivity, up/down, or man/woman- which have come to dominate an eminently patriarchal social order. Masculinity gains its power by legitimizing and inscribing domination in biology, which is itself a naturalized social construction.<sup>55</sup> The fact that men and women have long been seen as two different versions, superior and inferior, of the same physiology helps explain why, until the Renaissance, there exists no anatomical term to describe the female sex, which is represented as the male sex, but with a different organization:

And also why, as Yvonne Knibiehler shows, the early nineteenth-century anatomists (in particular, Virey), thinking in the same terms as the moralists, tried to find in the female body the justification for the social status that they assigned to it in the name of the traditional oppositions between inside and outside, sensibility and activity, passivity and reason. And one would only have to follow the history of the ‘discovery’ of the clitoris as related by Thomas Laqueur, extending it to the Freudian theory of the ‘migration’ of female sexuality from the clitoris to the vagina, to complete the demonstration that, far from playing the founding role that they are sometimes given,

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<sup>55</sup> In this respect, Michael Kimmel has argued that “the search for a transcendent, timeless definition of manhood is itself a sociological phenomenon -we tend to search for the timeless and eternal during moments of crisis, those points of transition when the old definitions no longer work and the new definitions are yet to be firmly established” (*Manhood* 5).

the visible differences between the male and female sex organs are a social construction which can be traced back to the principles of division of androcentric reason, itself grounded in the division of the social statuses assigned to men and women. (Bourdieu 15)<sup>56</sup>

It would appear, then, that even the sexual organs, which play a determining role in the description of any human being as male or female, are socially constructed. What social scientists call *sex differences* refer to a set of anatomical, hormonal, chemical, and physical differences between women and men. However, there are enormous ranges of female-ness and male-ness. In virtually all the sociological research that has been done on the attributes associated with masculinity or femininity, the differences *among* women and *among* men have been shown to be greater than the mean differences *between* women and men (Kimmel *Gendered* 4).<sup>57</sup>

Like sociology, psychoanalysis has also helped to undermine fixed notions of sexual difference. For instance, in his twentieth seminar, *Encore* (1973), Jacques Lacan famously proclaimed the absence of sexual relation. Though Lacan's manifesto has been subject to a number of different (mis)interpretations, he simply suggested that there can be no sexual relation

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<sup>56</sup> Londa Schiebinger's *Nature's Body* (1993) shows how natural history contributed to the *naturalization* of the sexual binary.

<sup>57</sup> See Butler (*Gender* 106-11) in this respect.

(and, hence, no sexual difference) outside/beyond language and the symbolic order. More specifically, Lacan contends in this essay that language, which he sometimes refers to as “the Other,” always stands in between the two partners in the well-known arrangement which is improperly called a sexual relationship. It becomes impossible, therefore, to talk about any “essential” —or, in Lacan’s terms, pre-symbolic— sexual difference. Similarly, in his *Ecrits* (1977), Lacan (282-8) suggests that the male must “have” the phallus, while the female must “be” the phallus. However, it is necessary to qualify that, for Lacan, the male only *seems* to “have” the phallus, just as the female only *seems* to “be” the phallus, since the fullness of signification, which the phallus represents, is unattainable by both women and men. In Lacan’s view, then, one can never be completely male since maleness can only be approximated and is ultimately unfulfilled and unfulfillable. The phallic function, as defined by Lacan, states that what is most purely phallic is that which is least material, most ideal. Therefore, real men approximate that function with many difficulties, since their own corruptible corporality, as DiPiero (231) explains, distances them from the unattainable ideal of masculinity. As Peter Middleton concludes, “a ‘real

man' is of course a fantasy ideal representing aspirations neither realizable, nor necessarily desirable if they were" (*Inward* 3-4).

Historically, a consensus is emerging that in American history the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were particularly significant for the consolidation and radicalization of the sexual binary. There had always existed a sexual division in both Europe and the United States. However, what was new -and distinctly American- were, as Kimmel (*Manhood* 53) indicates, the strictness and the degree to which women and men were now [in the nineteenth century] seen as having a separate sphere. The separation of spheres was largely the result of the increasing industrialization of the country. The casual conviviality of the workplace began to disappear in the new world of the factory system and mass production (Kimmel *Manhood* 53). To the growing industrialization of nineteenth-century America, the feminist historian Sandra Lipsitz Bem adds another key historical factor which, paradoxically enough, helped consolidate the sexual binary: the feminist struggle for women's rights. Bem (80-1) argues that, even if undesired, first-wave feminism reinforced the sexual binary for two main reasons. First of all, it was mainly separatist. Second, instead of joining with feminists, men often reacted against women's rights (for instance, their right

to vote) by underlining sexual difference, which they often used to defend sexual inequality.

Like history, cross-cultural anthropology (Gilmore; Cornwall and Lindisfarne; Moore; Yanagisako and Collier) has also shown how the Western sexual binary is historically and culturally specific. Moreover, it has challenged the traditional distinction between sex (biology) and gender (culture). Cross-cultural anthropology has shown how this division is a product of Western ethnocentric discourses which fail to take into account important aspects of cultural variation.<sup>58</sup> For example, a number of Native American cultures do not have two sexes but three, including in their sexual repertoire the figure of the *berdache*, who is capable of acting as male or female depending on the social context (Gilmore 9, 23, 207).<sup>59</sup> While the *berdache* is a highly respected figure in his/her society, ambiguous gender in our society, as Judith Halberstam (20) concludes, is often transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female.

It is true, as Judith Butler (*Gender* 37) reminds us, that anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern and Carol MacCormack have

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<sup>58</sup> For an excellent description (and critique) of some of the most relevant cross-cultural anthropological studies on sexual and gender variability, see Kimmel (*Gendered* 47-65).

<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of berdache traditions, see Williams (*Spirit*).



described a number of sexual universals, suggesting, for example, that most societies worldwide distinguish between women and men, and that nature is almost invariably represented as female, in need of protection and subordination by a culture that is always described as male, active, and abstract. While this might be taken as evidence for the universality and “naturalness” of the traditional sexual binary, one should bear in mind that the gendered politics that construct and maintain this distinction are effectively disguised by the discursive production of a nature and, indeed, a natural sex that is defined as the unquestioned foundation of culture (Butler *Gender* 37). Moreover, scholars such as Clifford Geertz have argued, as Butler (*Gender* 37) elaborates, that its universalizing structure misses the multiplicity of cultural understandings of “nature.”

From all this, one is led to conclude, then, that the “biological” concept of maleness and “sex” is anything but unproblematic. Equally relevant is the fact that since most definitions of masculinity rely on the concept of maleness, the concept of masculinity (studies) is itself put under severe pressure. For instance, Harry Brod defines masculinity studies as “the study of masculinities and *male* experiences as specific and varying social-

historical-cultural formations” (“Case” 40; emphasis added).<sup>60</sup> In the first sentence of *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996), George L. Mosse defines masculinity as “the way *men* assert what they believe to be their manhood” (3; emphasis added). Finally, Michael Kimmel has also defined gender as “the sets of cultural meanings and prescriptions that each culture attaches to one’s *biological sex*” (*Manhood* 2-3; emphasis added). Given these biological understandings of masculinity, then, it is clear that many studies of masculinities might as well be open to questioning.

## 2. 2. Interrogating heterosexuality

If, as it seems, the concept of maleness/masculinity has been radically challenged, the notion of heterosexuality has also been called into question. Since the 1960s, American feminist, gay/lesbian, and/or queer theorists have put the taken-for-granted uniformity of heterosexuality into question, not only by insisting on its cultural construction, but also by emphasizing its internal ideological contradictions and inconsistencies. Inspired by

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<sup>60</sup> In fact, Brod uses the term *men’s studies*, instead of *masculinity studies*, which is preferred here.

poststructuralist trends, much of American queer theory, for example, has questioned the traditional view of heterosexuality as fixed and uniform and has emphasized its hybrid nature.<sup>61</sup>

Probably, the most radical challenge to the presumed unity and stability of heterosexuality has come from Judith Butler. In her seminal *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler suggests, for instance, that the “unity” of gender is the result of a regulatory practice that tries to render gender identity stable and uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>62</sup> In her view, the power of this practice is, through an exclusionary and repressive system of production, to restrict the relative and complex meanings of “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “bisexuality” as well as the subversive potential of their convergence and re-signification (*Gender* 31-2). Butler is thus suspicious of (mis)conceptions of

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<sup>61</sup> In fact, the view of heterosexuality as a coherent system has been radically challenged by most queer studies in the U.S. As Dinshaw explains, “this view is such a basic one in the field of queer studies and is so widely held that specific documentation seems at once futile and unnecessary” (215). However, she mentions the work of Judith Butler (“Critically”) as a “theoretical starter;” Katz is referred to as “a full-length discussion of modern heterosexuality;” and she also mentions Richardson for her “emphasis on social and political theory” (Dinshaw 215).

<sup>62</sup> Butler terms this regulatory practice the *heterosexual matrix*: “I use the term heterosexual matrix throughout the text to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing on Monique Wittig’s notion of the ‘heterosexual contract’ and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (*Gender* 151).

heterosexuality as a coherent model. In this sense, then, she coincides with other American queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Carolyn Dinshaw, who also insist on the inextricability of “the normative” and “the deviant,” claiming that they often become indistinguishable.<sup>63</sup> For example, in her landmark *Between Men* (1985), Sedgwick put forward the concept of “homosociality,” which bears an equally close relation to homosexuality and homophobia. Thus, homosociality and homosexuality, Sedgwick argues, are closely related to each other. It would appear, then, that the ideal of a coherent and “uncontaminated” heterosexuality, which Monique Wittig describes as the foundation for the heterosexual matrix, is an unattainable ideal. In Butler’s own words:

A psychoanalytic elaboration might contend that this impossibility is exposed in virtue of the complexity and resistance of an unconscious sexuality that is not always already heterosexual. In this sense, heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy. (*Gender* 122)

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<sup>63</sup> However, these scholars differ from Monique Wittig in this respect, since she sees heterosexuality and homosexuality as two completely different realities.

For example, within the Western nuclear family, heterosexuality remains inseparable from reproduction, which is meant to ensure the social and economic survival of the family unit. Strictly speaking, then, a childless heterosexual couple is not purely “heterosexual” since they fail to identify “fully and without incoherence” to one of heterosexuality’s central tenets. So, this seems to lend further support to the view of heterosexuality as intrinsically contradictory. Indeed, Butler describes it as a “comedy” based on the concepts of repetition and performance. The performative status of heterosexuality becomes nowhere clearer than in its “imitation” by homosexuals. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual contexts shows the artificial nature of the so-called heterosexual “original.” Therefore, gay, as Butler herself comments, is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. As she concludes, “the parodic repetition of the ‘original’...reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original” (*Gender* 31).

It would seem, then, that the presumed stability and fixity of heterosexuality can be, and has been contested, in a number of ways. Indeed, the very concept of heterosexuality has a discrete history (Stokes 15). The term *heterosexuality* was first used in the American medical

context in 1892 in an article by Dr. James G. Kiernan.<sup>64</sup> In Kiernan's view, *heterosexuality* had perverse connotations, as it referred to non-reproductive male-female erotic desire. Since reproduction normalized different-sex eroticism, sexual pleasure occurring outside a reproductive context was seen by Kiernan and others as pathological. Like Kiernan's work, Richard von Krafft-Ebing's well-known tract *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1893) also described the term *heterosexuality* as a non-reproductive, pleasure-centered pathology. However, Krafft-Ebing, unlike Kiernan, begins to refer to heterosexuality as the "normal," different-sex erotic standard. The reason for this semantic change is obvious. Krafft-Ebing discusses heterosexuality *vis-à-vis* case studies of men psychically troubled by homosexual desire. Thus, heterosexuality begins to assume its shape as a cure for psycho-sexual deviance. Finally, Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905) helped to consolidate the power of heterosexuality as modern society's dominant norm. As Stokes concludes in this respect, Freud "helped to constitute our belief in the existence of a unitary, monolithic thing with a life and determining power of its own: 'heterosexuality'" (66). It seems,

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<sup>64</sup> It might be worth pointing out that Foucault traces back the birth of *homosexuality* as a pathology to 1870. In his own words, "the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized -Westpahl's famous article of 1870...can stand as its date of birth...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (1: 43).

then, that *heterosexuality* is not a stable, eternal, and immutable term, since its meanings have radically changed over the years.<sup>65</sup> The concept of (hetero)sexuality, as Foucault concludes in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976), is not a natural given, but rather a specific cultural and historical construction, influenced by discourse and power relations. In Foucault's own words:

Sexuality is a historical construct...a great surface network in which the stimulation, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (106)

### **2. 3. Interrogating whiteness**

Like heterosexuality and maleness/masculinity, the concept of whiteness has also begun to be questioned in recent years. Inspired by poststructuralist

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<sup>65</sup> In his influential work *Gay New York* (1994), American gay scholar George Chauncey explains that the very opposition between homosexuals and heterosexuals is relatively recent, and it is only after the Second World War that homosexuality and heterosexuality appear as mutually exclusive options in the United States. Previous to that, bisexuality was generally accepted. Heterosexual men could have homosexual lovers, and they were not feminized, as long as they played the "active" role in the homosexual relationship. The radical separation between heterosexuality and homosexuality after World War II, as well as the growing description of homosexuality as a deviant or abnormal behavior, may be put down to several factors. Among these, one should mention the growing conservatism of the 1950s -when both the press and the newly invented TV set promoted the (heterosexist) ideal of family life- as well as McCarthy's witch hunt, which involved the persecution of both communists and homosexuals.

work on culture and discourse, much of the latest American research on white masculinity (see, for example, DiPiero 9) suggests that the principal elements of identification -whiteness, maleness- are impossible ones, since according to the cultural and discursive framework that has defined them, no one could ever be completely white and/or completely male. The ideal white man, as Thomas DiPiero (9) argues, is not simply a fiction, but a fiction constructed to prohibit comprehensive identification. Because nobody has ever really been completely white or completely male, then, we have a radical division between our structures of meaning and our sociopolitical practices, which implies that we have a definition of human identity -white male- that apparently has no real referent in our everyday realities. In DiPiero's own words:

On the one hand it seems hardly surprising that such might be the case, since it is probably no more likely that any other identity for which we have a name perfectly corresponds to real individuals, but on the other hand it seems particularly ironic that the standard by which all others have traditionally been measured and through which all are made into fictionalized others is itself an impossible and nonexistent model. (9)

One could mention several examples to back up this argument. For example, the well-known "one drop of blood" rule, which developed in the



eighteenth century in the American South and has survived up to the present, states that no person with any identifiable nonwhite heritage whatsoever —however distant in the past and however culturally similar to European, especially Anglo-Saxon traditions— can be identified as properly white. However, nobody can really account for the sexual dalliances of ancestors long dead. Thus, “a great deal of racial consternation and hysteria arises in the people for whom such pedigree matters” (DiPiero 9-10). Moreover, the very concept of whiteness seems both culture-specific and context-bound.<sup>66</sup> According to Winthrop Jordan, the term *white* began to be commonly used to describe/classify human beings in the American colonies toward the end of the seventeenth century. As Jordan himself explains:

There seems to have been something of a shift during the seventeenth century in the terminology which Englishmen in the colonies applied to themselves. From the initially most common term *Christian*, at mid-century there was a marked drift toward *English* and *free*. After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term appeared -*white*. (qtd. in DiPiero 240)

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<sup>66</sup> For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Greek and Italian immigrants in the U.S.A. were not usually regarded as white, although both groups today would most likely be regarded as white by nearly everyone (DiPiero 10). Barrett and Roediger describe organized labor activity as one of the reasons why previously “nonwhite” groups became white. They contend that Greeks and Italians participated in an important strike of the Western Federation of Miners in 1912, and the category of white worker expanded after that event (404). Allen (2 vols.) provides a detailed account of the social and historical reasons for the re-classification of the Irish as white.

The historical origins of the “white” race appear to be indissolubly linked to social and economic factors. In his seminal two-volume work *The Invention of the White Race* (1994, 1997), which focuses on the plantation colonies of Anglo-America during the period from the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to the cancellation of the original ban on slavery in the colony of Georgia in 1750, Theodore W. Allen argues that the origins of the white race were determined by a number of class conflicts. There was in Anglo-America an increasing class struggle -in the absence of a system of racial oppression- between the plantation elite on the one hand and on the other the debt-burdened small planters and the vast majority of the economically productive population, the bond-laborers, three-fourths Anglo- and one fourth African-American. In this specific social context, the “white race” was invented as a form of social control. Its establishment in the continental plantation colonies, signaled by the enactment of the “Act Concerning Servants and Slaves” (1705), officially consolidated the system of privileges of European-Americans, of even the lowest social class, *vis-à-vis* any person of any degree of African ancestry, not only bond-laborers but free Negroes as well, whether they possessed property or not (Allen 1: 24).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Allen insists that it was only white, upper- and lower-class *males* who were privileged by white

It seems, therefore, that there was a clear subordination of class by race in the Anglo-American colonies at the turn of the century. Thus, southern colonizers were able to diminish the social differences between upper- and lower-class whites: “Race became the primary badge of status” (Nash qtd. in Allen 1: 24). It was only because “race” consciousness became more relevant than class-consciousness that the continental plantation bourgeoisie was able to achieve and maintain the degree of social control necessary for enriching themselves on the basis of chattel bond-labor. Thus, the “white race” was invented as a form of social control whose distinguishing characteristic was the participation of the laboring classes: non-slaveholders, self-employed smallholders, tenants, and laborers. In time, this “white race” social control system begun in Virginia and Maryland would become “the model of social order to each succeeding plantation region of settlement” (Allen 2: 251).

Moreover, the invention of “whiteness” served to prevent a rebellion from the European-American bond-laborers. The fear of white servants and

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supremacy. As he explains, his book is particularly interested in analyzing the “remolding of male supremacy as white male supremacy, as an essential element of the system of white-skin privileges” (1: 24). Therefore, Allen seems to agree with Thomas DiPiero; Peggy McIntosh; Kathleen Neal Cleaver; and David R. Roediger, among others, all of whom argue that whiteness and masculinity are closely linked. As Cleaver explains, for example, “central to the nineteenth-century worker’s devotion to whiteness was his assertion of maleness, with its perils and yearnings, and his uncertain claim to republican citizenship in the world of men” (159).

Negroes uniting in rebellion, a prospect which made some sense in the 1660s and 1670s, disappeared completely during the next half-century. It is no less significant, as Jordan elaborates, that the only rebellions of white servants in the continental colonies came before the official institution of slavery (qtd. in Allen 2: 252). After 1700, with the invention of the “white race,” every white man, no matter his economic status, could at least find pride in his race. Moreover, the immediate control of the black workers fell almost entirely into the hands of lower-class white males.

After the invention of “whiteness,” white, lower-class men enjoyed an increasing (and unprecedented) number of privileges. For example, the 1750 act repealing the ban on slavery in Georgia included a “deficiency” provision requiring the employment of one “white man Servant” on each plantation for every four Negroes employed. Moreover, it forbade the employment of Negroes except in cultivation and coopering. Although this system of white-skin privileges had not been invented by the European-American laboring classes but by the plantation bourgeoisie, the European-American workers were claiming them by the middle of the eighteenth century. Very soon, white workers were demanding the exclusion of Negroes from the skilled trades, claiming that barring black men from

competing for employment would avoid jealousy between slaveholders and non-slaveholders. “Within two decades,” as Allen concludes, “slaveholding would end, but the appeal to ‘white race’ solidarity would remain the country’s most general form of class-collaborationism” (2: 253).<sup>68</sup>

Of course, there were other factors that intersected with these class conflicts to make possible the invention of the white race. Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hume, and Locke, to name just the best-known, played a key role in the invention of the white race, too. Whereas the comte de Buffon -one of the eighteenth century’s best known naturalists, admitted to France’s prestigious *Académie des Sciences*- had established in his *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1804) a clear-cut distinction between the black and white races, “varieties of the human species,” Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau and Locke refused any notion of a natural hierarchy internal to the human order, declaring in opposition that all men are naturally free and equal. However, these philosophers were no less racist than Buffon. Indeed, they simply replaced Buffon’s distinction between different “races” with the distinction between the human and the

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<sup>68</sup> For example, Allen notes that while the elite planters got rich in the Anglo-American colonies, many landless European-Americans remained relatively poor. “Denied social mobility, these would-be planters were to have the white-skin privilege of lateral mobility -to the ‘frontier’” (2: 257).

animal (DiPiero 95). Thus, contemporaries disrupted the Great Chain of Being with a line, a radical break distinguishing the human from its closest non-human neighbor on the Chain.<sup>69</sup> Reason would establish the division between whites and nonwhites. As DiPiero concludes from all this:

Two sorts of binary logic thus interrupt the ostensible seamless continuity of the Great Chain of Being: whiteness/nonwhiteness, and reason/lack of reason. But it is not the case that these two binaries form a simple, coincidental disruption of the Great Chain...by the end of the seventeenth century, and certainly well into the eighteenth century, most observers associated whiteness with reason. (95)

According to Enlightenment reason, it would appear, then, that to be white is to be human, and to be human is to be white. This has several implications. On the one hand, the concept of whiteness is deprived of its purely racial or ethnic character at the moment of its universalization. As Montag explains, whiteness is “no longer conceivable as a particularistic survival haunting the discourse of universality but, rather, as the very form of universality itself” (285). On the other hand, nonwhite people are no longer considered human, they are now considered animals. As John Locke put it, a child in its innocence and naïveté might “demonstrate to you that a

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<sup>69</sup> As DiPiero (95) defines it, the Great Chain of Being was a conceptual framework that facilitated the contemplation of the entire natural world as an unbroken existential unit.

negro is not a man because white colour was one of the constant simple ideas of the complex idea he calls man” (qtd. in Montag 288).

The belief in the intrinsic superiority of the white race was reinforced by the nineteenth-century Anglo-American imperialist project. There is, indeed, a striking contrast in expansionist rhetoric between 1800 and 1850 (Horsman 139-140). The debates of the early nineteenth century reveal a pervasive sense of the future destiny of the United States, but they do not reveal the racism that describes the debates of mid-century. By 1850, however, the emphasis fell on the American Anglo-Saxons as a distinct, superior people who were destined to bring civilization, good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world.<sup>70</sup> Horsman (139-140) attributes this radical change to several

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<sup>70</sup> Although Americans often drew on their Anglo-Saxon origins and traditions to justify their racial superiority, Horsman claims that the term “Anglo-Saxon” has been historically misused since, in reality, there was never a specific Anglo-Saxon people in England. As he explains:

A number of tribes from northern Germany began to settle in England in large numbers in the fifth century; they were not an homogeneous group of ‘Anglo-Saxons,’ and they did not completely replace the Celtic tribes already living in England. Later the Viking invasions resulted in the settlement of other groups from northern Europe, and the Normans were added to the mix by the Conquest. When in the nineteenth century the English began writing “Anglo-Saxon” in a racial sense, they used it to describe the people living within the bounds of England, but, at times, they also used it to describe a vague brotherhood of English-speaking peoples throughout the British Isles and the world. In the United States in the nineteenth century the term “Anglo-Saxon” became even less precise. It was often used in the 1840s to describe the white people of the United States in contrast to blacks, Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards, or Asiatics, although it was frequently acknowledged that the United States already contained a variety of European strains. Yet even those who liked to talk of a distinct “American” race, composed of the best Caucasian strains, drew heavily on the arguments developed to elevate the Anglo-Saxons. (140-1)

factors. First of all, there were the new assumptions derived from a racist trend in Western thought in the first half of the nineteenth century. Very often, the ideas of superior and inferior races that defined American thinking also determined the thinking of the English and of Western Europeans in general by the mid-nineteenth century. When Gobineau published his work on the inequality of the human races in 1854, he was simply summarizing and elaborating on more than half a century of ideas on race rather than inaugurating a new era. Moreover, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States was anxious to justify the enslavement of the blacks and the expulsion and possible extermination of the Indians. Thus, the American intellectual community did not merely welcome European ideas, but it also provided European racists with scientific theories deriving from the supposed knowledge and observation of blacks and Indians. “In this era the popular periodicals, press, and many American politicians,” as Horsman (140) concludes, “eagerly sought scientific proof for racial distinctions and for the prevailing American and world order; the intellectual community provided the evidence they needed.”

It appears, therefore, that whiteness is a cultural and political construction that has been historically variable. Therefore, it has not always



been easy to identify who white males are. For instance, DiPiero (10-1) reminds us that it took a Supreme Court decision to determine if Bhagat Singh Thind, a native of India who was applying for American citizenship, was white. Finally, he was *not* considered white. The Supreme Court argued that the words *free white persons* are words of common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man. Thus, white masculinity appears to be determined at least as much by people's beliefs and opinions as it is by the physical characteristics that seem to define it. As DiPiero concludes in this respect:

If it were simply the case that any person who appeared to be a white male simply *was* a white male, the identity would have no problematic political or ideological dimension since there would be no question of a legitimacy to which some people were not entitled. That is why we cannot simply and unproblematically point to the person who seems both white and male: you have to know what he looks like before you can actually see him. (10-1)

From what has been suggested, it would appear, then, that the widespread belief in the (fixed) identity of the (American) white heterosexual male is anything but unproblematical. White heterosexual masculinity is simply the mythic model against which we all measure

ourselves.<sup>71</sup> It is nothing but an *ideal* version of manhood.<sup>72</sup> No (American) real man can live up to the impossible expectations raised by this ideal form of masculinity. More often than not, masculinity, as Gardiner (Introduction 10) explains, is “a nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp. Its myth is that effacing new forms can restore a natural, original male grounding.”<sup>73</sup> It seems, then, that the very existence and internal consistency of white heterosexual masculinity are well under scrutiny. Does it follow, therefore, that we should give up beforehand masculinity studies as well as any attempt to analyze white heterosexual masculinity? Inevitably, the question leads us back to the current American debate between those who defend the category of (sexual) identity and those poststructuralist thinkers who advocate its dissolution.

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<sup>71</sup> In Kimmel’s view, the history of white masculinity is “less about what boys and men actually *did* than about what they were told that they were *supposed* to do, feel, and think and what happened in response to those prescriptions” (*Manhood* 10).

<sup>72</sup> In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan already argued that what we think we know about ourselves as men and women often involves a considerable amount of fantasy and myth.

<sup>73</sup> Insisting further, Gardiner suggests that feminism is also a fantasy. Unlike masculinity, though, feminism is a utopian discourse of an ideal future, never yet attained, whose myths promote alliances that help deal with conflicts. Both masculinity and feminism, as Gardiner elaborates, are fantasies and myths of power:

Masculinity of the natural congruence of male self with social privilege and feminism of a perfectly self-regulating collectivity. In both cases, adherents often believe they can picture their ideals brightly outlined against the gray confusions of the present, yet without a clear path to reach them. This unmapped gap, then, this zone of frustration and anxiety, is the “crisis,” the loss of the past or the deferral of the future ideal. (Introduction 11)

## **2. 4. Poststructuralist vs. identity-based approaches to masculinity: introducing the debate**

One of the most important (and controversial) debates in the American academia these days concerns itself with the coexistence on the one hand of the poststructuralist demythification of subjectivity and identity and on the other of the work of several scholars who see identity (whether sexual, ethnic, and/or national) as central to our lives. It is far beyond the aim of this study to address the whole discussion.<sup>74</sup> Suffice it to say that the question has been the subject of numerous intellectual debates in the United States, such as those between gay/lesbian and queer theorists or between women's and gender studies scholars. The present study will show how the poststructuralist critique of sexual identity is (also/especially) relevant to American studies of masculinities by looking at a number of opposite views.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> For an in-depth discussion on poststructuralism, and in particular the relationship between identity/feminist politics and poststructuralist/queer theory in the U.S., see Butler ("Contingent"); Oliver (65); Andrés; and Mérida (Prólogo).

<sup>75</sup> Several masculinity scholars have recently taken up this discussion. See, for example, Chapman and Rutherford; Brittan; and Middleton ("Socialism").

Much of the latest American masculinity scholarship advocates a poststructuralist dissolution of sexual identity. It has been argued that since masculinity is closely linked to patriarchy and sexism, the very concept of maleness should be done away with forever. Many scholars advocate replacing the category of masculinity (and femininity) with that of androgyny. Blurring any clear-cut distinction between male and female sexual organs, John Stoltenberg's *Refusing to Be a Man* (1989) argues, for example, that the variety of people's sexual organs can be placed along a continuum. Stoltenberg asks men to think of their penises as not significantly different from a woman's clitoris, providing a view of eroticism as polymorphic. While the binary sexual model keeps dominating most of the social, cultural, and political institutions in the Western world, scholars like Stoltenberg or Patrick Grim insist that sex differences are not as important as is usually assumed. In Grim's own words:

Let us suppose that in some case we do have firm and unambiguous empirical evidence of differences between the sexes; let us suppose that we can *prove* that men are characteristically more aggressive, that women are generally more "communicative," and the like. What follows from suitably hard data revealing suitably fundamental differences even if we have it? Not as much, I think, as is often assumed.  
(12)

While much American work on sex differences ends with an appeal for further testing, Grim explicitly rejects such an appeal. “In light of the deep difficulties of attempting any satisfactory test, in light of the social dangers of a test gone wrong, in light of the inconclusiveness of the best data for any social purposes, and given the variety of genuinely pressing demands on our social energies,” he concludes, “I see little reason for continuing such testing” (16). Given the difficulties and social dangers of trying to “demonstrate” sexual difference, Grim concludes that testing sexual differences is neither possible nor desirable. Certainly, relying on a binary model of sexual difference for feminist and masculinity studies can reinforce, rather than question, patriarchal divisions, even if undesired. One can set out to fight (sexual) discrimination without realizing that the tools s/he uses to do so (man/woman, masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, etc.) are themselves the product of socially discriminatory conventions, which are naturalized by political means. Thus, (sexual) difference may itself be the result of domination. As Bourdieu insists, the concept of “difference” usually “appears when one adopts the point of view of the dominant on the dominated” and, indeed, “that from

which it seeks to differentiate itself...is the product of a historical relation of differentiation” (63).

Despite these claims, some American scholars keep relying on sexual identity and suspect most poststructuralist attempts to dissolve sexual difference. In their view, sexual difference is a fundamental aspect of one’s identity, not simply an external mark of oppression. Like many women’s studies scholars, some masculinity scholars in the U.S. believe that consideration of one’s sexual identity *per se* is indispensable. Although few critics contend that masculinity is eternal and unchangeable, many masculinity scholars, such as Harry Brod (“Case” 61), argue that there is a sufficiently unitary object of study denoted by the concept of masculinity to justify its investigation and analysis under one rubric.

Several American theorists, perhaps most notably Judith Butler (*Gender* 13), have long argued that the feminist effort to identify the white male as the enemy is a counter-discourse that uncritically mimics the discourse of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> In this sense, Harry Brod notes that one must also be sensitive to inappropriate expropriations of concepts from nonhegemonic cultures by the hegemonic culture. In his own words:

For example, the use of the term macho as a synonym for sexist ignores the positive connotations of this term within Hispanic cultures, and its popularization in the United States is a case of Anglo men using their white skin privilege to deflect the critique of their male privilege, just as the use of working-class male images to denote traditional

Some have even been claimed that patriarchy is over.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, (American) white heterosexual masculinity is still often regarded as stable and unitary. Oftentimes, it is described as a fixed category, that is, as a counterexample to the types of masculinity, usually queer, that seem “more informative about gender relations and most generative of social change” (Halberstam 3).<sup>78</sup> Many scholars do indeed seem to regard white heterosexual masculinity as a homogeneous category, insisting that white men in post-sixties American culture have, in fact, been lumped into one distinct category. As Sally Robinson explains:

In fact, I take a certain delight in imagining one possible response to my arguments here. How can we lump *all* white men, regardless of their differences, into one, seemingly monolithic category? The delight comes both from the irony of this question -what feminist woman wouldn't laugh at this? What victim of racial profiling wouldn't snicker at this

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sexism renders the sexism of middle-class and upper-class men less visible and therefore less challenged. (“Some” 92)

<sup>77</sup> As The Women's Bookshop of Milan put it, “el patriarcado ha terminado, ya no tiene crédito femenino y ha terminado. Ha durado tanto como su capacidad de significar algo para la mente femenina. Ahora que la ha perdido, nos damos cuenta de que, sin ella, no puede durar” (Librería 3). Of course, such a claim proves not only naïve, in light of persisting sexism and homophobia, but particularly dangerous, as it might weaken the feminist struggle for gender equality, even if undesired. And, today, feminist hope and strength is more necessary than ever, since it seems that current feminism has lost much of its initial optimism and confidence. As Segal explains, there is a growing general “tendency to cynicism and pessimism” (Introduction xxxvi).

<sup>78</sup> Though Halberstam traditionally figures as a queer scholar (and, therefore, as advocating the dissolution of fixed sexual identities), here she relies heavily on the view of white masculinity as a fixed identity.

payback?- and from the fact that anyone who articulates it will be further confirming the arguments I am making. (20-21)<sup>79</sup>

Crucially, Robinson reminds us that the poststructuralist deconstruction of masculinity and sexual identity should not underestimate the fundamental question of power relations. It has indeed been argued that poststructuralism focuses on discourse and cognition, thus neglecting material conditions and oppression in favor of symbolic and subjective particularities. Despite the poststructuralist emphasis on the dissolution of sexual and gendered boundaries, then, one should keep in mind that our everyday life is still governed by an important number of sexual and gendered power relations, which can cause the project of sexual dissolution to seem naïve, at best, and utopian, at worst. After all, many people still believe that men and women differ in certain ways, and those differences, the reasoning goes, justify a differentiation of social roles along sexual lines. Even though most differences between the sexes seem to be social, rather than biological/fundamental, the treatment of differences which are in fact

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<sup>79</sup> Though Robinson avoids monolithic conceptions of white heterosexual masculinity all through *Marked Men* (2000), her words at the end of the introduction reveal that, occasionally, she also falls prey to reductionist biases.



merely social as if they were fundamental appears to be a clear example of socially unjust treatment. Elaborating on that, Patrick Grim comments:

Standard paradigms of racism and sexism involve precisely this feature...differences between individuals or groups, real or imagined, are taken to be inherent and fundamental...The true sexist holds not just that some particular group of women are by force of circumstance scatter-brained and fragile, but that women are so by nature. (10)<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, it must be remembered that Western culture, in general, and American culture, in particular, is eminently patriarchal. This means that (American) men keep dominating the public sphere, especially in economic terms of *production*, while many women remain confined to the private sphere, the domestic space of *reproduction*. Generally speaking, patriarchy is grounded in three main principles: women's confinement to

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<sup>80</sup> Throughout his article, Grim establishes a distinction between "fundamental" and "social" sex differences. In his opinion, genuinely "fundamental" differences "must in several ways be free of social influence" and they should be "more than *mere* social epiphenomena" (4-5; emphasis added). Grim contends that there exist few fundamental sex differences and "in cases in which we are significantly ignorant, there may be ethical reasons for preferring a social explanation rather than the fundamental difference on which the standard argument relies" (16). The implication is, of course, that if a sex difference is acknowledged to be socially constructed, rather than fundamental, then it can also be socially de-constructed much more easily. Grim's argument can be contested in (at least) two different ways. First, so-called "fundamental" differences may not exist at all. As poststructuralism suggests, there is nothing outside/beyond language and the symbolic order. Second, acknowledging the social construction of sex differences does not always lead to their re-vision. After all, it is known that race is a cultural/ethnic construction, as there exist only minor biological/"fundamental" distinctions between the different races, and yet racism persists in most societies worldwide.

home-related jobs; women's inferiority *vis-à-vis* men; and men's monopoly of technology and machinery. As Pierre Bourdieu elaborates:

The first is that the functions appropriate to women are an extension of their domestic functions –education, care and service. The second is that a woman cannot have authority over men, and, other things being equal, therefore has every likelihood of being passed over in favour of a man for a position of authority and of being confined to subordinate and ancillary functions. The third principle gives men the monopoly of the handling of technological objects and machines. (94)

Before discussing the possible dissolution of sexual difference, then, one should bear in mind that masculinity remains the hegemonic model worldwide. Although masculinity, as we have seen, is far from monolithic or uniform, it remains inseparable from notions of power and privilege; it often refers to the symbolic power of the State and to unequal distributions of wealth. Masculinity, as Judith Halberstam (2) elaborates, seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; it represents the power of inheritance; the consequences of the traffic in women,<sup>81</sup> as well as the promise of social privilege. Masculinity continues to discriminate against “Other” groups -especially women, homosexuals, and ethnic groups.

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<sup>81</sup> Halberstam acknowledges, though, that sexism and misogyny are not necessarily intrinsic of masculinity, even though historically it has been very “difficult, if not impossible, to untangle masculinity from the oppression of women” (4).

Hegemonic masculinity is always defined by opposition, as masculinity is intrinsically opposed to femininity (as well as homosexuality and ethnicity). As Segal insists, gender “encapsulates relations of difference which, although they are shifting and precarious, are always already structured through assumptions of the *dominance* of masculinity over femininity (without the assumption of dominance, ‘masculinity’ starts transforming into ‘femininity’)” (New xxiii).

Thus, white heterosexual masculinity seems to reject everything that differs from it, projecting the responsibility of differential definition onto its “Other.” As the unmarked gendered and racial identity, (American) white masculinity causes those identities that it excludes from itself to define it. In order to fully understand the hegemony of white heterosexual masculinity, then, one must pay attention to the differential systems of meaning that produce and back it up. Because of its dominant meanings, masculinity occupies a hegemonic position in contemporary American culture, but it is important to distinguish hegemony from brute force. As Thomas DiPiero explains:

Hegemony differs from coercion in that it involves the production of meaning as a way of unifying and ordering

people (the word “hegemony” itself derives from a Greek word meaning “leader”). A hegemonic position...quilts together portions or fragments of meaning from different realms, in the process forming a way of knowing that becomes a world view for a given community. (12)<sup>82</sup>

Hegemony plays two main (interrelated) functions (DiPiero 13). First of all, it joins together differing social discourses. Second, it expresses, through that very act of joining together, new possibilities and new modes of thinking. Thus, one could define hegemonic masculinity as the narrative construction of a unified meaning that incorporates different elements under a single rubric, dismissing meanings or components that do not apply. Hegemonic masculinity is the social and political act that constructs the illusion of a unified social group by proposing a system of cultural, political, ideological, and personal beliefs that can be accepted as nearly universally valid for a given group of people. Above all else, then, the hegemony of white heterosexual masculinity is created and sustained as a form of knowledge, despite its representation as a bodily reality. As DiPiero elaborates:

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<sup>82</sup> DiPiero's view of *hegemony* in an ideological sense is thus indebted to Gramsci, who argued that hegemony tries to sell the privileges of a few people as convenient to all.

As a hegemonic identity that casts other identities as inadequate substitutes or failed approximations of itself, white masculinity has for the past three hundred years -since, that is, roughly the time that the identity “white” has come into the picture-governed not only questions of racial and gender identity, but also broader issues of signification in domains not generally associated with the color of one’s skin, or the arrangement of one’s genitalia or, indeed, the manner in which one presents oneself to the world as a member of a particular sexed or raced group. (13)

It would appear, then, that the power of white masculinity derives from epistemological, rather than corporeal factors. Above all else, the power of white masculinity arises because it causes different kinds of subjectivity to become expressions of the central position that it represents. Manifestations of difference get subsumed into terms not only designed to represent the central position, but limited to such use. Thus, heterosexual masculinity functions as “the least common denominator of subjective identity” (DiPiero 23) because part of its mythology has long been that it is an identity in which expressions of other identities are included.

It would appear, then, that hegemonic masculinity must be understood in epistemological, rather than bodily, terms. Indeed, hegemonic masculinity appears as a unitary and monolithic entity thanks to several specific political and ideological processes. In her seminal work *Male Subjectivity at the*

*Margins* (1992), American scholar Kaja Silverman uses the concept of “dominant fiction” to try to understand how an ideologically produced subjectivity conceals the contradictions informing its own construction. Borrowing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Silverman shows that masculinity, like femininity, is based on a “lack,” which is disguised by a number of ideological fictions. In her own words, “the normative male ego is necessarily fortified against any knowledge of the void upon which it rests” through a “dominant fiction,” which she defines as “the representational system through which the subject is accommodated to the Name-of-the-Father” (61). “Its most central signifier of unity,” Silverman elaborates, “is the (paternal) family, and its primary signifier of privilege the phallus” (34). Linked to narrative devices like realism and verisimilitude, Silverman’s concept of dominant fiction consists of the images and stories through which a society reaches consensus; images and stories which cinema, fiction, pop culture, and other forms of representation “presumably both draw upon and help to shape” (Silverman 30). Silverman’s concept of dominant fiction, for which she remains partly indebted to Althusser, shows how a subject is hailed by particular social and political structures.

Recognizing itself in those structures, the subject then reproduces them in everyday life.

Despite its internal fissures and contradictions, then, (American) white masculinity, as Silverman explains, keeps functioning as a hegemonic epistemology and as a differential system for the production of social meaning, which implies that the dissolution of sexual difference is anything but unproblematic. That is also the view held by the French feminist philosopher Françoise Collin. Though she explicitly rejects essentialist and dualist approaches to sexual difference, dismissing them as metaphysical, Collin also warns against the dangers of sexual dissolution. In her own words:

Que haya diferencia de los sexos es un hecho innegable. Que esta diferencia “deba” desaparecer o, por el contrario, fijarse en sí misma superando la dominación está en el orden del postulado. Hay diferencia, pero los diferentes no son esencializables. Las dos afirmaciones, “mujer no existe”, o “mujer es esto”, son similarmente especulativas y similarmente inquisitorias. (“Praxis” 14)

The erasure of sexual difference may indeed neglect the importance of gendered power relations as well as women’s realities. As Collin elaborates, the dissolution of sexual difference, “que insiste en la porosidad o la

indecidibilidad de la frontera entre los sexos y tiende a hacer de la diferencia de los sexos una diferencia indiferente, elude no sólo la figura de la dominación, es decir, la figura política que la atraviesa, sino también toda relación trágica de la relación sexuada” (“Praxis” 8). The erasure of sexual difference overlooks important historical and social aspects of sexual discrimination and, in so doing, proves both naïve and utopian. In Collin’s own words, the dissolution of sexual difference “inmediatiza ‘el fin de la historia’ (saltando por encima de los avatares de la dialéctica), donde en una suerte de indeterminación dichosa ya no habría ni hombres ni mujeres (no judíos ni griegos, ni amos ni esclavos...), en una atopía que se separa sólo por una letra de la utopía” (“Praxis” 8). Moreover, sexual dissolution often means identification with, and assimilation into, the dominant model. Thus, concepts such as “universalism” or “*mankind*” are often made synonymous with terms like “Man” and “masculinity.” As Collin herself concludes, “bajo un manto de universalismo,...la mujer sólo se vuelve plenamente humana si se vuelve hombre (o lo imita)” (“Praxis” 9). Thus, denied sexual difference is often transformed into sexual indifference and, ultimately, into a paradoxical re-inscription of the very differences the strategy was supposed to eradicate. What is called the neutralization of sexual marks often has the



paradoxical effect of conferring power upon man. As Jacques Derrida concludes:

When you say, “well you are in a neuter field, no difference,” we all know that in this case the subject will be man. So, this is a classical ruse of man to neutralize the sexual mark...So, to the extent which universality implies neutralization, you can be sure that it’s only a hidden way of confirming the man in his power. That’s why we have to be very cautious about neutrality and neutralization, and universality as neutralization. (“Women” 194)<sup>83</sup>

## 2. 5. Rethinking the debate

At this point, then, current American masculinity scholarship seems to be caught up in a debate between those who vindicate sexual identity and those who advocate its poststructuralist dissolution. Nevertheless, both positions seem equally fruitless. For instance, Robert Bly, who views masculinity as a fixed sexual identity, fails to envision new ways for men and women to interact, ways that solve the problems that he discusses. Rather, he returns uncritically to the past. On the other hand, John Stoltenberg, who advocates the dissolution of masculinity, leaves us with very little to hold on to once

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<sup>83</sup> In the same volume as Derrida (“Women”), Naomi Schor (98-110) also provides a feminist critique of the neuter.

we have refused to be a man. It is as if men should start from scratch, since all of their past concepts of masculinity are to be rejected on this account. Thus, there is very little attention to the positive aspects of masculinity that could be kept once the negative aspects have been rejected. Stoltenberg calls for a refusal not to be masculine in some of its aspects, but a refusal to be a man. However, such a step may not be necessary. It seems both feasible and desirable, as May and Strikwerda (Introduction xix) indicate in this respect, to provide new definitions of masculinity that are empowering, or at least enlightening, for men, without contributing to the further oppression of women. In other words, there are many other positions one can take, all of them inspired by feminism, that offer more options to those who find it hard or impossible to abolish masculinity altogether. For example, it is possible to degender features and behaviors without degendering people. As American sociologist Michael Kimmel indicates, “we will still be women and men, equal yet capable of appreciating our differences, different yet unwilling to use those differences as the basis for discrimination” (*Gendered* 266).<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> As Catharine R. Stimpson adds, “boys will grow up to be men, but no boy will think that being a man demands marching in lockstep with other men while women cheer them on from the sidelines” (Foreword xiii).

Rather than choose between fixed notions of sexual identity and the dissolution of sexual difference, then, it might be more convenient to start to rethink this debate in different ways. Many innovative approaches to the discussion have come from deconstructive and queer theories. It is true that in the current cultural and historical situation, the terms “Man” and “Woman” are not at all the same. In the Western patriarchal world, the cultural context suggests that there is a difference. As Derrida explains, “in our language, when one says ‘Man’ with a capital M and ‘Woman’ with a capital W...it’s not at all the same, not at all, because ‘man’ with a capital M means ‘mankind.’ Woman with a capital W means...‘Truth’ or things like that, but doesn’t mean mankind or womankind” (“Women” 195).

Nevertheless, this is not an eternal and universal situation. This could change. As Derrida himself indicates, keeping sexual difference has only the meaning of a “strategical phase” (“Women” 194).<sup>85</sup> As soon as you have

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<sup>85</sup> Derrida’s view of sexual difference as a “strategical phase” appears to be similar to Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism.” In “Three Women’s Texts” (1989), Spivak defines “strategic essentialism” as an essentialism that relies on binary oppositions but that is able to “situate feminist individualism in its historical determination” (176). Obviously, Spivak is fully aware that the term “strategic essentialism” may be, and has been, used to justify essentialism. However, she insists that the emphasis should be more on noting how we ourselves and others are essentialist, without claiming a counter-essence disguised under the excuse of strategy. Influenced by deconstruction, Spivak reminds us that deconstruction does not involve doing away with essences -which she sees as necessary- but to challenge and deconstruct them:

The most serious critique in deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything...One should always, as she says, deconstruct “identity by identities.” (Rooney qtd. in Oliver 401)

achieved the first stage of deconstruction, Derrida explains, then the opposition between women and men stops being useful and necessary. In Derrida's philosophy, then, sexual difference is associated with the concept of provisionality. As he himself puts it:

We need to find some way to progress strategically. Starting with the deconstruction of phallogocentrism, and using the feminine force, so to speak, in this move and then -and this would be the second stage or second level- to give up the opposition between men and women. ("Women" 194-5)

Certainly, Derrida's thesis has not gone unchallenged. While Derrida accepts claims to female specificity only as a temporary tactical necessity for important political aims, arguing that we must eventually come to a utopia of sexual indifferentiation and varied singularities, many feminist scholars insist that difference has a future. In their view, sexual difference does not only question masculinity as the universal norm, but prevents the assimilation (and disappearance) of the "Other" into the dominant norm. As American feminist scholar Myra Jehlen indicates, "the claim of difference criticizes the content of the male universal norm. But beyond this, it represents a new understanding that if the other is to live, it will have to live

as other, lest the achievement of integration be crowned with the fatal irony of disappearance through absorption” (qtd. in Schor 110).<sup>86</sup>

This insistence on the importance of sexual difference is understandable if one takes into consideration that many scholars, influenced by Simone de Beauvoir, seem unable to dissociate difference from domination. Because they see sexual difference as the direct consequence of sexual inequality, they suggest that the end of patriarchy would also entail the end of sexual difference. As Collin herself explains, “‘no se nace mujer, se llega a serlo’, tomado al pie de la letra, haría suponer que una vez superado ese secular devenir obligado y desdichado, mujer (hombre) ya no tendría sentido y que el Hombre (humano) se realizaría, en una humanidad plenamente sujeta de su destino, pura libertad” (“Praxis” 8-9). Nevertheless, this view mistakes equality for sameness. To be equal

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<sup>86</sup> Whereas many American theorists, some of them women, have drawn on the tools of deconstruction to dismantle metaphysical conceptions of Woman, it is at least curious, as Schor (109) comments, that no feminist theoretician *who is not also a woman* has ever fully espoused the claims to a feminine specificity, an irreducible difference. Schor explains that there is a division between masculine and feminine positions on difference: “Those who adopt the masculine position press for an end to sexual difference and only grudgingly acknowledge claims for feminine specificity, those who adopt the feminine position concede the strategic efficacy of undoing sexual oppositions and positionalities, all the while pursuing the construction of difference” (110). Schor insists that the most active site of feminine resistance to the discourse of indifference is a certain insistence on doubling, which may well be the feminine way of subverting the unitary subject: “Women occupy in modern Western culture a specific liminal cultural position which is...connected to their anatomical difference, to their femaleness. Women are bilingual, bifocal, bitextual,” (Schor 110). Schor’s argument about a “feminine position” on difference (which attempts to undermine sexual inequality and yet maintain sexual difference) seems interesting. However, in its emphasis on anatomy and femaleness, it ends up relying on essentialist conceptions of gender and is thus (at least partly) flawed.

means to be identical; to be different always means to be unequal. As Collin insists in this respect:

Se reencuentra aquí, a propósito de las mujeres y de los hombres, el rastro del pensamiento de las Luces según el cual la igualdad pasa por la identidad: no se puede ser Hombre más que de una sola manera...El extranjero sólo tiene derecho a la igualdad si se vuelve autóctono (o lo imita)...La destrucción de la alineación es destrucción de la diferencia. (“Praxis” 9)

Despite the views held by Jehlen and Collin, one should bear in mind that the end of patriarchy and domination does not necessarily entail the end of sexual difference. Though *equality* and *sameness* are often confused, one should take care to distinguish between the two terms. The direction of the gendered society in the third millennium is not for women and men to become increasingly *similar*, but for them to become more *equal*. “Such a transformation,” as American masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel elaborates, “does not require that men and women become more like each other, but, rather, more deeply and fully themselves” (*Gendered* 268).

When we speak of sexual difference, we should distinguish between “opposition” and “difference.” Opposition means two, opposition is man/woman. On the other hand, difference suggests an indefinite number of

sexes. As long as we keep sexual dualism in the classical sense -an opposition of two-, Derrida explains, “the arrangement is such that the gift is impossible. All that you can call ‘gift’ -love, *jouissance*- is absolutely forbidden, is forbidden by the dual opposition” (“Women” 198). In Derrida’s view, then, what is needed is the end of the sexual opposition, not the end of sexual difference itself. There is a certain neutralization which can reconstruct the phallogocentric privilege. However, there exists another neutralization which can neutralize the sexual opposition, and not sexual difference, liberating the field of sexuality for a very different sexuality, a more multiple and varied one. In Derrida’s own words:

At that point there would be no more sexes...there would be one sex for each time. One sex for each gift. That can be produced within the situation of a man and a woman, a man and a man, a woman and a woman, three men and a woman, etc....This is sexual difference. It is absolutely heterogeneous. (“Women” 199)

Influenced by Derrida’s deconstructive arguments, American queer theory has also set out to rethink the traditional binary between sexual identity/difference, on the one hand, and poststructuralism/sex as an “indifferent” difference, on the other. Although most queer studies in the

U.S. focus on the analysis of sexuality and “sex,” they often describe it as something heterogeneous, multiple, and fundamentally indeterminate.<sup>87</sup> Such an attitude toward indeterminacy is indeed very common among queer researchers, who tend to use anti-foundational methods informed by poststructuralist theories of the sign. For example, in her seminal text *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999), queer scholar Carolyn Dinshaw analyzes a number of medieval texts where the meaning of concepts such as “sex” or “heterosexuality/homosexuality” varies radically in the space of a few lines and where “natural” and “unnatural” sexual practices are confusingly proximate.<sup>88</sup> In Dinshaw’s view, sex’s indeterminacy derives from two main (interrelated) factors. First, sex depends on systems of representation, and, as such, is fragmented and contradictory. In other words, its meaning or significance cannot definitively be determined without exclusivity or reductiveness, and such meanings and significances change, moreover, with changes in place and time. Second, sex is indissolubly linked to other

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<sup>87</sup> Insisting on the indeterminacy of sexuality, Dinshaw has even suggested that concepts such as “sex,” sexuality, and/or gender might be “white terms.” It might be a good idea, as Dinshaw insists, to use them carefully as “provisional” terms (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*).

<sup>88</sup> As Carolyn Dinshaw concludes, “these criteria of naturalness have everything to do with proper gender roles” (7).



cultural phenomena, the indeterminacy of cultural phenomena being central to her historical vision.<sup>89</sup> It seems, then, that scholars like Dinshaw manage to keep “sex” as a useful identity category, all the while insisting on its intrinsic heterogeneity and indeterminacy.<sup>90</sup>

American queer theory has thus started to move beyond the dichotomous debate between poststructuralist and identity-based approaches to gender and “sex.” It is true, as Asian-American queer scholar David Eng has noted, that most epistemologies are still addressed to unacknowledged and supposedly universal, fixed, and unitary subjects (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*). For example, the white, Euro-American, middle-class woman remains the unacknowledged, universal subject of feminism, just as the

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<sup>89</sup> Dinshaw’s explicit reference to “other cultural phenomena” is linked to her attempt to challenge any “invidious formulations that suggest that queer articulations of indeterminacy can’t tell us a thing or have nothing to do with living in the ‘real world,’ past or present” (22). Moreover, she complains that analysis of interrelations between sexuality and other cultural phenomena is only occasionally pursued (215).

<sup>90</sup> Dinshaw’s text does not only question the binary between gay/queer theory, but also other key binary oppositions in gender studies such as essentialism/social constructionism. Indeed, she reminds us that Michael Foucault, who is traditionally regarded as the father of constructionism, acknowledged his debt to John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (1980), where homosexuality is seen as a transhistorical constant and where “a specific gay essence grounds both community and history” (Dinshaw 30). In Foucault’s own words:

[Boswell’s] introduction of the concept of “gay” (in the way he defines it) provides us both with a useful instrument of research and at the same time a better comprehension of how people actually conceive of themselves and their sexual behavior...sexual behavior is not, as is too often assumed, a superimposition of, on the one hand, desires which derive from natural instincts, and, on the other, of permissive or restrictive laws which tell us what we should or shouldn’t do. Sexual behavior is more than that. It is also the consciousness one has of what one is doing, what one makes of the experience, and the value one attaches to it. (qtd. in Dinshaw 33-4)

white, Euro-American, middle-class gay man is the unacknowledged, universal subject of most gay and queer studies. Finally, the white, Euro-American, middle-class, heterosexual man remains as well the unacknowledged and presumably universal, coherent, and stable subject of masculinity studies.

Nevertheless, the assumption of a universal, coherent subject for masculinity studies may, and should, be questioned for different reasons. On the one hand, it is important to bear in mind, as has already been pointed out, that conceptions of masculinity vary according to factors such as ethnicity, national origin, sexuality, gender, class, and age, among others. Second, it should be noted that no masculine identity is stable and coherent. As David Eng explains, masculine subjectivity is “the hybrid result of internalized ideals and lived material contradictions that were once external” (*Racial* 25). Most discourses that equate a given (usually white heterosexual) masculine essence with purity, wholeness, authenticity, and self-will can be traced back to Enlightenment theories and the legacies of abstract liberal humanism.<sup>91</sup> However, poststructuralist theory has

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<sup>91</sup> The Enlightenment concept of the transcendent subject (existing before and beyond the social realm) is undermined by Foucault’s contention that the individual is an effect of power, an idea which is itself indebted to Nietzsche’s assertion that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed -the deed is everything” (45).

challenged most of these liberal assumptions, showing how the belief in an autonomous and transparent masculine subjectivity is an illusion. Poststructuralism has argued how meaning cannot be fixed, as it is fluid and slippery, based on both presence and absence (see, for example, Derrida *Of*). In so doing, poststructuralist theory has also shown how all masculine identifications are always failed identifications, a continual passing as a coherent and static social identity. In David Eng's own words, "even the most orthodox of subject positions, finally, are ambivalent and porous" (*Racial* 26).<sup>92</sup>

Challenging traditional (mis)conceptions of masculinity as unitary and fixed, Eng advocates a new definition of masculinity studies as "subjectless" (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*). However, his redefinition does not entail doing away with the subject. He simply defends a view of the subject as problematic. There is, indeed, a key difference between the classical poststructuralist view whereby the subject never existed and Eng's argument that sees the subject as heterogeneous and contradictory. Eng questions the liberal humanist belief in the subject as intrinsically problematic, which is not the same as doing away with the subject. Thus,

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<sup>92</sup> See also Butler (*Gender* 122).

David Eng does not advocate the total dissolution of the subject. Like Judith Butler (*Bodies* 227), he simply contends that we should suspend all commitments to that which the term “the subject” describes, and that we ponder the linguistic function it fulfils in the consolidation and concealment of authority.

Taking all these innovative ideas into account, then, this study starts off from the critical assumption that sexual identity -and hence (white heterosexual) masculinity- does exist, even if only provisionally or as a strategic phase. I believe that categories like masculinity and gender continue to be relevant in spite of the poststructuralist insistence on their indeterminacy and instability. However, this study contends that (American) white heterosexual masculinity is not unitary and monolithic, but heterogeneous, multiple, and contingent. White masculinities are open to questioning. As Hearn and Collinson indicate, they “may indeed be simultaneously Irish, Jewish, and English; heterosexual masculinities may also be celibate, narcissistic, gay, bisexual...In short, types of men do not exist as separate categories or as separate in themselves” (114). Thus, (American) white heterosexual masculinity is made up of a multiplicity of national, ethnic, and sexual factors, which will necessarily lead to internal

conflict and contradiction. Masculinity in the U.S. is not a unitary concept, but simply represents trends and possibilities that individuals draw on at different moments, and coexist in a complex and shifting relationship. In other words, completely different notions of masculinity can refer simultaneously or sequentially to the same individual. As Cornwall and Lindisfarne elaborate in this latter respect:

Meaning depends on who is speaking and who is being described in what setting. Masculinity has multiple and ambiguous meanings which alter according to context and over time. Meanings of masculinity also vary across cultures and admit to cultural borrowing; masculinities imported from elsewhere are conflated with local ideas to produce new configurations. (12)

Moreover, the present work does not only see (American) masculinity as a contradictory and variable concept, but also contends that it is necessary to deepen into its fissures, contradictions, and variations. In other words, this study does not aim to “solve” (were it possible) masculinity’s internal contradictions, or reduce its complexity and plurality. On the contrary, the present thesis aims to focus on the complex, plural -and often contradictory- constructions of (white heterosexual) masculinity. After all, gender and masculinity studies, as American queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

comments, should never give up exploring “the indisseverable girdle of incongruities under whose discomfoting span, for most of a century, have unfolded both the most generative and the most murderous plots of our culture” (*Epistemology* 90).

## **2. 6. Analyzing (American) white heterosexual masculinity as a variable and heterogeneous gender construct**

Even though much feminist scholarship identifies the (American) white heterosexual male with patriarchy, masculinity studies may help question monolithic views of white heterosexual masculinity in the U.S. Admittedly, the present project is fraught with an (apparently) irreducible contradiction. On the one hand, it draws on a large number of feminist texts arguing against masculine hegemony. On the other hand, it concerns itself with a particular group of human beings, who, as (white heterosexual) men, are supposed to embody patriarchy, but whose masculine behavior proves far more complex and contradictory. While I do not wish to contest (were it

possible) the feminist assumption that men are in power,<sup>93</sup> nor lay (yet) another claim to male victimhood,<sup>94</sup> it seems essential to insist that (American) white masculinity is far from stable or monolithic.<sup>95</sup> As Judith Butler (*Gender* 3) has argued, we must take care not to equate masculinity with patriarchy too easily, since the very notion of a universal patriarchy has been widely questioned in recent years for its failure to explain the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it operates. More often than not, men's experiences of power prove so varied as contradictory. On the one hand, it is undeniable that men have more power than women do. Men, as Lynne Segal (New xix) reminds us, still have more access to cultural and political authority, corporate power, economic opportunities, compared to women, all over the world. However, Anglo-American men's overall unemployment, as Segal (New xix) herself goes on to acknowledge, is higher than women's and, indeed, it is only at the top end of the professions that women remain marginalized. Moreover, men cannot show their weaknesses and must always fight against each other for power

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<sup>93</sup> In this respect, this study explicitly moves away from best-selling texts like Warren Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power* (1993), which describes male power as unreal or illusory.

<sup>94</sup> Ironically, many white men in post-sixties America seem to be convinced that the *status quo* is embodied in the minority (Robinson 7).

<sup>95</sup> Thus, this study attempts to *rethink* masculinity, rather than *reconstruct* it, which seems to be the project of texts like Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990).

and for access to economic resources. As Segal herself concludes in this respect, “many -if not most- men suffer, at least in some ways, as they feel driven to deny their own vulnerabilities” and “to compete with each other individually” (New xix).

The plural and contradictory nature of (white heterosexual) masculinity can be shown in a number of ways.<sup>96</sup> For instance, the assumption that normative categories such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity are universal and unmarked depends on what American masculinity scholar Ross Chambers has defined as “in(di)visibility:” the belief that the normative is singular and unique, whereas the “Other” is marked, pluralized, and homogenized. There may be many different others, but they are all the same in their differences from the unmarked norm. The existence of multiple marked identities protects the singularity of the unmarked and, at the same time, establishes a close relationship between the unmarked and the individual. In Chambers’ own words:

Whereas the other is *pluralized* in order to produce [the normative] as indivisible and singular, the groups that compose

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<sup>96</sup> Most American studies of white masculinity insist on its intrinsic heterogeneity, suggesting that there are significant differences *among* (white) men. In other words, they claim that we should begin referring to (white) *masculinities*, not masculinity. Michael Kimmel, for example, refers to his works as “studies of masculinities” (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*), while one of Bob Connell’s key texts is significantly entitled *Masculinities* (1995).



this pluralized other are *homogenized* in this new relation, through what is called *stereotyping*, that is, the belief that “all Xs are the same” (where X refers to the members of marked, examinable groups and perhaps, at a certain horizon, to the whole set of members of all such groups). (192)

Nevertheless, a singularity that is itself the product of the pluralization of its “Other” can be vulnerable, in turn, to a pluralization, a divisibility of its own. As poststructuralism has taught us, there can be no difference without mixture. The supposedly aparadigmatic category actually forms part of the paradigm, and the paradigmatic is thus tinged with the aparadigmatic. Only if the normative category were opposed to an equally homogeneous non-normative category of difference and only if there were no other systems of social classification, Chambers (191) concludes, could a clear-cut distinction between the categories be maintained and the purity of each sustained. Even though we should not lose sight of the cultural hegemony of masculinity, the internal coherence of normative categories like whiteness, heterosexuality and/or masculinity thus becomes inevitably problematic and contradictory.

That (American) white masculinity is far from stable and monolithic is further corroborated by its own exclusionary nature. Since white

masculinity sustains its identity by excluding “Other” positions, which are largely the invention of white masculinity itself, white masculinity is continually threatened with the fear of contamination or corruption. This, as American masculinity scholar Thomas DiPiero (230-1) explains, casts white masculine identity as hysterical, since there is little internal confirmation of what it really is, and there is always the fear that one is not white or male enough. As DiPiero himself concludes, white masculinity is nothing but “a set of alienable properties that constitute the individual possessing them” (230-1).

It would appear, then, that the concept of (American) white masculinity has been oversimplified. For example, American white men have been usually regarded as the victims of, rather than active participants in, identity politics (Robinson). When whiteness or masculinity become the topic of political discussion, we tend to see white men *reacting* against, but not fully *participating* in, American struggles over gender and racial definition. For example, post-sixties gender and racial conflicts in the U.S. are often described as a battle between “multiculturalists” and the white, male representative of unmarked normalcy and universality. Indeed, a dominant narrative of white male decline in post-sixties America has

developed to explain the historical, social, and political downfall of what was once viewed as the normative in American culture. Versions of that narrative can be read in books by masculinity scholars such as Susan Jeffords (*Remasculinization* xi-xii; *Hard* 118); Michael Kimmel (*Manhood* 298-299), and Susan Faludi (*Backlash*), among others.<sup>97</sup> All these American scholars share a similar argument, which suggests that in the late 1960s, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, and with the rise of feminism and the gay liberation movement, American white men began to be questioned and to be de-centered. Some accounts of this general shift also take economic changes into account, insisting that postindustrial economies have thrown not only the working-class into crisis, but the professional class as well, traditionally represented by the white, middle-class man. While such economic changes affect both women and men (and both people of color and whites), a recurrent image of the disenfranchised American white man

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<sup>97</sup> Though Robinson disagrees with all of them, she takes issue with Susan Faludi's *Stiffed* (1999), which, in her opinion, "offers a journalistic, anecdotal, and somewhat sentimental account of the causes of the current crisis in masculinity" (Robinson 195). Robinson complains that Faludi's work is seriously jeopardized by an ahistorical nostalgia for an older masculinity that, in Faludi's view, was stable and secure and whose high-water mark was World War II (Ernie Pyle is the privileged exemplar of it). Robinson notes that although Faludi does not blame women and feminists for men's reactionary attitudes, she does not quite get beyond the ideas of the American men's movements of the 1970s that she herself claims were wrong: "The villain in Faludi's narrative remains a...non-agential 'society' that promised men everything but delivers nothing" (Robinson 195)

has become a symbol for the decline of the American Dream. In Sally Robinson's own words:

Since the middle classes are arguably the source of normative representations of Americanness, those who speak loudest and most forcibly for the decline of America in post-sixties culture speak of the middle class "falling from grace." That this class is assumed to be normatively white perhaps goes without saying; but the degree to which the crisis affecting the white middle class is also, and most forcefully, a crisis in masculinity, has become clear in recent years, with the vociferous cries of men who are contesting the claim that they are the villains in American culture. (2-3)

Although the view of American white heterosexual masculinity as eminently reactive is widespread, it is possible to challenge that dominant or master narrative in a number of ways. While there is evidence of American white men attempting to recover their power, shaken by the post-sixties era, it becomes necessary, as Sally Robinson (197) explains, to place the renegotiations of masculinity *within*, not *against*, the various struggles characterizing post-liberationist American culture. Post-sixties gender and racial struggles should not be regarded simply as a singular battle between the white man and his various "Others." After all, what is usually referred to as the "normative" in American culture is constantly under revision, and

shifts in response to the changing social, political, and cultural sphere.<sup>98</sup> White masculinity should be set within a field of struggle over cultural and political priority and authority, rather than outside of those struggles, looking on, affected by them but not affecting them. A description of white men as both subject and object of post-sixties liberationist movements will show, as Sally Robinson (4) insists, how white men both resist and welcome the *marking* of their minds and bodies. Even if American white men are particularly interested in maintaining the fictions of unmarked individualism, they have also been attracted to identity politics.

It is true that white masculinity has attempted to reconsolidate its centrality and power in the wake of the liberationist movements of the late sixties and early seventies in the U.S. However, it is equally true that the “average” Americans who might seem most interested in the reconsolidation of their power have also been attracted to the discourse of liberation. In this way, anxiety over loss of power and socioeconomic privileges competes with a strong desire to forge a collective American white male identity on the basis of victimization. Elaborating on these ideas, Sally Robinson explains:

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<sup>98</sup> “The power to represent the normative must be constantly won, and to recognize this is also to appreciate the power of liberationist discourses to change the dominant discourse” (Robinson 4).

On the one hand, the forced embodiment of whiteness and masculinity is often represented as a violence; on the other, there is evidence of an undeniable attraction toward a more fully embodied, particularized identity on the part of white men. The doubleness of this response is my subject here, and while I do not want to discount the power of whiteness and masculinity to define the cultural terrain, I do want to insist that this power is neither absolute nor secure. (4)<sup>99</sup>

White masculinity in the contemporary U.S. is thus grounded in a wide range of narratives motivated by opposed investments and intentions: to heal a wounded white masculinity, and thus to remasculinize America, but also to enter the space of crisis and thus to re-create the dominant meanings of white masculinity. Although Susan Jeffords (*Remasculinization*) insists that post-sixties American culture is engaged in an ongoing process of “remasculinization,” some narratives seem to demand a different interpretation, as they represent an undeniable attraction to masochism on the part of white men trying to deal with the feminist critique

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<sup>99</sup> Generally speaking, Robinson (20) argues that concern over the role of white men in post-sixties America produces images of a physically wounded white masculinity, represented in the fiction of American white male writers such as John Updike or Philip Roth. She shows how white masculinity can most fully and convincingly represent itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body, and that such a move stems not only from the persuasive force of bodily pain but also from an identity politics of the dominant. However, such representations can produce “unexpected effects” (Robinson 20). In her view, the display of wounded bodies “materializes the crisis of white masculinity, makes it more real, like other bloody battles over race and gender in American history.” However, such a materialization, in turn, “threatens to expose the lie of disembodied normativity so often attached to white masculinity” (Robinson 8-9).

of male privilege, most often visible in the remarkable frequency of representations of wounded white males (Robinson 11).<sup>100</sup> Thus, masochistic display of wounds and of male suffering is central to the construction of white masculinity in post-sixties America, although masochism always competes with the more obvious phallic pleasures of release. As Robinson herself concludes:

Blockage -of male speech, male sexuality, male privilege- becomes synonymous with not only repression but oppression, while release gets equated with “liberation.” Oppression and liberation are figured primarily in individualist rather than social terms, and what could be more individual than the body? Yet because white masculinity has retained so much of its power through what Michael Warner calls “rhetorics of disincorporation,” an emphasis on the body always risks plunging white masculinity into the morass of materialist politics -body politics, identity politics- that provoked the crisis in the first place. (13-4)<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> I am only trying to draw on serious, well-documented attempts to account for, and deconstruct, white male power in contemporary American culture. Thus, I am deliberately excluding other popular texts, such as Warren Farrell’s *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex* (1993), where “articulations of white men as victimizers slide almost imperceptibly into constructions of white men as victims” (Robinson 5).

<sup>101</sup> In order to illustrate and exemplify her arguments, Robinson (87-127) makes use of several American novels written by white heterosexual men, such as Philip Roth’s *My Life as a Man* (1974), John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* (1978), and Stephen King’s *Misery* (1987), among others. While it is far beyond the scope of this chapter to rephrase Robinson’s readings of each of these texts, her general argument is that in these narratives there is an explicit connection between white male bodies and culture. Together, these texts represent white masculinity as threatened by the increasing cultural dominance of women. Thus, white masculinity is depicted as being in crisis, and the consequences of that crisis are somatic. In this sense, many of these novels represent wounded white male bodies. While many American novels -such as James Dickey’s *Deliverance* (1970) or John Updike’s *Rabbit Redux* (1971)- represent wounded white masculinity in order to recuperate it at the end of a narrative and to make it stronger, Robinson elaborates that these fictions go much farther in their description of white masculine identity in crisis. Most of them represent as pleasurable the spectacle of suffering white male bodies, and the spectacle

It would appear, then, that American white masculinity is far from monolithic, always producing both retrenchments and re-codings. Masculinity is thus *both* conservative and subversive as a gender category. Just as not all trans-sexualities, of course, present a challenge (or want to) to hegemonic masculinity, and not all queer masculinities produce subversion, so too hegemonic masculinity is far from fixed and uniform.<sup>102</sup>

The traditional image of (American) white heterosexual masculinity as power can also be contested in a number of ways. When challenged by the idea that the gender order implies that men have power over women, American men often respond with astonishment, since most men do not feel powerful:

“What do you mean, men have all the power? What are you talking about? I have no power at all. I’m completely powerless. My wife bosses me around, my children boss me

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of a white masculinity in the hands of women and the feminine. Thus, these fictional images of white masculinity prove particularly complex and ambiguous. In Robinson’s own words:

These texts insist that there is something pleasurable in the wounding of the white male body, a pleasure not unlike that produced by the spectacular staging of wounds within masochistic narrative. This surplus of pleasure keeps the representations from being geared entirely toward the revenge of masculinity on the feminine; and the fact that none of the...novels ends with an entirely triumphant and newly empowered male body suggests that this is not possible even if it were desirable. (18)

<sup>102</sup> See also chapter 4 (section 4.4) and chapter 5 (sections 5.3 and 5.4) in this respect.



around, my boss bosses me around. I have no power at all!”  
(Kimmel *Gendered 93*)<sup>103</sup>

In order to understand men’s feelings of powerlessness, it becomes necessary, as sociologist Michael Kimmel (*Gendered 93*) reminds us, to distinguish between structural gender relations and individual experiences. Much of American feminist theory of gender-based power derived from a symmetry between the structure of gender relations and women’s individual experiences. Women were powerless in collective terms, and they felt equally powerless in individual terms. As Kimmel himself puts it:

Women, as a group, were not *in* power. That was much evident to anyone who cared to observe a corporate board, a university board of trustees, or a legislative body at any level anywhere in the world. Nor, individually, did women *feel* powerful. In fact, they felt constrained by gender inequality into stereotypic activities that prevented them from feeling comfortable, safe, and competent. (*Gendered 93*)

It seems clear, then, that women were neither in power nor did they feel powerful. However, that symmetry collapses when we try to apply it to

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<sup>103</sup> Kimmel insists that contemporary American men’s experience of powerlessness is *real* -the men really feel it and certainly act on it- but it is not *true*, since it does not accurately describe their condition. As he elaborates:

In contrast to women’s lives, men’s lives are structured around relationships of power and men’s differential access to power. Our imperfect analysis of our own situation leads us to believe that we men need *more* power, rather than leading us to support feminists’ efforts to rearrange power relationships along more equitable lines. (“Masculinity” 137)

men. “Here, in a sense, is where feminism has failed to resonate for many men,” Kimmel elaborates, “for although men may be *in* power everywhere one cares to look, individual men are not in ‘power,’ and they do not *feel* powerful.”<sup>104</sup> Contemporary American men often feel themselves to be equally oppressed by a system of traditional gendered conventions. American men as a group are in power (when compared with women), but do not feel powerful. Individual men are not powerful, at least none but a small number of individual men. It is true that insofar as a man is the subject of patriarchy, then he has power. However, power, as philosopher Hannah Arendt indicated,<sup>105</sup> is never a personal property, it does not derive from oneself. Rather, it belongs to those social and political institutions which the individual occupies and through which he finds an identity. In this sense, then, power acquires an alienating quality: it can be used but it cannot be owned. That is why, for example, many contemporary American men seem to feel frustrated and react in a number of conventional ways. As Kimmel himself explains:

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<sup>104</sup> That is what Michael Kaufman has described as “men’s contradictory experiences of power.”

<sup>105</sup> Arendt (44) believed that “power is not the property of an individual; it belongs to a group...The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with...disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes.”

The feeling of powerlessness is one reason why so many men believe that they are the victims of reverse discrimination and oppose affirmative action. Or why some men's movement leaders comb through the world's cultures for myths and rituals to enable men to claim the power they want but do not feel they have. Or even why many yuppies took to wearing "power ties" while they munched their "power lunches" during the 1980s and early 1990s. (*Gendered* 93)<sup>106</sup>

Although (American) white masculinity is a hegemonic force in contemporary social, political, and economic arenas, then, we need to approach it as a response to cultural demands, not as a self-generating timeless entity which can reproduce itself without any external help. We need to be careful, as DiPiero (3) elaborates, not to analyze (American) white masculinity as a self-sufficient force with no exterior, and we must take care not to confuse a hegemonic cultural force with the source of that culture, since hegemonic masculinity cannot perform the impossible task of defining itself. In other words, we must be careful not to equate an identity, which is the result of cultural activity, with that activity itself. As DiPiero insists, "in contradistinction to a great many studies of masculinity, then, I insist not only on the cultural conditions inhering in the production of

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<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, Halberstam notes that "excessive masculinity turns into a parody or exposure of the norm" (4).

specific strains of masculinity -in this case, white masculinity- but also on the cultural work that white masculinity continually performs in order to retain its hegemony” (3).<sup>107</sup>

Consequently, there exist two extreme poles of white masculinity in contemporary American culture, which rarely coincide (DiPiero 3). On the one hand, we have the model of hegemonic fixity and stability to which all other forms of identity are explicitly or implicitly compared. On the other, we have the identity as it is lived and acted out by real human beings in their daily lives. It is precisely because these two so rarely match up that white males are so often angry. As DiPiero himself indicates:

Sustaining the contradiction between how the culture defines them and how they experience their lives, white males are often frustrated by their inability to live up to cultural ideals. Indeed, studies in the 1940s and 1950s indicated that over-identification with cultural ideals of masculinity produced anti-social, even criminal behavior. (3)

From what has been suggested so far, it seems clear, then, that white heterosexual masculinity in contemporary American culture is far from stable and monolithic. Like femininity, masculinity is both complex and

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<sup>107</sup> In a similar vein, Fred Pfeil (*White*) insists that the normative features of masculinity -and of whiteness, middle-classness, and Americanness- require constant cultural work in order to look like the natural attributes of a privilege they simultaneously justify and disguise.

contradictory. Nevertheless, several qualifications need to be made. Although American white heterosexual masculinity is not homogeneous, (American) men as a group remain in power, especially when compared to (American) women as a group. As Segal indicates, “it is only in their ubiquitously cited and definitively enforced demarcation from ‘women’ that the deep and pervasive divisions between men can be ignored” (New xi). In terms of power, the differences *between* men and women are far greater than the differences *among* men. Although power is differently distributed among men, men *as a group* are more powerful than women *as a group*. Certainly, it is only *particular* groups of men in any given society who hold positions of public power and influence. However, this is precisely what reinforces, rather than questions, the hierarchical structuring of gender through relations of dominance. As Segal herself concludes, the gender order is being constantly reinforced by “the *symbolic* equation of ‘masculinity’ with power, and ‘femininity’ with powerlessness” (New xi).

On the other hand, it is equally important to note that the tensions, instabilities, and ambiguities within traditional masculinities do not always promote masculine self-reflection and change. It is true that, sometimes, these incongruities create a space where the dominant conceptions of

masculinity can be questioned and subsequently changed. More often than not, however, these contradictions often fracture while maintaining traditional gender arrangements. As Segal elaborates, recent poststructuralist theorizing of masculinity as a contradictory formation tends to have “only a tenuous grasp of the entrenched if shifting gender relations and routines within the multiple institutions which work, *however ambivalently*, to maintain men in more powerful positions than women in the workplace, the home and, most consistently of all, in the top eschelons of public life” (New xxxi). Although it is important to explore masculinity’s internal contradictions and fluidities, one should never lose sight, therefore, of feminism and its fight for gender equality. After all, feminism is the only way, as Lynne Segal reminds us, to envision more “concrete programmes for transforming the lives of men” (Segal New xxxi).

While feminist scholars like Segal have thus defined feminism and poststructuralism as intrinsically opposed, it seems possible as well as convenient to try to combine and reconcile feminist politics with the poststructuralist analysis of (American white heterosexual) masculinity’s internal fissures and contradictions. As queer scholar Judith Butler has noted, “the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics;

rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (*Gender* 148). To claim a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity and identity is not to place politics in the discourse of fragmentation. Equally important, it is not to set politics against poststructuralist thought. Rather, it is to think of the two fields in a dialectic tension (Eng and Hom Introduction 17).<sup>108</sup>

Moreover, it is important to ponder the new political possibilities that this knowledge opens up for American studies of masculinities, since a full understanding of the fragmented male subject allows us to question the exclusionary components of our own gendered and identity-based claims. After all, a monolithic vision of contemporary American masculine identity overlooks the existing social, ethnic, and sexual differences *among* men. Moreover, it reinforces the view of masculinity as natural, fixed, unitary, eternal, and immutable. In this way, masculinity could actually go unanalyzed, and unchallenged. Thus, it is no longer clear that (American) feminist theory should rely on notions of primary identity in order to get on

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<sup>108</sup> Though they distinguish between the term “lesbian/gay” (“the largely identity-based, post-Stonewall... political and academic movements that arose in response to the dominant pathologizing medico-judicial discourse on the ‘homosexual’”) and “queer” (“which we consider to eschew a political platform based exclusively on sexual identity, sexual practices, and the polarization of homo- and heterosexuality”), Eng and Hom, for example, agree with Michael Warner that queers can be lesbian and gays in other contexts, for example “where leverage can be gained through bourgeois propriety, or through minority-rights discourse, or through more gender-marked language (it probably won’t replace lesbian feminism)” (qtd. in Eng and Hom Introduction 17).

with the task of politics. Instead, we should wonder about the new political possibilities that might emerge from a radical poststructuralist critique of the subject. As Butler herself elaborates in this respect:

If the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed, then it follows that the critique of the...subject is crucial to the continuing *democratization* of...politics. As much as identity terms must be used,...these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production:...Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kind of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? In this sense, the genealogical critique of the...subject will be central to...politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism's most treasured contemporary premises. (*Bodies* 227)

## **2. 7. Discussing masculinities from an interdisciplinary methodology**

Since this study starts off from the critical assumption that (American) white heterosexual masculinity is varied and multiple, it also relies on numerous disciplines. In other words, the very object of study of the present work



seems to call for the use of an interdisciplinary methodology. Deploying what American masculinity scholar Judith Halberstam describes as a “queer methodology” (10),<sup>109</sup> Part II of the present work will thus go on to analyze a number of masculinity-related issues from different disciplinary perspectives, including the most recent and path-breaking contributions to American studies of masculinities from the fields of sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, history, anthropology, and literary theory, among others. In using an interdisciplinary approach to masculinities, then, this study relies throughout on what Halberstam has defined as “a scavenger methodology,” which makes use of a number of different disciplines and approaches to collect and produce information on a given subject.

Historically, the general models<sup>110</sup> that have governed American research on men and masculinities are: biological, anthropological,

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<sup>109</sup> “I call this methodology ‘queer’ because it attempts to remain supple enough to respond to the various locations of information on...masculinity and betrays a certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods” (Halberstam 10).

<sup>110</sup> Besides these main models, American scientific research on men and masculinities has also benefited from a number of key texts on other areas, such as philosophical approaches to masculinity. In this respect, one should mention the works of Larry May and Robert Strikwerda (*Rethinking*); Kenneth Clatterbaugh (*Contemporary*); Victor Seidler (*Rediscovering*); or Harry Brod (*Making*), among others. However, May and Strikwerda themselves acknowledge that although there have been many popular books on masculinity, as well as many books in social science and literature, “there have been very few books on philosophy and masculinity” (Introduction xii).

psychological, and sociological.<sup>111</sup> Although each of these perspectives helps us to better understand the meaning and forms of both masculinity and femininity, each is also limited in its ability to explain fully the workings of (American) masculinities (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xi). For example, in biology, genetic reductionism, which links different gendered behaviors to different genetic factors without hesitation, is undermined by the latest American genetic theory which, since the 1970s, completely rejects earlier assumptions that genes determine complex human action in any stable or direct way. There are not genes for everything, “let alone for such complex historically and socially shaped features of human existence as sexual desire or urban guerrillas” (Segal New xv, xvi).<sup>112</sup> We may be born males or females, but we always become men and women in a given socio-cultural and historical context. Biological differences between males and females would seem to influence some parameters for differences in social life, but would not determine the behaviors of men and women in any one culture. Indeed, these psychological and social differences would appear

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<sup>111</sup> For a detailed analysis of the different contributions of each of these models to masculinity studies, see Kimmel (*Gendered* 21-107). Michael Flood has also listed the most relevant sociological, psychological, anthropological, and cultural texts on masculinity studies (*The Men's*).

<sup>112</sup> As Segal insists, “this knowledge has failed to stall the absurd illusions fueled by beliefs in the potential of the massively funded Human Genome Project in the USA, set up to identify the genetic determination of all aspects of human behaviour” (New xvii).

to be the result far more of the ways in which different cultures interpret, adapt, and modify these biological inheritances. For instance, observed normative temperamental differences between men and women that are assumed to be of biological origin are often translated into political prescriptions in American culture. Therefore, “what is *normative* (i.e., what is prescribed) is translated into what is *normal*, and the mechanisms of this transformation are the assumed biological imperative” (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xi).

Although several anthropological works, such as Margaret Mead’s landmark text *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), have shown that the wide variations among cultures in their prescriptions of gender roles point to the fluidity of gender and the primacy of cultural organization,<sup>113</sup> many American anthropological models, such as David Gilmore’s *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1990), insist on the universality of gender differences, which they put down to specific cultural adaptations to the environment. Such positions reveal an obvious conservatism, since they assure that the differences between men

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<sup>113</sup> As Kimmel and Messner insist, “Mead observed such wide variability among gender role prescriptions - and such marked differences from our own- that any universality implied by biological or anthropological models had to be rejected” (Introduction xii). Although the empirical accuracy of Mead’s work has been questioned in its specific arguments, the general theoretical arguments remain convincing.

and women are the differences that nature or cultural evolution intended, and are thus not to be tampered with (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xii).

Although psychological models have made some decisive contributions to masculinity studies in the U.S., accounting for many of the internal conflicts and fragile sexual identities that haunt the minds of men, the power and meanings of masculinity stem not just from anatomy or familial interaction, but from broader social and political gendered relations. As Lynne Segal elaborates, “it is the difficulty of moving beyond the pervasive methodological individualism of all psychological thinking (beyond the idea that all explanations of personal and social phenomena can be reduced to facts about individuals) that makes it hard to understand why change is so slow and so contradictory” (New xxxvi).

Moreover, it should be remembered that although American psychological theorizing about gender has described specific developmental sequences for both males and females, these models have also been challenged by American feminist psychoanalysts like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan. These scholars have shown, for example, how a number of highly ideological assumptions make masculinity the standard and the norm

against which the psychological development of *both* males and females is measured. Inevitably, then, femininity becomes problematic and less fully developed. Moreover, Chodorow, as Kimmel and Messner (Introduction xiii) remind us, insists that the “essential” differences between the sexes are socially constructed and, therefore, subject to contestation and change.

Despite their essential contribution to masculinity studies, many American sociological models still rely on “sex role theory.” Several sociologists keep talking about “sex roles” -namely, “the collection of attitudes, attributes, and behaviors that is seen as appropriate for males and appropriate for females” (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xiii). In this way, masculinity is often associated with technical mastery, aggression, competitiveness, and cognitive abstraction, whereas femininity is associated with emotional empathy, sociability, and passivity. American sex role theory informed a wide variety of self-help manuals that instructed American parents on what to do if they wanted their child to grow up to be a healthy man or woman. However, several feminist scholars have also set out to challenge sex role theory, showing how the unexamined ideological assumptions about maturity and health all made masculinity the norm

against which both sexes were measured (Kimmel and Messner Introduction xiii).<sup>114</sup>

From what has been pointed out, it seems clear, then, that American studies of masculinities may benefit from an interdisciplinary methodology, which analyzes different questions from highly divergent (sometimes conflicting) perspectives and, in so doing, helps to keep a critical focus on each of them. Using an interdisciplinary methodology, Part II of this study will thus focus on analyzing (American) white heterosexual masculinity from different theoretical perspectives, including some of the latest contributions to American studies of masculinities from the areas of sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, history, and literary theory, among others.<sup>115</sup> Since American masculinity plays a key role in the construction of many different social issues in contemporary America -such as fatherhood, friendship styles, sports and healthcare, work, etc.-, it becomes impossible here to carry out an in-depth analysis of all of them. Focus will, therefore, be given to the relationship

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<sup>114</sup> For an in-depth analysis and critique of sex role theory, see Kimmel (*Gendered* 89-92).

<sup>115</sup> As will be seen, this study will borrow heavily from American sociological approaches to masculinities. While sociological theory is generally grounded in both quantitative and qualitative methods, sociological analyses of masculinity, particularly the most influential (see, for example, Kimmel *Manhood* and *Gendered*; Beneke *Proving*; Kaufman; Brod *Making*), tend to use a qualitative, rather than quantitative, methodology. Thus, the sociological parts of the present study will also be focused on qualitative, rather than quantitative, data.

between (white heterosexual) masculinity and two main social themes - namely, emotions and violence-, which have been selected taking into consideration their special relevance, as we shall see, to contemporary (American) society and culture, in general, and to contemporary American masculinity scholarship, in particular. Applying an (eminently American) interdisciplinary corpus of studies of masculinities to the analysis of emotions and violence, Part II of this thesis thus sets out to try to demonstrate and illustrate the influence of masculinity on these two (apparently genderless) main social themes of contemporary American culture.

