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# GENDER FORUM

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## Rac(e)ing Questions III: Gender and Postcolonial/Intercultural Issues

Edited by  
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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

## Article Publishing

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## Editorial

1      **Rac(e)ing Questions III** is the third issue of **gender forum** to address interrelations of gender and race from a variety of perspectives. The four featured articles analyse the mutual implication of race and gender in US-American white gender theory, Black Scottish poetry, British and West-African literature as well as in Australian white queer politics and represent important contributions to this highly productive discourse in new and enlightening ways.

2      In "Property: White Gender and Slavery" Sabine Broeck sketches a project aimed at investigating how white women positioned and defined themselves in a culture whose very existence depended on the desubjectification and ownership of human beings. Arguing that US-American white gender theory has largely failed to confront white women's valuing of their privileged position in the system of slavery, Broeck expresses the need to re-examine their role in the perpetuation of white dominance and of the manner in which white women's self-perceptions were affected by their involvement in this system. Her cross-reading of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the work of Hortense Spillers illustrates how white gender theory can be made fruitful to a (re-)examination of gender roles in the Deep South. Broeck demonstrates her thesis with a reading of Valerie Martin's *Property* focusing on the novel's representation of white female subjectivity and of the (self-) positioning of the white mistress in the race-gender system of the Deep South.

3      Molly Thompson's "'The Body is a Bloody Battlefield': Jackie Kay and the Body in Flux" investigates the interrelation of race and health in poems and short stories by the Scottish poet Jackie Kay. Focusing on Kay's representations of black corporeality, the article explores the links which her works frequently establish between the black female body and physical as well as mental illness. Thompson illustrates how Kay's poems use the body in flux to present effects of illness and racist attacks on the self as similar, both of which are shown to result in the disembodiment of the self and a loss of identity. Rather than reinforcing discourses which construct black women as carriers of contagion, Kay's poems, Thompson argues, invite us to question these "medical mythologies" and signal a need to heal the illnesses caused by a racially oppressive social environment.

4      Damien W. Riggs' contribution, "Priscilla, (White) Queen of the Desert: Queer Politics and Representation in a 'Postcolonising' Nation" takes issue with white queer politics' failure, particularly in the Australian context, to interrogate its implication within "normative assumptions about gender and race." In his combined reading of the film *The Adventures of*

*Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and Gilad Padva's article "Priscilla Fights Back: The Politicization of Camp Subculture," Riggs aims to show how the representational foregrounding of the oppression of white queers in Australia at times entails a problematic disregard for, if not a continuation of, racial oppression. In contrast, Riggs's exemplary analysis argues for a "white queer accountability" which confronts its own entanglement within white, heteropatriarchal discursive structures.

5 Beth Kramer's "'Postcolonial Triangles': An Analysis of Masculinity and Homosocial Desire in Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Greene's *The Quiet American*" likewise conjoins queer and postcolonial concerns. By employing both Sedgwick's and Girard's concept of the love triangle, the article investigates how the selected works are plotted around a "triangulated model of desire." Against the backdrop of postcolonial politics, this familiar literary device of the European novel produces gender hierarchies in the respective postcolonial narratives which mirror the power distribution in colonizer/colonized relationships.

6 This issue of **gender forum** features reviews of *African Gender Studies. A Reader* (edited by Oyèrónké Oyewùmí), *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (by Marlon B. Ross), and *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* (by Deborah Caslav Covino).

# Property: White Gender and Slavery

By Sabine Broeck, University of Bremen, Germany

## Abstract:

The article will focus on the problematic workings of white women's function as allegorical embodiment of white dominance and their subjective agency, their involvements in the violence and desire of the racial divide of slavery. Of course, this requires a theoretical grounding which the space of this article permits to sketch out only in roughest form. The first part of the article therefore means to frame what is actually an extensive project of study as a kind of opening, a suggestive plea for debate, discussion and cooperative results. Its second part engages a cross reading of Judith Butler and Hortense Spillers by way of clearing mental space for a re-reading of the complexly charged scene of race/gender and gender/race as conditioned by slavery. In its third part, I will engage a literary text by a contemporary white female writer which tries to come to terms with the legacy of an inextricable connection of white femininity to slavery.

[M]odern life begins with slavery [...]. Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. [...] It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. (Morrison, in Gilroy 221)

1 The images the Deep South will evoke are likely to be titillating; even though the contemporary public has learned to distance itself from all too naive and stereotypical mind frames. Nevertheless, the sensationalist imagery of abolitionism has had a long and persistent life in a mixture of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Awakening*, *Gone With the Wind* and *Roots*: hysterical wasp waists and piles of white, pure, feminine muslin, porches filled with rustling Mammy-underskirts, mint juleps, strained female idleness and male self-importance, alongside scenes of nameless terror: back breaking labor in cotton fields, auction block, whippings, a baby child's mother sold down the river. It is only outside the reign of the grippingly affective, that Deep South historiography may offer facets of the social and cultural practices of slavery pointing beyond clichés which are distinguished mostly by their value of political correctness, but which otherwise leave even a white critical readership, like academic gender studies, unimplicated.

2 The chronotope of the Deep South keeps recreating itself in conflicting representations, which seem to exist simultaneously in strangely unconnected and non-scrutinized ways. The aim of this article is to take up such scrutiny. The impulse to this kind of questioning reaches back to earlier contributions in Black feminist scholarship, such as Angela Davis' groundbreaking *Women, Race and Class* from 1981, but also to the nineteenth century legacy of black women's address of issues of gender trouble in their slave narratives, and other writings (Painter, Mullen). The questions I want to raise are meant to address

particular limitations of US-gender research/theory and to possibly reach beyond, by emphasizing the importance of dialogical approaches "across race" and asking for a theory that does not argue in the abstract beyond historical contingency. "Question" here has to be taken quite literally; the article may function rather as a construction site of inquiry than as an ultimately satisfying set of research results. The following considerations are the beginnings of some sort of path finding into a research project based on the assumption that white Southern ladies had reasons to value the system of slavery — despite their own ambivalences. From this perspective the focus is on the problematic workings of white women's function as allegorical embodiment of white dominance on the one hand as well as their subjective agency, their involvements in the violence and desire of the racial divide of slavery, on the other. Of course, this requires a theoretical grounding which the space of this article permits to sketch out only in roughest form. The first part of the article therefore means to frame what is actually an extensive project of study as a kind of opening, a suggestive plea for debate, discussion and cooperative results. Its second part engages a cross reading of Judith Butler and Hortense Spillers by way of clearing mental space for a re-reading of the complexly charged scene of race/gender and gender/race as conditioned by slavery, it will suppose the need for contemporary gender studies to address this charged scene. In its third part, I will engage a literary text by a contemporary white female writer which tries to come to terms with the legacy of an inextricable connection of white femininity to slavery.

### **Slavery and Gender**

3     The assumption of freedom, i.e. the generative semiosis of an individual human subject as the owner of a right to freedom, was the self-authorizing gesture of modernity par excellence, just as it has provided the philosophical and epistemological foundations for emancipation movements such as feminism. Yet this assumption required a massive break within cultural memory. It required a self-inscription of western modern subjects as not-enslaved and, at the same time, as opponents to slavery at a historical point at which modernism fostered the slave trade most profitably, and was at the same time fostered by the latter in surprisingly effective ways. In their basic denial of transatlantic slavery critical philosophies of modernity were marked by split consciousness; the Enlightenment in particular, with its impetus for individual self-ownership, self-responsibility, subjective and objective right to freedom and productive self-realization, learned to operate within a system of a large-scale parasitism. Social critique used the slave trade and slavery in a very creative, but also mostly metaphorical way. Slavery in the abstract provided the modern symbolic with

an intricate apparatus for the formulation and critique of mechanisms of social inclusiveness, exclusiveness, and liminality (Broeck, *Slavery and Early Modernity*; Gilroy, Patterson, Davis, *Problem of Slavery*) .

4        The social and cultural practices of trade and slavery changed the history of sexuality in the transatlantic realm, in which a voyeuristic drama for the submission of people unfolded. This encouraged the development of a large-scale white pornographic perspective and allowed for a permissivity of white male rape, by which whole generations were corrupted (Painter, Spillers). It is also necessary to speak about the almost absurd degree of fusion of economic motives and human greed, which turned female human beings into breeding machines in order to maximize profit and social control — which has had a profound effect on the representations and self-representations of black women until the present day. Most crucially in my context, slavery must be seen as a culture of ownership, — or, where white women, adolescents and children are concerned, co-ownership of people, a culture of an aggressively defended right of access to de-subjectified beings, to so-called chattel, their labor, and their reproduction. The elements of white dominance over black add up to a picture of an extreme precariousness of social and individual relations, as Orlando Patterson and other scholars (Patterson, Mullen) have so amply configured. What interests me about these relations is the process of idealization and splitting of gender.

5        The status of white women within the plantation complex is difficult to assess. It was aggressively marked by an almost schizoid antagonism between not having civil rights on the one hand and being extremely privileged, socially and culturally, on the other. After decades of neglect, Deep South historiography has, over the last thirty years, become gendered: anthologies and monographs have been published on a variety of aspects of white female life and gender relations in the antebellum South, ranging from studies of white women in Southern politics, to domesticity, to motherhood, to male-female power relations, class distinctions among white women, women's cultural, particularly literary contributions and more (see e.g. Scott, Clinton, Faust, Juncker). Many of these studies by white researchers, with the notable exception of Elisabeth Fox-Genovese's work, are characterized by what I would call the unacknowledged desire to counter-write the abolitionist myth of the lazy, hysterical Southern Belle with representations of white women fully integrated into social functions, responsibilities, and ethical obligations; their lives bound into structures of production and reproduction in which they played a crucial and distinct role vis-à-vis white men to whom they still remained legally and culturally subjugated. Black women, if they appear at all in those publications, appear marked as such, marginalized from those



reconstructions of the centrality of gender divisions and relations for plantation society, often pluralistically and rather naively subsumed under politically correct multicultural approaches to gender studies issues like mothering. Strikingly absent are specific studies which might confront the parasitical configuration of dominance and oppression which enabled white women's position in the plantation system vis-à-vis Black women, and black men, for that matter. An inquiry is necessary as to how white women pursued their own privileged status, how they defined their own mistress — (or co-master-) — position within the slave system, how they judged the investment of their femininity for the physical and cultural representation of white dominance, and how they reacted to the splitting off of black female slaves from their gender. The discourse of domesticity will have to be re-examined with an eye to the role of white women's structurally legitimate and largely exploitative access to black women's labor, their emotional resources, and sexual availability played in the production of both the iconographic constitution of white lady-hood and white women's subjective readings of their situation. Historian Nell Painter's investigations have prepared a road map: her essays should be read as signposts for further necessary archival scholarship on letters, diaries and correspondence; one might also suggest tracing those complex contradictions in a web of literary representations — even if that might entail a reading for what Toni Morrison would call ornate absences; a further object of interest could be the small number of contemporary counter fictions, such as *The Wind Done Gone* (Randall) and *Property* (Martin) which have imaginatively tried to fill in those representational lacunae, the latter of which I will take up in this article.

6 US-American gender theory has basically developed within a framework of — as I want to call it — racially innocent modernity and its emphatic philosophical foundations of the subject and subjectivity (Broeck, *Amnesia*). In US-American society, modernity has constituted itself in a particular logic of the subject (Broeck, *Slavery and Early Modernity*), and it has done so by reverting to a philosophically justified freedom of white subjectivity that presupposes the desubjectification of others by way of ownership of those others. US-American gender theory has avoided searching for the traces of its own historical rootedness within this philosophical and political regime of freedom as ownership; it has entered a dialogue almost exclusively with the theories of European modernity and postmodernism, rather than with philosophical approaches generated by Black diasporic theory that has given center stage to the meaning of slavery for modern ideas of subjectivity. Neither psychoanalysis, nor Foucauldian theory, nor gender studies — for that matter — have sufficiently dealt with the history of subjectivities created within extreme human conditions

characterized by divisions as well as convergences between and across gender and race constellations in a historical situation marked by the conditions of ownership of human beings. The aim of my project is to come to understand the intricate and individually invested psychic mechanics of this culture of ownership, as well as the subjective mental figurations of this relation. How did owning, having to work and control other human beings in a chronotope such as slavery and enjoying unlimited access to those beings one way or another, affect white women's sense of their capacities, their limitations, the reach of their desires? How did white female subjects learn to become owners of beings and to desubjectify those that appeared day in day out before their very own eyes as human beings, how did they learn to un-think another human being's access to human subjectivity? What acts of aggression (directed at self or other) were employed in order to compensate for the social and psychological compulsion to embody white domination? To what extent could a desire for closeness, intimacy and satisfaction of their own needs be gratified within the social divide of slavery, and which role did their privilege and ownership play in this? How did white women deal with the right to sanctioned white violence which afforded a perpetual invitation to excess?

7      Female domesticity of plantation ladies was inevitably contingent on female slaves' labor capacity (Weiner). For a white lady, domesticity meant a kind of compulsive but luxurious construction of the white female body, which required extreme efforts at staging this body. Part of this was, for example, the creation of an ethereal aesthetics, bearing no correspondence to the reality of the climate, or to bodily functions, or a repertoire of white feminine body language, such as calculated faints. Fictions of the South, as well as autobiographical material speak volumes to these camouflage acts. However: which role was attributed to black women in order for these acts to be successful? And how did white women perceive themselves, knowing that their success was dependent on black women's work? Domesticity meant being trained to expect and to accept black labor for one's own sustenance as a matter of course; it entailed a dependent relation to that labor: even though white ladies had the power of representing their oftentimes absent husbands in matters concerning the "big house." According to black female slave narratives white women relied on their female slaves for the actual execution of almost all household tasks (taking care of the children and the sick, cooking, household logistics, sewing, washing, keeping store, feeding slaves and animals, gardening, but also of such intimate tasks as emptying chamber pots) (Mullen, Davis, *Women, Race and Class*). Moreover, domesticity for the Southern Belle included a very ambivalent position concerning her role as mother and her offspring: white children were to the largest

extent raised by black nannies. This parasitical state of affairs did create a subjective feeling of being at the mercy of the household's slaves, which in turn means that a paranoid preemptive despotism must have been the order of the day. White women were routinely surrounded by black people, who, in their imagination figured as loyal chattel, and must have caused great wonder and aggressive disappointment if they chose not to function properly.

### **How To Get Beyond the Analogy of Race and Gender?**

8 Even though a historical reappraisal of plantation slavery has been available for years it has hardly made an entrance into white gender theory; by the following exemplary engagement with Judith Butler's early argument in *Gender Trouble* I turn to this lack directly, trying to tease out the possibly productive implications of a necessary address of slavery's scenarios for gender studies. I will look at two paradigmatic passages from Judith Butler, which reflect — though in a rather condensed fashion — the state-of-the-art knowledge gained by Euro-American gender theory which, in my view, still rests with the far-reaching insights Butler provided into the performativity of gender. Some gender theorists, like Butler herself, have recently transferred that approach to a selective discussion of race — which, however, has remained connected mostly to an examination of issues concerning "raced" people, as in African-Americans (Butler, *Bodies* and Salih); what has been missing is a general address of gender theory's genealogy which has been so profoundly implicated in slavery's division of women into gendered subjects, and ungendered body things. To quote black feminist critic Hortense Spillers first for contrast and clarification:

Under these conditions [of slavery], we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point biological, sexual, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes converge. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: (1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time — in stunning contradiction — it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness" [...]. (206)

9 In contrast to that argument, Butler's *Gender Trouble* marks a crucial void in white gender studies in the very theoretical universality, and the abstraction in which it appears. I quote two passages which condense what has become a widely uncontested paradigm for gender theory. First: "If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before', 'outside', or 'beyond' power is a

cultural impossibility" (30), and, the second one:

As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations [...]. Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender of the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (10, 140 - 141)

This paradigm could be, in principle, very useful for a discussion of gender relations in the Deep South, which reveal the precariousness of the category gender. Why then, has white US gender theory so rarely looked at slavery and the role of white women within it? The question of the racial constitutedness of/in gender — which has, after all, become one of the most crucial questions for gender studies — could be much more productively theorized if the discourse included an address of US history. One explanation might be that the lack of such a historicizing approach in gender studies is the result of a re-universalizing tendency within theory as genre, in which the obsession with the abstract leads to an a priori, always already, white subject. Theory — in this logic — knows only the universal kind of performativity of gender (which is by white by default); authors and readers as agents of a mutually shared symbolic can in the end only imagine post-enlightenment white subjects. European theories of modernism (and postmodernism) in their exclusively abstract contemplation of the master-slave dialectic, which has consistently functioned as the key-metaphor for oppressive relations, could only imagine human beings who were not enslaved as subjects. In reverse, and one could say, rather perverse logic, it decided not to see the enslaved as subjects. Gender theory's affective and epistemological liaison with post-enlightenment theory resulted in an avoidance of American history to which the paradigm of the master-slave dialectic could never be applied only as a metaphor, but for which, instead, the issue of the enslaved's access to subjectivity (and thus to gender) was the most crucial, and visceral, question, and one which has had repercussions until today.

10     These are, of course, polemical suggestions. I want to go on in the same spirit and share some observations which could be useful for a reconsideration of gender in and through slavery, and race. These observations have been inspired mostly by Hortense Spillers, who, in

her already quoted "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," (a 1987 article which has gone largely unnoticed by white theorists, reprinted in Spillers), has already pointed to fundamental problems for a grammar of gender grammar, that is, for gender theory:

[...] in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject positions of "female" and "male" adhere to no symbolic integrity. At a time when current critical discourses seem to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender 'undecidability', it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender. But undressing these conflations in meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance [i.e. slavery], would restore, as figurative possibility [...] the potential for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points [...]. (206)

Spillers refers here to the division of female beings in "women" equal white-female and "slaves" equal ungendered, which made it impossible for black female slaves to access the cultural capital available to gender. Spillers also scandalously suggests that this reduction of black women and men to tortured and torturable flesh (206, 207) established manipulative rights to sexual, mental and psychological infringement on slaves for both white men and women. This made any interpellation of female slaves into gendered subject positions impossible. This structural impossibility then marks a kind of ground zero for theoretical notions of gender differentiation of heteronormative sexuality in the United States, in which the availability of gender neutral flesh significantly undermined the naturalness of binary gender constellations and of socially stabilizing gender differentiation along the straight axis of male versus female subjectivity.

11 Spillers' article also suggests that motherhood was an impossibility for black female slaves, whose children did not belong to them or their men, but became white owners' chattel. This deliberate bastardization, or orphanization of black children had dire consequences: triangularization and oedipal identity formation within the family triad mother-father-child became outlawed for generations of African-Americans. White intervention required a psychological, mental and social act of compensation from the black community, beyond the gendered task of individual legitimate mothering in order to counter this imposition of white patriarchal interest of reproduction onto their own kinship structures, and the destruction of a black male subject position as father. Insight into these conditions of slavery thus necessitates a reconceptualization of theoretical statements about gender differentiation: a re-assessment of the assumption that only those allegedly universal gender relations may be constitutive for social and individual reproduction, and thus, nothing outside a binary white gender purview requires theory's interventions. Spillers concerns herself mostly with the effects of slavery's constellations on the black community in US-American history, and especially on the position of black women, as perceived by themselves and by others. Robyn Wiegman, the only white

gender scholar who clearly refers to Spiller's thesis of the "ungendering" of the black community, in her book *American Anatomies. Theorizing Race and Gender*, also focuses on the long term effects of this psychological and social de-subjectification of the black community and the resulting American difficulty to imagine sovereign race relations. The agency of white women in slavery's *quadrangulations*, as it were, thus still awaits theoretical address. What I will suggest in the following then are some preliminary speculative questions which gesture in that direction.

12 White femininity which, in the antebellum South, works as an aesthetic representation of gender at the cost of almost total disembodiment of white women, functions as a central defining moment of white dominance, as visceral allegory of an unassailable white gentility. This in turn is made possible by ascribing to black female slaves a status of pure flesh, so to speak (in the sense of sexual and reproductive accessibility and functionality). The Deep South needed female whiteness in order to *allegorize* racial difference, but its livelihood depended on making this allegory materially visible and physically effective. It thus granted white women an agency of being white that was based on an authoritative privilege of gender which could only, by necessity — since equity within patriarchy was out of the question — have slaves as its defining object. The possession of a white gender subjectivity was bound to owning black objects — materially or symbolically, female gender could only exist, and thus support the white power structure, only because and if female slaves were split off from it.

13 The construction of gendered subjectivity depends largely on the successful management and controlled pursuit of a human being's libidinous desire. But what does this easily acceptable sentence mean within the orbit of slavery? How has a definition of white desire within the bounds of race and its complete and terrorist restriction to the white race succeeded in the face of stunning day-to-day intimacy of black-white relations and of white violence? A human relation which was characterized simultaneously by a high degree of intimacy and an extremely rigid hierarchical divide and disavowal must have carried within itself the latent possibility of transgression of which we have as yet no protocol, as Spillers would phrase it. Can a post-Lacanian analysis of the law of the symbolic and its regulations of human desire into and within gendered constellations be transported universally into a historical scenario that has juxtaposed raced and gendered beings in a way that explodes and multiplies beyond the binary difference of gender that European theory assumes? The sexual nexus of slavery functioned in a way that excluded the black non-subjects from the symbolically legitimate circulation of desire; it did, as Althusser would say, not interpellate black human beings as gendered subjects, but worked so as to de-subjectify them. What was

white women's function in that game? How did white women function in a scenario with four actors, in which both, "possessing the phallus" and "being the phallus" was seriously thrown into question by the presence of a second binary gender constellation, to which the white couple had a relation of ownership — so that it was viscerally present at the same time that it had to be aggressively disavowed? Psychoanalytically speaking, what do we make of the fact that the white woman was situated in a gender quadrangle in which the black man could not have the phallus, and the black woman could certainly not be phallic — or both of these only to the point of a hysterical breakdown of the system of white control? Post-Lacanian theory has as yet not ventured to self-reflexively address psychosexual scenarios that were not inscribed in/as binary differences and which might have effected the emergent white subjects' situatedness within the symbolic, as well as the black human non-subjects' barred access to it, and the psychosexual, and cultural conflicts resulting thereof, to a considerable extent.

14 Furthermore, what do we make of the complicated games with their own sexuality which white women must have been playing: in which way did white ladies use their black female slaves for their own strategies against repeated unwanted pregnancies? In which way did white women access black bodies for their own pleasure — or are we to remain theoretically fixed within Victorian strictures of make-belief that framed interracial desire of any kind as impossible, and therefore, non-existent? Or, to step up the complication of questions: Black slaves were not allowed to mother their children in many cases, but raised their white owners' babies for whom they became a proverbial fountain of motherly care and nurturance. How then does a theory, for which oedipal disavowal and the loss of the maternal object have been most crucial in the formation of gendered, individual subjectivity, apply? The maternal object was not only to be, as it were, passively lost, or forsaken; it had to be actively disowned so that the human being (who had performed as maternal object) could be owned prospectively, could mature and become realized as a legal and material object, as it were. What becomes of the taboo restriction for the child to grow beyond symbiosis if it has to work not only in order to enter the child in his/her own sexual subjectivity apart from the parents, but also to rid the child of an improper racial attachment? How did the culturally enforced and sanctioned exchange of the maternal function affect white women's psychic constitution? What did it mean for white girls in the first place, as well as for them as prospective white mothers with black mammies for their children? My article means to appear as an inquisitive accumulation of stress points, to paraphrase Spillers again, which need to be disseminated, worked through, and possibly answered; this question in this part thus work as a list, not as a presentation of an organic picture.

## **On Being the Subject of Property Relations: Valerie Martin's Exploration of Possession and Domination**

15 In the last part of my article I want to read two crucial passages from Valerie Martin's 2003 novel *Property* — thus referring readers to a contemporary text which addresses the conundrum of gender in slavery by way of a daring fictional re-imagination of the master/mistress/slave entanglement. Martin works with the steamy props of antebellum romance (an almost gothic plantation setting, cruel and greedy white male characters, an assortment of narcissistic Southern Belles, wicked creoles, and self-indulgent splendor on display) but employs those to shore them up, as it were, against the very genre conventions they conjure up. In her text, slaves organize for a successful uprising, the white master of the Louisiana sugar plantation, male protagonist of the novel, is murdered in the revolt; the light-skinned female house slave, who has been abused as rape object by the master, manages to run away in the fracas and escape to Boston. The slave woman is abetted by her lover/partner, a free New Orleans Black man, only to be apprehended by a slave catcher at the novel's end, not because of his detectival intelligence but because — by a deus-ex-machina narrative twist — the slave's mistress, daughter and inheritor of the dead master's slaves and estate, has a fit of female intuition, driven by the desire to re-obtain her property.

16 With her, as Toni Morrison called it, "prised and clean-limbed" prose (in a back cover blurb on the *Abacus* edition of the novel) Martin's novel may serve to fill an imaginative void in theoretical conceptualizations of gender, and gender splitting. Looking at plantation slavery as the constitutive US-American microcosm for gender articulation, her text squarely places property that is the existence of human beings as possessions for other human beings at the center of analysis. To critically represent a white female perspective of possession from within, as it were, becomes as much a daring act — given the overall negligence which characterizes white gender studies' attitudes towards the problematics of white women and slavery — as it remains an urgent desideratum. Of necessity, this perspective needs to be reconstructed in the realm of imagination; it may only be accessed by a careful re-consideration of the in-between-the-lines of white women's diaries, letters, and memoirs, as well as African-American slave narratives; first, the silences kept by Victorian standards of decency, and later, a profound lack of political interest in re-examining white women's position have not exactly facilitated an entry of this perspective into the cultural memory of white gender studies.

17 Of course my reading in this context does not claim to do the novel justice in terms of



literary analysis proper; on the contrary, I am looking only at a rather select aspect of it, namely its representation of the social, cultural and psychic implications the material fact of property has for the positioning of the white mistress, and her black slave on an axis of gender; and what it could mean for white gender studies to pay attention to those implications. Which is also to say that I will not in any detail trace the novel in its intertextual connectedness to both, African-American writing, theoretical and literary, about slavery, as well as to antebellum white literature. What interests me is the problematics of the *splitting* of gender, into white female human beings who have gendered subjectivity, and black slaves who do not; and the trans-aggressivity this splitting endows white women with, by way of enabling unchecked access to their slaves' physical existence as possession. In this scenario, the black slave woman figures as a monstrous crossing between a dis-subjectified, de-gendered sexual beast, and a movable, serviceable body-thing. By way of constructing her tale as a first-person narrative of the white mistress, which does not allow for any changes of perspective beyond the protagonist Manon Gaudet's narcissistic reflections, Martin — consciously running the risk of misreading — forces readers into an instructive, but uncomfortable identification with that position of white gendered subjectivity. The art of reading Gaudet's tale, she seems to insist, lies in the empathy a reader will need to picture the point-of-view of the slave by way of willfully positioning herself as possession of a white woman, and by — from that position — mentally responding to the questions a strategically ignorant Manon Gaudet keeps asking throughout her tale: "My husband is dead... why would she run now, when she was safe from him? It did not make sense" (137). And, getting the very last sentence of the novel, wondering at what good a free life in the North might have possibly meant to the now re-posessed Sarah, she muses: "What on earth did they think they were doing"? (209)

18     The two scenes I want to look at specifically are positioned at crucial points of the narrative's plotting. The first one is the novel's opening sequence; it establishes Manon Gaudet's position within the plantation orbit as a white possessor, and at the same time, as a subject at her master husband's mercy. It also creates a voyeuristic white female gaze on white male violence, and sexual exploitation of black slaves which, by way of being voiced by the narrative's protagonist, envelops the reader in Gaudet's precarious oscillation between envious desire, repugnance and a rather aloof disdain for male spousal misbehavior. This opening sequence is of strategic importance to the text because it already positions its heroine as a willing — though passive — participant/observer, literally a spy through the looking-glass, in what she calls her husband's "games" which will in the course of the novel, slide into

her active usurpation of the right to a deliberate masterful trans-aggression in her own sexual "game" with her slave servant.

19 I will need to quote the pertinent passages from the novel at some length, in order to visualize the problematics for those readers who are not familiar with Martin's text. This is the first scenario: Gaudet repeatedly watches her husband — unbeknownst to him — at one of his favorite pastimes with his property. On the plantation's lake, he forces young black boys to perform water gymnastics for him which entail their unconsensual sexual arousal, and his brutal corporeal punishment of them as a consequence; the master, in turn, experiences orgasmic pleasure caused by both, an enjoyment of the boys' forced sexualisation and by the unchecked reign of his own violence which does not even have a need to be framed as illicit sadism, because its object are things in his possession. Not only the boys themselves, but also their slave mothers, regularly have to bear the brunt of his desires, because they will be punished for their offspring's forced performance. Manon Gaudet's very phrasing of that ritual reveals her own position as profoundly complicit with the masterful pleasure — what separates her interest from his is not any kind of empathy for the boys subjected to the ritual, or for the boys' families, but rather an angle of scandalized, envious fascination with the master's freedom which throws her own rights and claims as a presumably loved wife into sharp relief, and subjugates her to under his moods and whims:

They have to keep doing this, their lithe young bodies displayed to him in various positions. [...] The boys rub against he other, they can't help it [...]. It isn't long before one comes out of the water with his member raised. That's what the game is for. This boy tries to stay in the water, he hangs his head as he comes out, thining every thought he can to make the tumescence subside. (4)

Her next words give away Manon's conjugal implication in the master's pastime; even though she clearly recognizes the violence employed against the boys' integrity, it does not occur to her to question the enlightened racist prerogative on which it is premised: "This is what proves they are brutes, he says, and have not the power of reason. A white man, knowing he would be beaten for it, would not be able to raise his member." (4) She may call her own stance "incredulous" in the face of her husband's self-centered and willfully misdirected desire, in effect, however, Manon shares a gleeful satisfaction with him upon the execution of his fancies:

He has his stick there by the tree [...]. Sometimes the offending boy cries out or tries to run away, but he's no match for this grown man with his stick. The servant's tumescence subsides as quickly as the master's rises, and the latter will last until he gets to the quarter. If he can find the boy's mother, and she's pretty, she will pay dearly for rearing an unnatural child. This is only one of his games. When he comes back to the house he will be in a fine humor for the rest of the day. (4)

20 The second scene under scrutiny here, as provocative as it is productive, needs an attentive reader to deal with her shocked, and always already implicated awareness of white female titillation. The white master and husband having died, Manon Gaudet is enabled to follow her very own designs on and with her black property, and the novel follows her exploitative, and vengeful dealings with Sarah and Walter (the half-wit, deaf master's bastard son with Sarah) in some detail. Time and again the text deconstructs its own premises, as it were, because behind Manon's narcissistic but shrewd readings of Sarah's righteous anger at her abuse at the master's hands, it does allow readers to obtain glimpses of a possible line of joint gendered interests against the white patriarch. The text makes it very clear — drawing on a wealth of documentary material that Southern historians like Nell Painter have of late unearthed — that the ubiquity of white male liaisons with African-American slaves within the white plantation household was the crucial and unforgivable vexation for white women to drive them into opposition to the white male prerogative of freedom at their own expense (Painter). This deeply entrenched mad white female hatred of white male power to do what pleased the patriarch *might* have enabled a reconfiguration of gender so as to include African-American female slaves within its claims, but — as the text makes equally clear — it did not because it was thwarted by white women's own possessive investments in their slaves, and the need to maintain the position of white ownership and control over and against a — however germinal — potential of gender based alliance.

21 By way of a neat narrative ploy, Martin amply exposes that white priority of interest. By having the master be killed in the slave uprising, and leaving Manon Gaudet as a propertied widow with the proverbial room of her own (based on the sale of the plantation, and the inheritance of her mother, conveniently deceased in a cholera epidemic in New Orleans), Gaudet finds herself in the privileged and exceptional position of being able to master her own affairs. And master them she will. She will go to considerable, and financially unwarranted, lengths in recapturing the runaway Sarah to exert her ownership over the woman. Her ostentatious reason to have wanted Sarah back is the woman's competence as a servant on the protagonist's white body, captured, tellingly, by Manon's statement: "No one could dress my hair so well as Sarah..." (206). However, the scenario I am going to discuss here reveals that Gaudet's investments in her property go far beyond the usefulness of being served and extend to a masterful enjoyment of trans-aggressive sexual freedom which, at the beginning of the novel, she could but follow as a powerless voyeur.

22 After her mother has died, Manon is sitting awake in her house, being watched by the slave Sarah who is sucking her baby, wondering why her husband let Sarah keep her child,

instead of selling it immediately. Watching Sarah's milk leak from her breast, it comes to Manon like a revelation: "It was for his own pleasure, I thought" (89). In a fantasy of wishing her husband dead before the fact, she takes on his position, assaulting Sarah by kneading her breasts, and sucking her nipples for milk. Having turned the tables on her husband she gleefully imagines that he, this time, is looking on "with an uncomfortable position that something was not adding up" (82). She thus successfully accomplishes the act of her own, gendered, liberation, by the trans-aggression of confirming, and acting out the slave woman's splitting off of gender. The slave literally, in this scene, becomes an un-gendered breast to fulfill the white woman's dreams both of power, and of the physical comfort of body nurturance — which seems to be an ingenious textual signification on the hundreds of scenes of black mammies feeding white babies in American cultural memory, nursing them into masterhood, as it were, as well as on Toni Morrison's scene of the white men taking Sethe's milk in *Beloved*.

23 Gaudet's sentences contracts white freedom into a microcosm of pleasure, willfulness, possession and power: "I closed my eyes, swallowing greedily [...]. How wonderful I felt, how entirely free. My headache disappeared, my chest seemed to expand, there was a complimentary tingling in my own breasts" (82). One needs to be keenly aware of the fact that this is neither a scene of utopian women-bonding, nor of lesbian cross-racial desire, but entirely one of domination, and potential violence:

I opened my eyes and looked at Sarah's profile. She had lifted her chin as far away from me as she could, her mouth was set in a thin hard line, and her eyes were focused intently on the arm of the settee. She's afraid to look at me, I thought. And she's right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her. (82)

The gendered subjectification of the white woman — her freedom as an agent of her own desire — is literally sucked from the black woman's body, contingent on the de-subjectification, and thus the de-gendering of the enslaved human being who has become her serviceable flesh, as it were. It appears as if Valerie Martin, with this compromising scene, has cast Hortense Spillers' observations in literary terms, thus filling a blank in white gender studies' perceptions of the gender/race nexus in American history. Martin does not list Spillers' text in her acknowledgement of material she consulted upon writing her novel; however, her reading of the nexus of sexuality and gender under slavery corresponds to Spillers' argument with striking clarity. Spillers observed that slavery, under which gender, and "the customary aspects of sexuality [...]" are all thrown in crisis [...]" provides a realm of sexuality

that is neuterbound, because it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic

sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male and/or female. Since the gendered female exists for the male, we might say that the ungendered female — in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential — might be invaded/raided by another woman or man. (222)

24 Of course, this argument does not mean to read the novel as a text of documentary value about the life of Southern white women to any representative degree. Rather, it is meant to probe suggestively into configurations of gendering, and ungendering under slavery which white gender studies need to include in their theoretical horizon. As my reading of *Property* has tried to demonstrate, a largely unexamined nexus of impulses and effects of violence and desire constituted white women's emotional and psychic investments within the affective orbit of slavery (to paraphrase Fox-Genovese's term), and by the very fact of having been left unexamined, paradoxically has carried over into post-slavery racialized constructions of gender. Gender studies, despite politically correct affectations of the race and gender mantra, have widely avoided to read a growing corpus of black gender theory as *theory* and to apply it to a cultural analysis of white women. Going back to the history of slavery and its implications — paying the referential debt to history, as Shoshana Felman once called it — could, however, improve (white) gender theory far beyond any explicit, or implicit facile appeals to universalism, or a helpless, and misleading reliance on the analogous pairing of gender, and race.

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# **“Postcolonial Triangles”: An Analysis of Masculinity and Homosocial Desire in Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Greene's *The Quiet American***

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## **Abstract:**

This article provides an original approach for understanding postcolonial representation through queer theory. I argue that mapping Sedgwick's view of triangulated desire onto literary models of postcolonial representation uncovers how authors create gender hierarchies in their novels that mirror the inherent power disjunction in the colonizer/colonized relationship. Specifically, I examine two postcolonial works which employ the love triangle, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. By integrating Anne McClintock's and Frantz Fanon's conception of imperial imagery and power into this exploration, I show how Achebe and Greene use the love triangle to portray the relation of masculinity and patriarchy to neo-imperialism and the new world order. This study is ultimately an attempt to explore the following question- can the love triangle, an age old literary device central to the European novel, in fact be decolonized?

The triangle is useful as a figure by which the "commonsense" of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations, and because it allows us to condense in a juxtaposition with that folk-perception several somewhat different streams of recent thought. (Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*)

1 The love triangle, as Eve Sedgwick notes above, is an excellent literary vehicle to represent the complexity of human desire. In this paper, I will explore two postcolonial works which employ this device, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. Although Greene's *The Quiet American* and Achebe's *A Man of the People* convey different views of the colonial and postcolonial situation, both works use the triangulated model of desire to create gender hierarchies in their novels that mirror the inherent power disjunction in the colonizer/colonized relationship. By integrating Anne McClintock's and Frantz Fanon's conception of imperial imagery and power into this exploration, I will show how Achebe and Greene use the love triangle to portray the relation of masculinity and patriarchy to neo-imperialism and the new world order. This study is ultimately an attempt to explore the following question & can the love triangle, an age old literary device central to the European novel, in fact be decolonized?

2 In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock makes the statement that "all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender" in their declaration of power and nationhood (353). In particular, McClintock stresses that the British government used gendered language and images to reinforce its ultimate projection of power. Lee Horsely, in *Fictions of Power in English Literature: 1900-1950*, gives further evidence to McClintock's claim by stressing that before the First World War,



"the whole notion of heroic adventure was most closely bound up with the excitement of empire-building" (20). This historian equates the British imperialist enterprise with male heroic action and he notes that tales of adventure kept alive the idea that battles, man-to-man combat, and fierce struggles were vital to the national image. Other scholars, such as Roger Horrocks and Michael Kaufman, further concede that civilized societies were built through and shaped by decimation, containment, and exploitation of other peoples (See Horrocks 141 and Kaufman 5). "The blood thirsty history of the British empire and more recently of American expansionism should not be ascribed to the biological or psychological make-up of the British or American male," says Roger Horrocks, "but to the specific social and political oppression of other states" (141).<sup>1</sup> These historians reveal the historical tie between nation building and the masculine military image.

3 The mighty British imperial image was also strengthened throughout its history by associating colonized lands with the oppressed feminine body. In *Gender Power in Britain, 1640-1990*, Susan Kingsley Kent explains that in the era of colonization, depictions of non-white peoples become increasingly depicted as feminine until "representations of empire took on the image of masterly, manly Britons exercising control over irrational, impulsive, weak-willed, effeminate colonial peoples" (203). She reinforces this point by explaining how the ideologies of similarity and difference between British and non-British peoples depended upon a notion of gender difference; she claims that a common justification for the practice of imperialism was that the non-British were inherently incapable of exercising the self-control necessary for governing themselves, and required the strong arm of British might to keep order. McClintock also studies representations of Victorian advertising which featured a "vista of Africa conquered by domestic commodities" and as a result presented "colonized men... feminized by their association with domestic servitude" (219). Gender hierarchies were therefore embedded in the practice of imperialism and the public justification of the practice.

4 Nevertheless, in the era of decolonization when Achebe and Greene were writing, this British image reliant on masculinity was under threat from a variety of sources. Lee Horsley discusses how Britain in the first half of the twentieth century "witnessed the collapse of old empires, the failure of parliamentary governments, the rise of totalitarian dictatorships, and violent revolutions and the devastation of two world wars" (1). He speaks to the widespread loss of confidence in the notion of heroism and how this was overcompensated by the fictions of power and language of the cold war which emerged throughout Europe (4). This loss of

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<sup>1</sup> Horrocks credits the motivation behind British and American expansion to the need of the modern state to both condone its own violence and at the same time condemn the violence of others.

power served to feminize the imperial island itself; Kent notes that it was thought British colonies failed "because Britain's political institutions were in the hands of a corrupt, weak and even effeminate ruling class" (80). In addition, the growing presence of women in societal power positions posed a threat to the masculine image of empire. In *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, Alan Sinfield notes that women's roles in servicing the workforce during the Second World War were viewed as "undermin[ing] male control of public affairs and the household" (206). In addition, Fanon's theory is useful in understanding the use of masculine, imperial imagery in new nation formation as former colonized lands struggled to assert independence and new leadership. Fanon speaks to the fantasy of substitution in which "The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor" and recycle the imperial structure under new leadership (53). Both Greene and Achebe's texts focus on the human obsession with weakening imperial imagery and patriarchal leadership.

5 Yet, how does this tie to theories of desire and the love triangle? Rene Girard understands desire as "a dynamic structure extending from one end of novelistic literature to the other" (95). Girard posits that all novels present and negotiate desire in some type of capacity. In his work *Deceit, Desire, & the Novel*, Girard analyzes literary representations of love triangles to study how the emotions of esteem, envy, jealousy and rivalry between members of the same sex become stronger pulls than the sexual passion for the object. Girard reveals that triangular desire disfigures the object and confuses same-sex desire between rivals for heterosexual yearning (17). Eve Sedgwick's theory on triangulated desire builds upon Girard's argument. In her work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick uses Girard's notion of triangulated desire to focus more deeply on what she terms the "homosocial" bonds between the subject and the mediator. Sedgwick uses the following claim by Girard to make her point:

The bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved...the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent. (21)

While Sedgwick uses this theorem as a foundation to her argument, she criticizes Girard for reading a symmetry in the triangle that is undisturbed by gender differences, because she does not believe that a rivalry between women over a male object would hold the same play of identification as a construction of two males over a female object. To reinforce this point, Sedgwick presents literary examples of triangulated desire which portray female characters serving as conduits to facilitate male homosocial relations. There has been minimal work, however, integrating Sedgwick's view of triangulated desire into studies of postcolonial

representation. Many scholars only address the similarities between imperial oppression and masculine domination, and thereby ignore the homosocial bonds that exist to preserve these structures. For instance, in *Masculinity and Power*, Arthur Brittan focuses on the male-female binary in his discussion of patriarchy. He supports the idea that in male discourse and pornography, "sexual objectification is reminiscent of the relationship between the slave and the master" (66). Brittan explains that making a woman an object of desire places her in a physically and politically subordinate position, like that of an exploited colony in the hands of its colonizer. Yet, Brittan does not address the presence of male bonds which might heighten or preserve this oppression. On the other hand, Michael Kaufman, in *Beyond Patriarchy*, notes a "triad of desire" in which violence of "men against men" or violence of "men against themselves" reinforce each other but cannot be understood until confronted by "violence against women" (2). Kaufman, nevertheless, overlooks the way that this homosocial violence might speak to larger systems of nation formation.

6 I believe, however, that Sedgwick's theory provides a strong model for understanding political hierarchies *and* gender hierarchies in postcolonial representation. Sedgwick suggests that "there is a special relationship between male homosocial desire and the structures for maintaining patriarchal power" (25). Her work highlights specific ways in which the suppression of the female object in a homosocial context mirrors the power structures of masculine domination. For example, Sedgwick links triangulated desire with the traffic of women; she highlights how this process politically and economically oppresses women through a strengthening of male bonds. Sedgwick therefore conceptualizes both a theoretical and political goal in her writings. She explains specifically that her work aims to analyze a model for "delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment" (27). Her theory is consequently very helpful in addressing postcolonial novels whose plots inherently overlap political and gendered conflict.

7 Other triangular models can help us bridge the gap between Sedgwick's theory and postcolonial discourse. Starting as early as the seventeenth century, "triangular trade" or the slave trade worked through an asymmetrical mechanism; England and America exploited African resources and peoples to stimulate their own economic growth (Kent 84).<sup>2</sup> By understanding the connection between the two colonizing nations, England and America, as homosocial bonds gaining power because of the oppressed body of Africa, this notion of triangular trade can be read as a political version of Sedgwick's gendered triangle. Another

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<sup>2</sup> Kent explains mechanism of slave trade as: the transport of slaves to North America in exchange for the raw materials of spices, tobacco and rum, which were exported to Britain for manufactured goods.

political triangle that can be envisioned is what I call a postcolonial triangle. This asymmetrical relationship emerged in the twentieth century between the former colonizer, the emerging nationalist elite, and the former colonized body or indigenous people. We can imagine a "homosocial" triangle in which the former colonizer and new nationalist elite mutually gain strength at the expense of the continued oppression of the former colonized body. These models offers insight into how the construction of asymmetrical triangulated desire can portray homosocial bonds in terms of a country or nation's "desire."

8        These theories will help to explore the imperial implications of Greene and Achebe's use of triangulated desire. "In large measure [Greene] is a product of England between the wars, of the period of diminution of the Empire," claims R.H. Miller in his work *Understanding Graham Greene* (98). Although he published *The Quiet American* in 1955, Greene incorporates into his novel the feeling of weakening empire which began much earlier in the century. Set in Indochina as the French were struggling to maintain control of Vietnam, *The Quiet American* references a situation in which the colonizer is under threat from communism and from the native population seeking independence. Greene not only sets his novel in a situation which captures an era of decolonization, but he also presents the action of the novel from the perspective of a British man who reflects back on a time of British power. Although this novel takes place outside the British Empire, Greene clearly uses his text to portray the changing imperial image of his nation.

9        In Greene's work, the triangulated plot line is introduced early into the text. Thomas Fowler, an aging British journalist, is the lover of the native woman Phuong at the start of the novel. Phuong, however, becomes the simultaneous love interest of Alden Pyle, the young and "innocent" American who arrives in Vietnam. With this introduction of competing male rivalry for the female object, Sedgwick's model is realized in Greene's text. The scene in which Phuong dances with Pyle exemplifies the woman's placement as an object between the two men. The reader glimpses the burgeoning rivalry that will develop between the two as Fowler claims: "I thought how much she missed in her relation to me" by watching Pyle and Phuong move across the dance floor (41). Thus, Fowler experiences the emotions of envy and jealousy almost immediately when he sees Pyle approach his possession. When Pyle returns Phuong after the dance, the position of the woman is made even clearer as Fowler claims, "One always spoke of her [Phuong] like that in the third person as though she were not there. Sometimes she seemed invisible like peace" (44). This statement allows Greene to imply that Phuong serves the place of conduit between the two powerful forces in this novel.

10 Yet, Greene does not only position these two men as enemies; he also introduces the bonds of esteem and friendship between the two rivals. Although Fowler senses a threat from Pyle, he feels a simultaneous need to shelter and accommodate the innocent, young American. "I like that fellow Pyle," he tells Phuong, "I had better look after Pyle" (37). In return, Pyle feels a connection with Fowler based on respect, esteem and admiration; Pyle's words: "I feel in a way this has brought us together. Loving the same woman," convey his intense bond to Fowler. As these positive feelings mix with the feelings of jealousy and hate, the emotions between the men become much more central to this novel than the heterosexual desire towards the object. The dangerous journey which Pyle makes to inform Fowler of his intentions with Phuong reveals his need of masculine recognition. "You didn't think I'll tell her & without you knowing" claims Pyle, making it clear that his desire for Phuong cannot be complete unless it has the awareness of the other male rival (57). Greene's readers cannot ignore the intense male connection that rises out of the quest for the female object.

11 Girard's notion of the rival as "mediator" also becomes humorously evident in this novel as well. When Pyle finally tells Phuong his feelings, Fowler literally claims that he will "act as interpreter" and mediate Pyle's competitive intentions by translating them to the woman (76). After this scene which makes the rivalry extremely apparent, the competition between men grows more aggressive. Fowler even jokes that they should call off the battle and "dice for her" (78). This is not the only time when the notion of traffic in women is raised; Fowler makes comments that reference trade throughout the text such as "I can't outbid Pyle" (120). Despite the seemingly strong heterosexual desire that these men claim to have for the object, these comments promote the view that the real connection is between Fowler and Pyle. Even when Phuong does not accept Pyle's first proposal, Pyle asks Fowler "You won't let this come between us, will you?" (79). And after Pyle's death, Fowler feels Pyle's absence in his life and asks "Am I the only one who really cared for Pyle?" (22). In this novel, the bonds between men become filled with the desire that would traditionally be felt between a man and a woman.

12 Unlike Greene's narrator, who is a reflection of fading Britain, Achebe's hero is the product of a newly independent nation state. Achebe is confronting the murky politics of postcolonial Nigeria as he writes *A Man of the People*. Simon Gikandi, in *Reading Chinua Achebe*, stresses that Achebe faced great challenges in capturing contemporary Nigerian politics in his novel and that the author "struggled to find an appropriate form to represent the contradictory impulses of the postcolonial situation"(101). Given Achebe's position as an African novelist frustrated with the history of imperialism in his country, it seems surprising

that he would plot desire in a way similar to Greene. Yet, Achebe sets up a rivalry between Odili, the University educated teacher, and Chief Nanga, the government minister and politician, that resembles the rivalry between Fowler and Pyle. The tension between Chief Nanga and Odili is realized immediately in the novel as Odili expresses his concerns that the Chief uses "his [political] position to enrich himself" (2). Odili softens his harsh criticism of Nanga when the Chief invites him to share in his prosperity; nevertheless, tension reemerges when a woman comes between the two men. Elsie, Odili's former lover, is initially positioned as Odili's prize possession as the narrator claims that he "feel[s] a little jealous anytime [he] found her reading and re-reading a blue British air-letter" (25). A battle subsequently emerges over Elsie when Nanga makes the move to sleep with her right under Odili's nose. This battle is extremely ironic, however, because Odili shows he has no true regard for the woman. Once the affair takes place, Odili calls Elsie a "common harlot" despite the years of friendship that they shared (72). He feels the emotion of betrayal towards the man that he was beginning to trust; he attributes all the pain, jealousy and envy that he feels at Nanga and suddenly claims that he "no longer cared for anything but the revenge" (78). Achebe sets up the same model of desire as Greene in which the bonds between rivals become a stronger presence than the feelings toward the female object.

13 Achebe's plot in this novel moves from one triangulated structured into another. Odili seeks his revenge by desiring Nanga's "property" and he plots to steal Nanga's future second wife, Edna. The narrator characterizes the intensity of his passion for Edna as part of his overall need to politically and emotionally bring down Nanga (110). Even when Odili becomes more familiar with Edna he realizes that a part of him still wanted her "very remotely as a general part of revenge;" he tells the reader explicitly that "things seemed so mixed up; my revenge, my new political ambition, and the girl" (109-110). In addition, Nanga is revealed to lack a true love for this woman. The reader is told that Nanga wants a young wife because "his missus is too 'bush' for his present position so he wants a bright new 'parlour-wife' to play hostess at his parties" (23). The treatment of women in this novel is degrading on multiple levels, and the practice of traffic in women to facilitate male homosocial relations is also referenced in the text. This is evident as Odili and his father journey to Edna's male relatives to make the marriage exchange. Odili's decision to pay the full bride price is not based on heterosexual love but rather on the notion that he "did not want to go through life thinking that [he] owed Chief Nanga money" (148). Like Greene's novel, *A Man of the People* portrays women as objects needed to facilitate the emotions flowing between men.

14 In light of the fact that Sedgwick's theory fits so well in an analysis of both of these novels, the question of authorial motivation is inherently raised. One might ask why these two authors with clearly different political backgrounds and agendas would set up literary structures that reinforce the same gender hierarchy. I believe that the answer to this question lies in the homosocial bonds which emerge in the works. Both authors ultimately show male rivals involved in heated battles over masculinity and patriarchy. Sedgwick claims that in any male dominated society there is a special relationship between male homosocial desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power. She explains that the disciplinary use of "homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some [...] combination of the two" serves as a way for institutions or governments to structure society (25). Alan Sinfield, in *The Wilde Century*, reiterates this notion by describing how deep prejudices emerged against homosexuals when effeminacy and queerness become virtually synonymous in the twentieth century (62). Feminizing homosexuality was a way to "demasculinize" the homosexual man and promote a dominant image of heterosexuality. Sedgwick's theory undoubtedly links patriarchal power to the promotion of a powerful, masculine image which only heightens itself with the oppression of the female.

15 In *The Quiet American*, there are many instances when the competition between Pyle and Fowler emerges as a struggle to own a masculine image. Part of the reason that Fowler is so upset with Pyle is that the American's very young, vibrant image is a threat to his own waning youth and sexuality. Fowler puts into words his self consciousness as he claims: "I saw myself as he [Pyle] saw me, a man of middle age, with eyes a little bloodshot, beginning to put on weight, ungraceful in love...less innocent" (40). Ultimately, Fowler's narration presents the reader with a view of one man's internal struggle to own a strong, masculine image. William Bonney's argument in "Politics, Perception, and Gender in Conrad's *Lord Jim* and Greene's *The Quiet American*," highlights how Fowler "generates narratives" in a way that is "masculine [...] and obsessional" (114). Although Fowler tries to convince the reader that his destruction of Pyle is ethically motivated, he cannot truly mask the feelings of envy, jealousy and fading masculinity that drive his actions. The following passage is a moment when Fowler's objectives become very apparent; Fowler tells Pyle:

I've reached the age when sex isn't the problem so much as old age and death. I wake up with these in mind and not a woman's body. I don't want to be alone in my last decade [...]. [I]f Phuong left me, would I have the energy to find another? (104-105)

Fowler reveals that his competitive obsession with Pyle over Phuong is about proving his masculinity and preserving his status rather than a real desire for the woman. Masculinity is a

large component, if not the defining component, of the rivalry between the two men in this novel.

16 In fact, the scene where Pyle saves Fowler's life brings this struggle to the very surface of the text. "Who the hell asked you to save my life," screams the journalist to the young man trying to help him, displaying how he prefers death to a life that he will always owe to the stronger man (111). The feelings of Fowler's inadequacy builds after this encounter; when Phuong asks him why he will not open the letter from his wife he replies: "I'm afraid of the loneliness, of the Press club and the bed sitting room, I'm afraid of Pyle." (117). Therefore, when Pyle convinces Phuong to leave the journalist, Fowler projects himself as more and more impotent to the reader. He narrates his unsuccessful attempt at violence towards Pyle at the office where he winds up weeping in the bathroom; he also describes how he cannot perform sexually with the prostitute as he becomes "frozen" with memory (147, 153). By looking past his front of being the "ethical journalist," even Fowler's rage at Pyle's political involvement with the bombings can be read as part of his overall competitive rage over Phuong (Gorra 143). *The Quiet American* presents the narrative of a man whose sense of rivalry over the female object is inseparable from his obsession with his own masculine power image.

17 In addition, Fowler's narration captures Pyle's struggle with masculinity. The reader views Pyle as a man desperate to preserve a noble, aboveboard image of gentlemanly conduct. For instance, Pyle tells Fowler that he will not marry Phuong until he brings her home to meet his mother and gives her a "proper" ceremony (155). Pyle's constant attention to formality and to the process of "saving" the needy woman implies a desire to bolster his own male image in the world. "You have such an awful lot of experience, Thomas," claims Pyle, "I've never had a girl. Not properly. Not what you'd call a real experience" (102). While this statement does grant Fowler some of the masculine respect he desires, it also implies that Pyle's quest for Phuong is an attempt to make up for masculine lack of experience. Pyle also reveals his own masculine motivation when he explains his reasons for saving Fowler's life to the old man; he tells his friend that he saved him because if he left him to die, "[he] couldn't have faced Phuong...when you are in love you want to play the game" (112). Pyle directly admits that his desire for the female object revolves around his need to "play" the male part against Fowler. The homosocial bonds between men reflect a battle to own a masculine image.

18 In *A Man of the People*, Achebe similarly characterizes the competition between Odili and Nanga as a struggle for masculinity and power. The desire of the two rivals to prove their masculinity to each other is evident even before Elsie enters the picture; Odili tells the reader



"Chief Nanga and I [had] already swopped many tales of conquest and I felt somehow compelled to speak in derogatory terms about women in general" (60). The men of Achebe's novel convey to the reader that earning male respect involves the ability to conquer the female. After the episode with Nanga and Elsie, Odili actually becomes obsessed with his threatened masculinity. The ability of Nanga to make him feel like an emasculated, colonized object is evident as Odili claims:

A man had treated me as no man had a right to treat another & not even if he was master and the other slave; and my *manhood* required that I make him pay for his insult in full measure. In flesh and blood terms I realized that I must go back, seek out Nanga's intended parlour wife and give her the works, good and proper. (77)

Odili's reaction to betrayal is to reverse his emasculation by claiming his rival's political position and his woman. Yet, the reader comes to see that Odili's struggle for masculinity is not one sided, and Nanga is just as insecure. For instance, in the scene where Nanga tries to convince Odili to drop out of the race, he enters sarcastically calling "Odili, my great enemy" (116). Nanga tries to emasculate Odili by stressing his "youth" and claims "I [Nanga] am not afraid of you...Every goat and every fowl in this country knows that you will fail woefully" (116, 119). Yet, Nanga's desire to pay Odili for dropping out as a political competitor shows that Nanga is in fact threatened by the young man. In tandem with this, the violence that erupts between the two men in the scene of the political rally speaks to the violence which becomes a mask for feelings of inadequacy. During this scene of physical struggle, Odili describes how "Edna rushed forward crying and tried to get between us but he pushed her aside so violently that she landed on her buttocks on the wooden platform" (141). Edna serves as the reflector of male brutality; this scene reinforces Sedgwick's construction of triangulated desire in which the female presence heightens the emasculating effects of male violence. *A Man of the People* shows male characters using a female body to test the boundaries of their masculine strength.

19 The masculine struggles depicted by Greene and Achebe also relate to their overall messages on imperialism and patriarchy in the new world order. Greene uses triangulated desire in his novel to highlight the historical and theoretical connection between fading masculinity, power and neo-imperialism. He deliberately makes one of his rivals British and one of his rivals American, so that their battle over the native woman would recall the structure of triangular trade superimposed on Sedgwick's asymmetrical love triangle. In this sense, the love triangle can be read in allegorical terms in which Fowler represents fading masculinity *and* a fading British Empire; Pyle stands for an emerging American Empire equally fighting for the masculine image; finally, Phuong symbolizes the native state and the

feminized, oppressed body (Miller 109).<sup>3</sup> The ensuing triangulated battle which emerges in the novel symbolizes world powers struggling for a masculine right to control decolonized lands. Greene plots desire in this fashion to portray the way that gender roles have been and remain bound in political and international power struggles. Phuong, as a woman and a former colonized individual, is the perfect body from which Greene can reveal the place of the feminine, colonized body in the new world order.

20 In Greene's novel, Phuong is often associated with a native land that lacks action, power and intelligence. Fowler constantly speaks of his mistress as an empty and passive object and he looks to her body rather than to her mind to satisfy his desires. Fowler's simultaneous presentation of Phuong as a weak female and a passive colonized body is evident in the following passage:

It isn't in their nature [to love] [...]. It's a cliché to call them children & but there's one thing which is childish. They love you in return for kindness, security, the presents you give them & they hate you for a blow or an injustice. (104)

By using the general terms "they" and "them" when referring to Phuong in this passage, Fowler tries to promote a strong, British image in comparison to a collectively weak, native population. Greene presents Fowler as the hopeful imperialist "protector" of the "childish" native woman and lends a paternalism to his treatment of his mistress (Couto 169). And although Pyle represents the emerging power in this novel, Fowler implies that his rival's treatment of the feminine object is really no better. Without even being able to communicate with the woman, Pyle hopes to come in and "rescue" Phuong from her chaotic native land. "I want to give her a decent life & this place smells," suggests Pyle (133). Fowler reinforces the "colonial" nature of his rival's comment with his sarcastic retort, "I suppose you'll offer her a deep freeze and a car for herself and the newest television set" (133). Yet, while Fowler tries to reveal Pyle's misplaced motives, the reader sees that Fowler desires the same exact thing. Both men compete in a gendered rivalry over a female object in a way that mirrors a global power struggle over third world lands.

21 Although one might argue that Greene's presentation of Phuong is not in line with his anti-imperial sentiments and third world sympathies, it is more likely that he is representing a situation as he views it, not as he wants it to be. Greene's support of Kikuyu in Kenya and his sympathetic presentation of the French position in this novel reveal an attitude that is tinged with the very "paternalism of empire" that he criticized in the government and settler.<sup>4</sup> Maria

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<sup>3</sup> Miller supports this argument by explaining that the struggle for control over Phuong can function as a representation for a larger struggle: "Phuong is the East, the third world; Fowler the old, and Pyle the new."

<sup>4</sup> See Miller 99-101. Also see Adamson 138.

Couto explains that Greene's novel addresses the context of national liberation emerging from the "death-throes of the old imperialism" as well as the issue of "new and more insidious imperialism of the superpowers" (166). Greene may wish to awaken his audience to his own country's hesitancy to put down its imperial and patriarchal image with his portrayal of Fowler; this author also implies through Pyle that the masculine political structures that once fostered imperialism are being reincorporated by America as the next emergent superpower. Greene's depiction of a patriarchal struggle through the love triangle may be his attempt to address the ways in which the new superpower is recycling the age old imperial image based on masculinity.

22 This same focus on political reality might also explain why Achebe would use a triangulated model of desire in a novel about the political situation in Nigeria. Similar to Greene's love triangle, Achebe's love triangle can also be viewed in a political framework. Achebe presents Nanga as an extension of the former colonizer with his deference to European power structures, while Odili becomes part of the emerging nationalist elite. The homosocial bonds between these two men serve as evidence for a reincorporation of masculinity in the new leadership of the nation at the expense of the continued oppression of the indigenous native people, represented by the violence and degradation of Edna. Achebe's love triangle speaks to a new nation recycling gender oppression and patriarchal power to assert its emerging strength.

23 Similar to Greene's first person narrator who reveals doubts as to his own power in relation to his nation's power, Achebe's narrator conveys an anxiety about his masculine ego and his stance as a postcolonial subject (Gikandi 120-121). The deep feelings of masculine inadequacy that Odili's feels from his father who "had too many other wives and children to take any special notice of [him]" intensify after he feels the threat from men such as Nanga (28). Odili's obsession with image shines through in the following passage, as Odili claims after meeting Max's friends:

I was anxious not to appear to Max and his friends as the easily impressed type. I suppose I wanted to erase whatever impression was left of Max's unfortunate if unintentional presentation of me as a kind of pitiable jellyfish. (79)

Throughout the novel, Odili repeatedly voices insecurity about the way others interpret his strength. In addition, the overwhelming examples of degradation to women in the text reinforce the notion that political power feeds off the continued domination of women. For example, Elsie is used as a sexual pawn in this work, as is Jean, who Odili only desires for her body. Edna is also presented as a woman unable to utilize her education and who is "sold" from her male relatives to her husband. Scholar Chioma Opara, in her article "From

Stereotype to Individuality: Womanhood in Chinua Achebe's Novels" agrees with my recognition of Edna's self effacement, and Opara suggests that Edna's engagement to the Chief "allows her selfhood to be bought by Nanga" (117). While Nanga is more aggressively demeaning to women in the text, Odili's more idealistic approach to politics is nevertheless intertwined with the notion of female oppression. Odili tells the reader that he has "twin hopes of a beautiful life with Edna and of a new era of cleanliness in the politics of our country" (131). With his admittance, it is clear that possessing the woman unfortunately becomes synonymous with the patriarchal view of power presented in this novel.

24 However, I do not wish to argue that this presentation of political power through objectification of women is necessarily reflective of sexism on the part of the author. Although Achebe is quite cognizant of structures which oppressed his nation, he may present a picture of masculine, patriarchal power like Greene because he sees it as linked to the current corruption of leadership following Nigerian Independence. Raisa Simola, in *World Views in Chinua Achebe's Works*, explains that Achebe is one of the first generation of African writers who lived during colonial times but then felt disillusioned after independence (204). While Achebe states in early essays that the African writer must be an educator to reassert the past and uplift the African population, he is noted in later interviews, such as that in *Africa Report*, as stating "The most meaningful work that African writers can do today will take into account our whole history...what it is today" (Simola 268). The triangulated plot of this novel may then represent Achebe's warning about the current use of power in the Nigerian state. Achebe's use of the love triangle in colonial terms may not be a promotion of leadership using subordination of women and maintenance of patriarchy, but rather a literary "photograph" of Nigerian politics at this confusing time. Gikandi agrees with my reading and even claims that Achebe's novel reveals how postcolonial subjects are caught in a great ironic moment, when "independence was expected to be a break with the colonial past, but ha[d] become, instead, the apotheosis of colonialist ideology and rhetoric" (110). Regardless of Greene's or Achebe's ultimate political desires, both authors use their novels to display the reality of masculinity within power structures in both fading and emerging nation states.

25 In light of this study, it appears that the postwar, postcolonial novel is inevitably forced to employ desire along the triangulated model because decolonization and revolution work upon the axis of masculine control. Both novels in this analysis link the wellbeing of the state with masculine domination and simultaneous female oppression. In *The Quiet American* and *A Man of the People*, both female objects are in fact "won" by one of the male rivals by the end of the work. The placement of Phuong into Fowler's care and Edna into Odili's has

little notion of romance; the conquering of the rival power and the superiority of the narrator over the rival is the last image in both of these different texts. While each novel does voice concern with colonialism and imperialism, (through Greene's portrayal of Pyle's politics and Achebe's portrayal of Nanga's ethics), both authors end their works stressing that patriarchy and masculine control is intertwined with political structures. Although Pyle is destroyed in *The Quiet American*, the presence that he left behind haunts Fowler's imagination; in the same way, political revolution in *A Man of the People* implies Nanga's downfall, but the reader is left doubtful that the same methods of patriarchy will not reassert themselves under new leadership. And most importantly, both works conclude by reinforcing the weak condition of the female body and great strides that would need to be taken to reverse a dominant male ideology. Graham Greene and Chinua Achebe promote the inevitable tie of patriarchal, masculine power to political and revolutionary power.

26 I am not criticizing Achebe or Greene for the approach they employed in their novels, but I finally posit a general question in light of their methodology. Is there a way to represent the real and the hopeful ideal by utilizing triangulated desire to describe the postcolonial situation? While Achebe and Greene raise awareness of power structures, how might they have employed this literary device so that reality of patriarchal power is not just revealed, but a reversal could be invoked? By first recognizing the implications of triangulated desire in the postcolonial novel, critics can bring greater attention to both gendered problems in the postcolonial situation and the political structures that keep them in place. Perhaps then we can begin to address the larger challenge, and discover if love triangle is so imbedded in European, masculine tradition, that it cannot be decolonized at all?

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# **Priscilla, (White) Queen of the Desert: Queer Politics and Representation in a "Postcolonising" Nation**

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## **Abstract:**

The brief analysis presented here of both *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and the work of Padva has highlighted some of the problems facing white queer politics in Australia. My intention has not been to provide a definitive reading of either text, but rather to draw attention to some of the problems that they present for representations of white queers in Australia. Not only does the analysis demonstrate the troublesome ways in which white queerness engages with race in Australia, but it also highlights some of the assumptions around racialised and gendered privilege that inform queer politics. As three white queer characters, and myself as a white gay man, we experience considered privilege as a result of our social location. This is something that I believe requires accountability, and something that is not easily theorised away or discounted through recourse to "good intentions." Being a white queer in Australia does not place us outside of racism, nor does it mean that our self-representations are not seen as oppressive by those who identify as non-white.

1 In this paper<sup>1</sup> I ask some necessarily difficult questions of both myself as a white gay man, and of white queer politics and representation more broadly. Primarily, my intent is to examine what it means to speak from a political position as a white queer person living in a country such as Australia, one that has been referred to by Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson as "postcolonising" rather than "postcolonial." Moreton-Robinson proposes "the verb postcolonizing to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonizing relationship that positions [Indigenous people] as belonging but not belonging" ("Still Call" 38). Moreton-Robinson contrasts this with the more common term "postcolonial," which she suggests is not appropriate in the Australian context, as "Indigenous belonging challenges the assumption that Australia is postcolonial because [Indigenous] relation to land [...] [what Moreton-Robinson terms an "ontological belonging"] is omnipresent, and continues to unsettle non-Indigenous belonging based on illegal dispossession" (24). These points about the "postcolonising" status of contemporary Australia suggest to me that an interrogation of white queer belonging by white queers is of central importance to examining how queer politics operate, and their potential limitations in the Australian context.

2 In addition to my focus on what it means to engage in queer politics as a white person in Australia, I am also interested to look at how queer politics are always already gendered in

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<sup>1</sup> I begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, traditional owners of the land upon which I live in Adelaide, South Australia. Thanks to Greg for support and proof reading, and to our foster child Gary, for bearing with me whilst I wrote this paper.



particular ways. Here my interest is in examining how particular forms of queer representation achieve hegemony, and how these may, or may not, resist normative forms of gendered embodiment as they are currently configured under white heteropatriarchy (Riggs, "Caught"). In writing about gender as a white gay man I am thus interested in exploring how the first and last descriptors in this identity position may often result in a range of unearned privileges that greatly outweigh the central descriptor. Whilst queer politics have necessarily focused on discrimination (amongst other things) that results from the marginalisation of queer sexualities, my question is as to whether this focus may represent a failure to examine how such sexualities may still often be highly reliant upon particular normative assumptions around gender and race.

3 In order to engage in this examination, I first elaborate upon a theoretical framework provided by Aileen Moreton-Robinson ("Possessive"), namely what she terms "the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty." Her cogent analysis of land rights decisions in Australia demonstrates how white people in Australia are invested in claiming particular forms of belonging and ownership, and how this serves to disavow Indigenous sovereignty. My interest in the framework she provides is twofold: first, to look at what it means to claim belonging as a white queer person in the context of a postcolonising nation, and second, to examine how such claims to belonging may represent a specifically queer investment in the hegemonic practices of the white nation. By focusing on how white queers may desire to belong to a particular white national imaginary, I propose that queer politics (as elaborated by white queers) may at times do very little to challenge how race circulates as a discourse in Australia that both privileges and oppresses.

4 Having outlined this particular interpretive framework, I go on to examine one particular site where representations of white queers may be seen to generate a relatively narrow version of queer politics, one that does little to address issues of colonisation and dispossession. My examination of the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, alongside a reading of one particular paper that focuses on the politicality of the film (Padva), will serve to highlight how forms of white queer representation may at times be complicit with white hegemony in Australia. To sum up, then, my intent in writing this paper as a white gay man is to contribute to the burgeoning literature in Australia (Nicoll; Offord; Riggs, "What's Love"; "Possessive") and abroad (Bernard; Berube) that seeks to problematise the assumption that white queers are only and always oppressed, and that being queer places one outside of enacting oppression against others. More specifically, my aim is to demonstrate a form of white queer accountability that recognises the ground upon which I stand, and the

relationship that I am in to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty.

### **White queer possessive investments**

5 As the white Australian nation continues to be confronted by the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, alongside a growing acknowledgment of ongoing histories of colonisation and dispossession, there exists a profound uneasiness in relation to white claims to belonging in this country. For some white people, this uneasiness is routinely dismissed through recourse to discourses of "Indigenous violence," or the "civilising mission." Such discourses are used to justify colonisation and thus discount the histories of white violence that Indigenous narratives record (Riggs & Augoustinos). Yet in much the same way, white people in Australia who seek to challenge oppression may just as easily be engaged in disavowing ongoing histories of white violence (Riggs, "Benevolence"). This may occur when white people claim to "do good for the other," when white people (such as white queers) claim for themselves an oppressed subject position, or when white people presume that their anti-racist practice puts them outside of the discriminatory framework of racism.

6 Aileen Moreton-Robinson's ("Possessive") work on the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" suggests three key aspects that demonstrate the investments that white people in Australia have in perpetuating such forms of disavowal. Firstly, she suggests that the possessive logic "works ideologically and discursively to naturalize the nation as a white possession," secondly, that it is "predicated on exclusion and what it does not own — the sovereignty of the Indigenous other" and finally, it "promotes the idea of race neutrality on the premise that 'race' only belongs to the other" (5-6). In this section I will elaborate some of the implications of these points in regards to white queer claims to belonging in Australia.

7 An example of when those of us who identify as white queers may demonstrate an acceptance of a possessive logic is when we attempt to seek equality with the white heterosexual majority in regards to rights. The claiming of rights by white queers may signify a desire not only to have our entitlement to such rights recognised, but also to have the legitimacy of white queer identities acknowledged as valid forms of citizenship (Phelan). This desire for an acknowledgement of validity (in addition to the right to civil liberty and protection), whilst understandably representing a desire to live a life free of anti-queer violence, also signifies a desire for acknowledgement within a white national imaginary — one that as Moreton-Robinson ("Possessive") suggests is founded upon the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty. The particular white national imaginary that I refer to here is

one that seeks to disavow ongoing histories of white violence, one that seeks to construct the white nation as a good nation, and one that ultimately seeks to posit an a priori right to belonging for white people in Australia.

8 The desire by some white queers to secure a place within such a white national imaginary may therefore potentially come at significant cost. One example of this may be the ways in which white queers are encouraged to make a committed investment to the terms for belonging as set by the nation. To seek protection within the nation, and to do so through a desire for an acknowledgment of being requires taking on board (at least to some degree) the terms for sanction determined by the State (Butler). This obviously presents a problem to white queers, namely; whose rights and desires take precedence in a postcolonising nation? Should our primary responsibility as white queers be first to an ethical engagement with Indigenous sovereignty, and only then to securing rights for other groups of people who are also currently disenfranchised within the national space? Or, as Shane Phelan has suggested, does a desire for full citizenship on the part of white queers require a radical rethinking of national belonging that would take as its ground the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, a move that could be productive of a "queered" national space that could then begin the important work of rethinking how we understand belonging? And of course there is the pressing need to consider what it may mean to be a queer person living in Australia who does not identify as white, and who may well experience an uneasy relationship to lesbian and gay rights movements that typically do not allow a space for representations of queer non-white people: how is citizenship possible for someone whose life is disavowed in multiple, concurrent ways?

9 The previous point about reconfiguring the national space suggests that there is a pressing need to examine how particular groups of people are currently afforded some form of belonging, whilst others are excluded. White queers who seek a place within the nation as recognised citizens thus trade on the configurations of national imaginary that are currently sanctioned, and which are founded on both the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty and the construction of other groups of people (such as asylum seekers) as enemies of the nation. Understanding white queer belonging from this perspective may involve viewing belonging as a practice of co-option, whereby previously disenfranchised groups (such as white queers) are given space within a white national imaginary (albeit on terms highly delineated by the heterosexual majority) in order to reinforce the hegemony of whiteness (Riggs, "Possessive"). Complicity with such practices thus reveals the contingency of queer rights upon the forms of citizenship already available within colonial nations, rather than necessarily representing a

radical repudiation of "heteronormative citizenship" (Johnson).

10 Carol Johnson suggests that the terms for white queer belonging that are set by the nation encourage a form of passing, whereby those of us who identify as white queers must be complicit with our own oppression in the form of passing off our relationships as "just like" heterosexual relationships, and in not being "too threatening" in our behaviours and words in public spaces. She suggests that this encourages the performance of the subject position "good queer," whereby certain non-heterosexual bodies are granted recognition as a result of their ability to look as the nation would desire them to look (i.e., not queer, not threatening, not subversive, etc.).

11 One of the key problems that arises from this location of white queer identities within the terms of a white national imaginary is that it is premised upon the exclusion of particular queer identities that do not or cannot conform to those deemed acceptable (Phelan). Thus, for instance, whilst white lesbians or gay men may be granted recognition by the white nation, it is far less likely that bisexual or transgendered individuals or those in polyamorous relationships will be recognised as equally entitled to rights. This draws attention to the distinction between access to rights, and acknowledgement of being — whilst some white lesbians and gay men may be able to gain acknowledgement of the validity of our relationships within the national imaginary, this may come at the expense of those queer families or relationships that are not accorded acknowledgement (Stoler).

12 Furthermore, it is not only the case (as previously outlined) that some white queers are able to claim a space within the white nation as a result of ongoing colonising violence against Indigenous people (e.g., in regards to the refutation of land rights claims and the refusal to offer an apology or negotiate a treaty). The white nation also reinforces its hegemony by positioning certain groups of people (e.g., asylum seekers) as being enemies of the nation. Whilst of course many white men and women, both heterosexual and queer, do indeed challenge the government's policies on mandatory detention and other forms of human rights violations against asylum seekers, this does not negate the fact that our belonging as white people is further secured through the construction of certain groups of people as enemies. Indeed, recent political and media representations in Australia of the "children overboard" scandal demonstrates one of the ways in which the white nation is constructed as inherently good through contrast with those groups of people positioned as being "dangerous" or "unworthy" of belonging. Reports of asylum seekers threatening to throw their children overboard in order to be granted asylum (reports which have since been shown to be false) are but one example of claims made by the white nation in order to bolster the contrast between

white Australians who "deserve to belong," and asylum seekers who do not (O'Doherty & Augoustinos). Here the motivations for any person seeking asylum are marginalised, and asylum seekers are instead positioned as threats both to their own children, and to the integrity of the white nation (Hage).

13 As I have outlined in this section, white queer belonging in Australia, much like white belonging in general, is highly contingent upon the disavowal of ongoing histories of white violence. White queers who seek a place within a white national imaginary, whilst potentially doing so in order to secure rights and protection, do so by accepting the terms set for belonging through the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty. By failing to acknowledge the privileges that white queers experience as white people, queer rights campaigns may do very little to engender a form of politics that is critical of white hegemony. And it is to this point that I turn in the following section.

### **Race, gender and queer politics**

14 Queer theory has played an important role in developing understandings of subjectivity that focus on its multiplicities and fractures: subjectivity in this sense is seen as ever-changing rather than fixed, and thus as flexibly deployed towards particular ends in everyday interactions. The purpose of such theorising is in part to demonstrate how particular (sexual) identities achieve hegemony, and how others are positioned as deviant. Queer theory also questions sexual and gendered categories themselves, and interrogates how they are involved in maintaining hierarchical relations. However, as Barnard suggests, queer theory has often implicitly (and at times explicitly) been white queer theory — it is more often than not written by white queers, it often fails to engage with the critiques elaborated by queers who do not identify as white, and it neglects to adequately theorise how queer identities are always already racialised. This may in part be seen to result from the location of queer theory within the Western academy: queer theory, and the politics that it arose from, are largely the product of the standpoints of white queers, and in particular white, middle-class, queer men. This group of people (of which I am a member), whilst obviously facing considerable social oppression and prohibition, nonetheless benefit from living in a social system that is founded upon the values of white men (Riggs, "Possessive"). Obviously it would be naïve to suggest that queer theory has not been influenced by a wide range of theorists from all walks of life, but as Barnard points out, this has not stopped the canon of queer theory from being mainly white, and thus largely written by people who enjoy considerable privilege.

15 These points about queer theory (and its connections to contemporary queer politics) suggest to me the pressing need to think through the ways in which particular identity categories (no matter how multiple or fragmented) are valorised within Western societies. As I have already suggested, Moreton-Robinson's ("Possessive") framework of the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" provides us with one means of examining how identity categories shape our politics. The utility of this approach is that it seeks to understand how practices of racialisation are central to identities, and it draws attention to the considerable privilege that white people experience in Australia as a result of our racialised subject positions. This is of particular relevance to queer rights campaigns that are often primarily predicated upon the experiences of white lesbians and gay men. Thus as Moreton-Robinson (Talkin' 45) suggests, "white lesbian women do not give up all of their race privilege because of their sexuality": the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty affords white queers the privilege to claim an intelligible subject position within colonial nations (i.e., one who is in some way or another committed to a white national imaginary), and it provides us with the voice through which to speak out about our experiences of oppression and to *expect them to be heard*.

16 To return to my earlier points about queer theory, then, it is necessary to maintain a focus on the fact that whilst claims to multiplicity in relation to identity may well be of use to white queers who find norms of gender and sexuality to be oppressive, they may not necessarily be useful (or useful in the same way) to those queers who do not identify as white. In addition, a focus on sexual multiplicity and fragmentation does not necessarily require white queers to examine our own complicity with whiteness, nor the benefits we gain from living in a society that privileges the values of white people. Whilst focusing on complicity and privilege may not necessarily be high on the priority list for those white queers involved in activism, I believe that it is important that this focus is given greater consideration within queer politics. Thus, whilst approaches such as those advocated by queer theorists may be useful for challenging heteropatriarchy, it is important to incorporate a focus on how subjectivities in Western nations continue to be shaped through discourses of race. Otherwise, as Bernard suggests; "no matter how coalitional its compass, [any rights campaign] that identifies itself in terms of gender and/or sexual orientation only [...] will be a white-centered and white-dominated politics, since only white people [...] can afford to see their race as unmarked, as an irrelevant or subordinate category of analysis" (3).

17 One example of how white queer politics can at times fail to critically interrogate the intersections between race privilege and oppression based on sexuality appears in the work of

Kitzinger and Wilkinson, two white lesbians who elaborate in their writings some of the precedents that have been used to push for marriage reform within the US. One particular case that is used repeatedly in this area is that of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which sought to challenge the racial segregation that existed in the US at the time. Whilst this has proven to be an important precedent for gaining access to marriage rights for white queers, the problem as I see it with using this case as a benchmark against which to contrast the exclusion of (primarily) lesbians and gay men from marriage is that it runs the risk that comes from trading on histories of racialised oppression to critique oppression based on sexuality. These risks I believe are twofold: first, it compares sexual and racial oppression in ways that may not necessarily be conducive to maintaining a critical focus on ongoing race privilege and discrimination. In other words, if white queers use legal challenges to racial oppression as a benchmark against which to measure oppression based on sexuality, then this may well serve to ignore the ways in which the privilege that white queers experience (as white people) comes at the expense of Indigenous and other people variously labelled as "non-white" who may or may not identify as queer. Second, the equation of sexual and racial oppression effectively sidelines the overlaps that exist between racial and sexual privilege and oppression (Barnard). In the context of Australia, for example, this could well work to position oppression based on sexuality at the forefront of rights issues, which would obviously do little to engage with the unfinished Treaty business that exists in Australia currently (Haggis; Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin'*). To equate racism with heterosexism may thus in many ways be to implicitly suggest that white queers are not racist, or for that matter, to suggest that white queer men (in particular) are not sexist. My point here is obviously not that white queers should not desire marriage rights (or any other form of rights for that matter), but rather that the use of analogies such as those made by Kitzinger and Wilkinson draw upon a moral position that may at times co-opt the voices of non-white queer people in order to warrant the moral positions held by white queer people. Moral authority in this instance is taken to be applicable across contexts, and as transferable between racially diverse populations. Such an approach does not pay significant attention to the incommensurable differences that may shape both the lives of white and black LGBTI activists, nor the range of political contexts within which particular moral claims are made, such as apartheid South Africa, Jim Crow US, and contemporary UK (where the previously mentioned authors are currently located). My suggestion is thus that whilst it is one thing for queer people who do not identify as white to talk about the similarities between racial and sexual apartheid, it is another thing entirely for white queer activists to do the same thing — it requires in part a claim to moral authority that

is in many ways unearned, and which in my opinion seriously undermines the truth claims of white LGBTIQ activists.

18 This brings me back to my earlier point about the canonical texts of queer theory, and their location within a particular social context that valorises the values of white middle-class men. Whilst queer politics are of course all about challenging the normative frameworks of gender and sexuality under heteropatriarchy, they are by no means exempt from perpetuating those same norms. Part of this problem may stem from the fact that "queer is nominally ungended" (Barnard 11). Though ambiguities around gender are of course an important aspect of the challenge that queer politics present to heteropatriarchy, a failure to engage with the very real ways in which bodies are gendered can institute a logic where, much like the failure to interrogate race privilege, the gender privilege of some queers is also left unexamined. Whilst to destabilise gender binaries is a key function of the work of queer politics, this, I would suggest, should not come at the expense of examining how particular queer identities (no matter how multiple or fractured) stand to benefit from gender norms. This theme of how gender operates in queer politics and representation is one that I shall return to in the analysis that follows.

### **Priscilla and the racialisation of queer representation**

19 Released in 1994, and written and directed by a white gay Australian man — Stephan Elliot — *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* is a campy take on the life of three white queers who travel together through the outback to perform a drag show in Alice Springs. Along the way the three main characters meet a number of different people from a range of backgrounds, some of whom become part of the story as it progresses. Whilst the film is primarily the story of the three main characters, and their own queer identities and forms of representation, I believe it can afford us particular insight into how white queer politics and representation operate in Australia. To supplement my reading of the film, I will also in this section engage with one particular academic paper (Padva) that has taken up the "cause" of the film, which is depicted in the paper as an example of the "politicization of camp subculture." Through a reading of these two texts, I will highlight how white queer politics in Australia may at times trade on particular hegemonic forms of representation, and how they may as a result fail to interrogate white privilege.

20 There are three particular areas of symbolism that I wish to focus on in this section in regards to *Priscilla*. First, I seek to explore how white queers are at times seemingly placed outside of oppression. Second, I look at how white queerness may be seen within the movie to



co-opt Indigeneity, and how this is simultaneously challenged by Indigenous people. And third, I wish to explore how white queer belonging is claimed, and how it is also unsettled within the film. These three foci will be interspersed with my own responses to the aforementioned paper that focuses on the politics of the film (Padva), in order to more closely examine how *Priscilla* has been read, and how such readings may similarly neglect to engage in an interrogation of the film's racial and gendered assumptions.

21 In regards to my first point of inquiry, I focus on one particular symbol of Australiana that is used within the film, namely, the kangaroo. More specifically, I am interested in two instances where the image of a dead kangaroo would seem to suggest a particular representation of queerness within the film. In the first instance, the three main characters find themselves lost in the middle of the desert when their bus ("Priscilla") breaks down. One character, Bernadette, goes out in search of assistance. As her search goes on, Bernadette finds herself in increasingly isolated areas of the desert. Luckily, she is fortunate to see a vehicle heading towards her. She manages to flag it down, and is given a ride by the elderly white couple who drive it. Unfortunately for Bernadette, she must sit in the back of the vehicle along with a dead, and rather fly-blown, kangaroo. Things get worse upon her return to the bus, where she fetches her two travel companions to meet her saviors, only for them to drive off in a cloud of dust when one of the queer men appears in drag, whilst the other is covered in pink paint. The elderly couple by implication are depicted as homophobic or otherwise uncaring about the plight of the three stranded characters and their bus.

22 The second time we see the symbol of the kangaroo is later that night, when an Indigenous man comes across the three characters and their bus. He invites them back to his campsite, where a group of Indigenous people are sitting near a open fire over which a kangaroo is roasting. When the three characters arrive at the campsite they are depicted as feeling somewhat uneasy about the stares from the Indigenous people, and unsure about how to engage in social interaction. This appears to be broken down when, following on from one Indigenous man playing the guitar, the three characters perform a number in drag for their (seemingly appreciative) Indigenous audience.

23 There appears to me to be a stark contrast in the film between the symbol of the dead kangaroo as it is associated with the elderly white couple, and the roasting of the kangaroo by the Indigenous people. In the first instance, the kangaroo represents a form of shaming of the character of Bernadette, identified in the film as transgendered. She is forced to sit next to the dead carcass, and for her trouble is abandoned by her would be white saviors. Here we see a contrast between the white queer characters, who are the ones being abandoned, and the white

(nominally heterosexual) characters, who are doing the abandoning. The next time we see the symbol of the kangaroo, however, we see the three white queer characters in the process of "being saved." Here the kangaroo may be taken to represent substance or aid offered, as opposed to the shame or discrimination offered when we first saw the symbol. The white queer characters are not only depicted as being saved by the Indigenous character, but are relatively straightforwardly welcomed (or indeed even embraced) by the group of Indigenous people. Here the symbol of the kangaroo implicitly aligns the white queers "on the side" of the Indigenous people — as engaged in a form of mutual recognition that stands in opposition to the imagery of the dead and rotting kangaroo associated with the elderly white couple. White queers in this sense are depicted as being on the side of "the good" — of those who are oppressed, rather than those who are doing the oppressing.

24 Likewise, within a paper written by Gilad Padvá which focuses in part on the film, there is an implicit assumption that white queers are somehow beyond oppression. In his preliminary discussion of how camp representations can destabilise normative forms of representation, Padvá suggests that the:

proto-camp gestures developed by men like the mollies may have actually worked to displace the epistemological clarity of dominant codes of identity. Therefore, the early modern origins of English camp may actually have been those well-informed political practices that deployed the representation of the body against the growing bourgeois attempt to shape and control the subject. (223)

Whilst interesting, Padvá's argument makes the implicit suggestion that English camp was inherently distinct from a bourgeois identity, and thus did not attempt to "shape and control the subject." The question that I would ask of this is; exactly which men were "well-informed" in their engagement with "proto-camp gestures," and how may these men themselves have been, if not bourgeois subjects, at least subjects who stood to benefit from being (presumably) white men living in a society that accorded significant privilege to white men? Padvá's imagery of "proto-camp" men may thus be seen to do very little to challenge how such men may have not only been engaged in "displacing the epistemological clarity of dominant codes of identity," but also in asserting new, and equally oppressive (white, masculine) codes of identity. In other words, to depict white queers as "displacing" oppressive social practices may demonstrate a failure to examine how white queers similarly stood to benefit from such practices.

25 To return to the film again, and to my second point of inquiry in regards to co-option, we may see how particular white queer forms of representation engender a particular logic of reciprocity that is based upon appropriation rather than acknowledgment. In the remainder of

the storyline relating to the drag performance reported above, the three white queer characters notice during their performance that the Indigenous man who originally found them is merrily dancing along to the performance. This gives them an idea — to make him part of the performance! Thus we see a final set of routines wherein the Indigenous man is clothed in drag, and dances along with the three white queer characters. My concern with this particular representation is that whilst the Indigenous man in the first instance seems to offer a form of aid to the three white queer characters that acknowledges their need for help, their response to this aid is not an acknowledgement in return of the specificity of Indigenous experience, but rather is to some degree appropriative: it reads Indigenous experience through white queer experience. Of course my suggestion is not that the Indigenous man did not want to join in the performance, nor that he or the Indigenous characters were dupes of the white queers' performance. Rather, my point is that the form of reciprocity or relationship that is engendered between the two groups (white queers and Indigenous people) is one that appears to be largely directed by the white queers, and which does not problematise the white queers as being stranded *upon Indigenous land*. Rather, the white queers reciprocate the aid given to them by the Indigenous man by offering him a role in their performance, instead of themselves seeking to reciprocate on the terms set by the Indigenous man. As we are given no indication of the Indigenous man's sexual identity, we cannot interpret the accuracy of the white queers' reading of his dancing to the performance, nor what the Indigenous man's engagement with the performance meant *for the man himself*. Instead we are largely left with the viewpoint of the white queers.

26 Having said all that, there is I believe a great deal of space left open to the white viewer to think about and challenge the particular reading that I believe the film provides. First in this regard, when the white queers join the Indigenous people by the campfire they are depicted as feeling uneasy, a feeling that we see reflected in the alternately inquisitive or disinterested gaze of the Indigenous people. In other words, the white queers *are being seen*, but not on their terms. Second, the Indigenous people who watch the performance largely engage on their terms — we are left unsure as to what their laughter at the performance signifies, and we are shown that their reception of the performance suggests a particular Indigenous reading of white queer. This appears in the incorporation of the performance into the music already being performed by the Indigenous people, where the white performance becomes in part an aspect of the broader Indigenous context of the evening. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the following day, when he again assists the white queers in returning to their bus and securing a tow truck, the Indigenous man asks of them "so you

actually make money by dressing up like a woman?" This, I would suggest, implicitly reasserts an Indigenous reading of white queer representation, one that challenges the straightforward assumption that Indigenous people can be simplistically incorporated into white readings of Indigeneity. In this sense, white queerness becomes the other to Indigenous identity, rather than the other way round.

27 The challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents here to the logic of white queerness is, I believe, indicative of the incommensurability that must be taken as a foundation to any dialogue between and Indigenous and white people (Haggis; Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin'*). In other words, rather than simply presuming a shared ground (as I have suggested the white queers did in attempting to incorporate the Indigenous man into their performance), it is important that white people acknowledge the differences that shape our experiences (through privilege) as distinct from those of Indigenous people. One example of this that I suggested in the previous section was in regards to white queer rights claims that trade on the rights claims of non-white people (e.g., in regards to segregation in the US). This is also evident in Padva's paper on *Priscilla* and camp representation. Drawing on the work of African American scholar bell hooks, Padva suggests not only that "the (straight) bourgeois attempt to manipulate the (queer) subject is similar to interracial relationship, especially between white dominant culture and black subculture" (222), but also that "[hooks'] claim for revision of black history and ethnic oppression can be associated with a demand for revision of queer history and heterosexist oppression" (223). Here Padva may be seen to engage in a form of co-option, whereby he presumes that the critique of racial oppression (as presented by hooks) can be mapped across to a (nominally white queer) critique of "heterosexist oppression." This form of co-option, besides running the dangerous risk of denying how white queers benefit from unearned race privilege and how white queers are never outside racism, also appears to depict people as being either queer or black. The question this begs of course is: "what does this mean for black queers?" Padva's paper would thus appear to attempt to make neat work of what is in practice nowhere near as neat: queer politics are never entirely outside of oppression, and the threat of co-option by white queers is the implicit flipside to critiques (in Padva's case of "bourgeois") co-option of white queers.

28 This leads me to my final point of inquiry, and one that also returns us to the earlier section on how white queers claim belonging. I believe that the film *Priscilla* provides us with at least two examples of how white queer belonging in Australia is unsettled often at the very moment where it is claimed. In the first example from the film, we see the bus stop abruptly when the driver (one of the white queer characters) first sees the massive expanse of the

desert. The three white queer characters step down from the bus to take in the enormity of what they face, and in that moment, when one of them suggests "maybe we should have flown," we hear the music of didgeridoos, an instrument most commonly associated with Indigenous people. This I take as an example of the awe and potential fear that the white queer characters are faced with when they are forced to engage with something they either cannot comprehend, or which cannot be easily assimilated. As a result, whilst the white queer characters are engaged in traversing a landscape to which they claim belonging, the landscape itself challenges this claim to belonging. Furthermore, the didgeridoos that we hear would seem to suggest that whilst the landscape would appear to be somehow "uncanny" or unfamiliar to the white queers, it may not be so to Indigenous people (at least those who play didgeridoos!). Whilst of course it is problematic that the landscape is automatically associated with didgeridoo music, it nonetheless serves to demonstrate the anxiety that white Australians often hold in regards to belonging in this country.

29 The second example of how white queer belonging is unsettled appears in what may be read as the penultimate moment of the movie. One of the characters (the one who had previously abruptly halted the bus ride) tells earlier in the movie of the fact that "ever since I was a lad I've had this dream, a dream that I now, finally, have a chance to fulfill: to travel to the centre of Australia, climb Kings Canyon (as a queen), in a full-length-Gaultier-sequined, heels and a tiara." Following their arrival in Alice Springs, and the subsequent storyline there, the three white queer characters proceed to do just that: climb a rather large mountain in full drag. Yet when they stand at the top, seemingly queens of all they survey, there appears to be a gap between a desire for the type of belonging or unity that the dream may have suggested, and the actuality of it. Once they are all "at the top," Bernadette states "It never ends. All that space." To which the "lad with the dream" asks "so what now?" The third character responds by saying "I think I wanna go home." This to me signifies the characters' recognition of a disjuncture between the dream of being in the imagined space "at the top of Kings Canyon," and the desire to "be at home": belonging does not appear to come easily being dressed in drag at the "centre of Australia." This is not of course to say that white queers are *a priori* excluded from belonging "at the centre," but rather that dreams of belonging, which I would suggest inform a significant part of a white national imaginary, are not so easily fulfilled when faced with "all that space." Home is something that the white queer characters "go back to," rather than being something they carry with them — in contrast to what Aileen Moreton-Robinson ("Still Call" 31) has referred to as Indigenous peoples "ontological relationship to land" — that Indigenous people carry their sovereign rights to belonging with them through

their embodiment. White queer belonging in *Priscilla* is thus depicted as predicated on an anxious form of embodied belonging that only exists in particular "settled locations" that are taken as signifying in excess of "all that space."

30 So, to summarise, and to return to the paper by Padva one last time: camp, as represented in films such as *Priscilla* is not inherently political, where the term "political" suggests subversive or critical. Yes, certainly, *Priscilla* has a politics about it, one that speaks out about homophobia, stereotypes and queer identity. But that does not necessarily make it politically useful in the context of a postcolonising nation. Thus in contrast to Padva, who suggests that Susan Sontag's seminal text on camp misreads camp's political intent, I would not concur with his statement that "[camp] subculture's subversive aspects in fact politically challenge the social and cultural order" (217). Whilst it may be true that camp challenges particular aspects of the social order, as do queer politics and theory, they largely do so from the perspective of white queers, and with the agendas set by white queers. Camp, just like queer, may at times do much more than that, but to assume that it automatically does so would be to miss something crucial: that critiques of oppression may themselves not be free from enacting oppression. As I have suggested in this section, it is thus important that proponents of white queer politics in a postcolonising nation such as Australia examine their own assumptions, and challenge the privileges that they may presume.

### **Conclusions: Towards a situated queer politics**

31 The brief analysis presented here of both *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and the work of Padva has highlighted some of the problems facing white queer politics in Australia. My intention has not been to provide a definitive reading of either text, but rather to draw attention to some of the problems that they present for representations of white queers in Australia. Not only does the analysis demonstrate the troublesome ways in which white queerness engages with race in Australia, but it also highlights some of the assumptions around racialised and gendered privilege that inform queer politics. As three white queer characters, and myself as a white gay man, we experience considered privilege as a result of our social location. This is something that I believe requires accountability, and something that is not easily theorised away or discounted through recourse to "good intentions." Being a white queer in Australia does not place us outside of racism, nor does it mean that our self-representations are not seen as oppressive by those who identify as non-white.

32 These are of course difficult statements to make, not primarily because they suggest a

need to engage in forms of accountability, but rather because they may be read by some as disavowing the need for some form of queer rights, or as overwriting white queer experiences of oppression. These I believe are necessary risks, and ones that I can take precisely because of being white. They therefore do not inherently represent examples of me actually "giving up power," but are rather moments where I enact the very power that comes from being white in a society that privileges white people. So what does this mean for a situated queer politics?

33 First, I think it suggests that there must be much more to white queer politics than simply deconstructing heteropatriarchy. Heteropatriarchy is gendered and racialised as much as it is sexualised, and there is a pressing need to look at how white queers may well be complicit with oppression, even if we attempt to challenge its operations. Second, there is the need for white queers living in Australia to more adequately theorise our relationship to Indigenous sovereignty — how does it form the ground upon which we develop our politics, and what does this mean for the types of politics that we engage in? Third, we must recognise the incommensurable differences that shape white and Indigenous experience, and to pull back from trading on comparisons between racial and sexual/gender oppression. These types of comparisons, I believe, can only serve to marginalise the concerns of non-white people, and render invisible the experiences of queer non-white people. And finally, there is the need to recognise what these incommensurabilities signify: they arise as an outcome of colonisation, and as such they are a challenge to the claims to belonging of white queers. It will not suffice to simply recognise these differences: from this must follow a commitment to examining not what these difference mean *for other people*, but rather how these differences signify the tenuous location of white people in Australia, including white queers.

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## **"The Body is a Bloody Battlefield": Jackie Kay and the Body in Flux**

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### **Abstract:**

This article focuses on the poetry and short stories of the Scottish writer Jackie Kay and seeks to investigate possible reasons why the black feminine body in Kay's texts is often represented as either diseased or in a state of conflict. Thompson demonstrates how a longstanding mythical association between blackness and disease may have affected black subjectivity. Her claim is that the mental and physical states of dysfunction that Kay utilises may be read as a metaphor for a bifurcation of the mind and body due to a damaging discourse that has designated her body as "other." Thompson argues furthermore that, because black women may experience their environment differently from white women (due to prejudice and ostracism for example), such a rift could be due to living in a largely racist society.

1 In Jackie Kay's poem "Where It Hurts," from which the above quotation is taken, and which opens the collection *Off Colour*, the body is depicted as a network of illnesses that is unceasingly being subjected to disease and pain (9-12). In this text, the body is in constant conflict, failing to resist the multifarious afflictions that befall it, eventually culminating in the prophecy of death. The poetic persona predicts that she will die, "A great thumping death." Unlike other "light people" who will "take flight / like graceful swallows," she will be a "huge pig / squealing," ending her life with "A fucking great fucking big death." Whilst this reference to "light people" here could simply be referring to body mass, it could also be alluding to skin colour, implying that those with "light" skin (white people) may experience both life and death in a different (perhaps easier) way.

2 This ambiguous duality present in the notion of "light people" is also present in the title of the collection itself. Richard Dyer points out in an interview with Kay that "Off Colour" can refer to both not feeling well and to mixed race-ness (57-61). That these two states of being are simultaneously present in the indeterminate phrase "Off Colour" alerts the reader to the idea that health can, in some way, be connected with identity; in this case, racial identity. This correspondence between race and health is also suggested in many of the poems in *Off Colour*, as well as elsewhere in Kay's writing. Because in the above poem the implication is that being black and female is almost co-existent with being "Off Colour" or physically unwell, one could infer that an individual's skin tone may be involved in the state of health of that individual. And, for the protagonist in "Where it Hurts," inhabiting a body that is not "light" seems to have increased her suffering.

3 Whilst I acknowledge there are other equally important elements to be considered, such as regionalism, Scottishness and issues of class, I believe these have been more than

adequately dealt with elsewhere. (See for example Papaleonida, Somerville-Arjat and Wilson, Hagemann, and McMillan, For this reason, I am choosing to limit my focus to an exploration of the textual link between the black feminine body and sickness, both physical and mental. In this endeavour particular reference will be made to *The Adoption Papers* (1991), *Other Lovers* (1993), and *Off Colour* (1998); as well as Kay's collection of short stories *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (2002).

4 This notion of the body-as-text, able to convey meanings that are outside of verbal language, has secure theoretical foundations. For example, Michel Foucault posited the notion of the discursivity of the body, citing its ability to display symptoms that, according to Bryan Turner are thus "a system of signs which can be read and translated in a number of ways" (Body and Society 208). Similarly, Susan Bordo claimed that a woman's anorectic body, defeminized by the process of starvation, may be perceived as articulating a rejection of patriarchally constructed roles. In her thesis, the emaciated body, therefore, must be "read" as a "text of femininity" (16, emphasis added). It is because these theoretical propositions suggest that the body can supplant language as a means of expression, that I believe we need to interpret Kay's representation of corporeality as something other than mimetic.

5 It is important to note at the outset that the history of the relationship between black people and health issues has been a problematic one. Racist discourse has associated blackness with bodily disease and contamination, as well as with a variety of mental disorders. Chris Shilling notes that, during the period of colonial slavery, black Africans were seen as "diseased and dirty" (58). Similarly, there has been an assumed equivalence between blackness and insanity. Sander Gilman informs us that the Victorians believed it was "specifically the physiology of the blacks which predisposed them to mental illness" (Difference 138). Categories were invented by the white plantation owners to "explain" the slaves' behaviour. For example "rascality" was the name given to a disease "peculiar to negroes," the symptoms of which caused slaves to run away or behave in a lethargic manner. Such "symptoms" were pathologized rather than considered as a rejection of the institution of slavery. Gilman claims elsewhere that these kind of racist mythologies were promulgated because "[M]edical tradition has a long history of perceiving this (black) skin colour as the result of some pathology" ("Black Bodies" 250). Black women, he argues, were particularly singled out in this regard. The medical mythology engendered in the nineteenth century designated the black woman as hypersexual and, as a result, a likely carrier of syphilis. Because of her perceived lascivious and "deviant" sexual appetite, it was believed that "the qualities of blackness, or at least of the black female, are those of the prostitute" ("Black

Bodies" 148). It is not difficult to see how promiscuity, madness and disease thus became conflated in the Victorian imagination.

6 The legacies of these damaging, mythical stereotypes have been pernicious and enduring, and the black woman's perceived hypersexuality continues to be used as a dominant image in various forms of representation. The link between sexuality and ill-health, although now perhaps less explicit, nonetheless remains a subtle undertone in the many depictions of her as an exotic, predatory or deviant force. But, as well as having been constructed as the carrier and sufferer of disease, black women have paradoxically received a documented lack of care and prejudice from those in the health services. Writing in the 1980s Beverley Bryan et. al. highlight the imbalance of power in the doctor/patient relationship and claim that this is perhaps most intensely felt by black women. They state that: "[W]hen a Black woman enters a doctor's surgery, there is another dimension to this experience, particularly if the doctor is a white, middle-class man, as he usually is" (Bryan 102). They also point out that it is they (black women) who are most vulnerable to ill-health (both mental and physical) because of the social conditions that many inhabit which are influenced by a combination of race, class and gender (Bryan 90).

7 Although written many years later than Bryan's account, much of Kay's work seems to be entering this debate by suggesting that the problematic association between black women and health issues has not gone away. For example in "Where It Hurts," the protagonist recounts how, during a visit to the doctor, she recognizes the prejudice in his eyes: "[H]e looks at me as if I were a germ, a sudden outbreak" *Off Colour* (10-12). The patient, clearly cognisant of the fact that the doctor believes in the mythical association of blackness and disease, replies with more than a touch of irony:

I come from a long line of sufferers.  
We lived with live-in disease-ridden beasts.  
We caught rabies, had babies, passed madness down.  
We clenched our crossed teeth. (10)

Despite her brave attempts to overcome his racist gaze through a lightness of tone, the deleterious consequences of inhabiting a body that is so stigmatized is made explicit in the lines:

The sick headache tightening the screws. Zigzags.  
My moods swing. My sinuses scream. I look like a hag,  
There's not a pain I haven't had. (12)

This shows how the protagonist's body, racially coded and marked by a medical gaze that has constructed her as "a germ," has resulted in the sensation of real physical pain. That there

might be a causal link between this type of prejudice and ill health is confirmed by *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*, a document outlining Britain's attitudes towards racial diversity published in 2000. It suggests that: "[R]acism [...] and the stress of living in a hostile society - *directly harms health*" (Runnymede Trust 178, emphasis added). Pamela Ashurst and Zaida Hall concur with this notion, stating: "[H]ealth is that state of equilibrium that we enjoy when we thrive in the context in which we live. Illness, or dis-ease, represents a deviation from that healthy equilibrium" (9). The idea being proposed here is that individuals who perceive themselves or are perceived by others as socially "acceptable," are more likely to be healthy, whereas those who find their identity is sometimes "unacceptable," (due to skin colour in "Where It Hurts"), will be more prone to disease and sickness. This is certainly borne out in the poem above, where there is a clear psychosomatic connection between the protagonist's ill health and the experience of racism.

8 Her only method of negotiating the doctor's damaging constructive gaze, which is emblematic of a wider belief system, is to separate mind and body in an attempt to be liberated from pain, both physical and mental. The protagonist's longing for disembodiment is indicated by her wish: "If I could have a day, an ordinary day, / away from the worry - the body - I would be happy" (10). The price of this freedom, however, results in becoming alienated from herself, illustrated by the fact that she loses command of her mental and physical faculties: "It's got that bad I've started to swear, / I've begun to think in obscenities, I can't stop - cunt. (11). The consequent tension between the controllable and the uncontrollable elements of her corporeality leads to confusion, as she asks: "How did I get like this? So far away from myself." (11). The powerlessness felt by black women in the face of mythical representations of blackness and disease is thus suggested here. And although the protagonist is "[S]ick to death of being sick," she knows there can be no real freedom when "[T]he body is a bloody battlefield" (9).

9 The consequence of inhabiting a body that is ostracized because of racist beliefs is further suggested in the short poem "Somebody Else" (*Off Colour*). The first three lines state:

If I was not myself, I would be somebody else.  
But actually I am somebody else.  
I have been somebody else all my life. (27)

The duality proposed here indicates that subjectivity is not necessarily unitary or stable and there is the possibility of both a self and a non-self existing simultaneously. James Olney concurs with this in his ideas about human memory, stating that because it (memory) is disjointed and often incomplete, one could argue that "selfhood is not continuous; for it brings up one self here and another self there" (24). Commenting on the above poem in an interview,

Kay admits that for her this feeling of embodying a duality of selves comes from having been adopted. She says, "[W]hen you are adopted you always have this possibility of having been somebody else [...] I think lots of people (adopted or not) have a sense of this other self that they could have been" (Dyer 59). I would add to this the idea that being black in a predominantly white (racist) society also can cause this splitting of the self. And for the subject in "Somebody Else," this has resulted in an existential uncertainty whereby she has become distanced from her "self." As well as interpreting this poem as a textualisation of the dualities inherent in being adopted, it could also be usefully read as a text connecting black femininity with the discourse of racism.

10 The disembodied self and loss of identity that can be experienced as a result of illness have clear symmetries with the self under attack from racism, as both can produce similar responses. Bryan Turner states, "we often experience embodiment as alienation ... when we have cancer or gout [...] The importance of embodiment for our sense of the self is threatened by disease" (7). Similarly, Robert Dingwall states, "disturbances affecting the body [...] present immediate and important problems for the interpretive scheme being employed by the individual in any situation." As a result, he states that "[T]he automatic expectation of a stable and predictable relationship between a person and his body cannot be sustained" (98). Indeed, in material terms, the body does literally become "other" in some cases. For example, immunologists have noted that in cases of cancer, healthy cells are replaced by "alien" or unhealthy ones, resulting in the body gradually becoming "non-you" (see Babiker and Arnold). In the case of cells that cause viral or bacterial infections, these are potentially immortal, and can survive even after the host body has died. Germ cells too can truly be considered "non-you" as they are the only part of the body generally considered to be non-somatic:

The mortal part is the body in the narrower sense - the 'soma' - which alone is subject to natural death. The germ-cells, on the other hand, are potentially immortal, in so far as they are able, under certain favourable conditions, to develop into a new individual, or in other words, to surround themselves with a new soma. (Weismann qtd. in Freud 252)

Illness then, in the same way as racism and prejudice, can cause a feeling of "somebody-else-ness," an identity crisis if you like, that can destabilize the relationship between the known and the unknown self. Bodily displacement engendered because of feelings of unbelonging perpetrated by a society that alienates and stigmatizes can mean, as Kay describes in "Somebody Else," that "people mistake you / you mistake yourself" (*Off Colour* 27).

11 "In My Country," a poem from Kay's collection *Other Lovers*, encapsulates how these

processes of racism can perpetrate feelings of estrangement, and how they can be present in apparently innocent remarks. Written in the first person, it tells of a walk by the sea interrupted by a woman who passes round "as if I were a superstition; / or the worst dregs of her imagination." Eventually being asked by this onlooker "*Where do you come from?*", the poetic persona answers "Here. These parts" (*Lovers* 24), emphasis in original). The question, accentuated by its italic print, is said by Kay to insinuate that "you don't belong *here*" and is one that is loaded with subtle xenophobic undertones (Somerville-Arjat and Wilson 121, emphasis in the original). This interactive quality of belonging-ness and identity is reiterated by Bryan Turner who claims that: "[T]he body is the most proximate and immediate feature of my social self, a necessary feature of my social location and of my personal enselfment" (8). Much of Mary Douglas' renowned work in the field of anthropology is based on this symbiosis between the situatedness of the body and an individual's agency (see for example *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*). If Turner and Douglas' views are accepted, then it must be the case that the pernicious influences of racism can affect both the body and the mind. Instead of an interconnectedness between the mental and the physical that occurs when a body "belongs" to society, these poems show how the two have become distanced or alienated from each other because of externally imposed prejudicial beliefs.

12 This disjuncture between the physical and social self is also addressed in Kay's collection, *The Adoption Papers*, a text that is concerned with the underlying tensions inherent within genealogical connections and disconnections. It investigates these ideas in relation to blood, a bodily fluid which in terms of health can be life-sustaining, circulating food, oxygen and molecules of the immune system around the body, as well as potentially life threatening, conveying bacteria, cancer cells and poison. In terms of identity, blood is often thought of as that which distinguishes us from one another (Buckley and Gottlieb). It is this latter idea of blood being a potent indicator of identity that is explored in *The Adoption Papers* through the polyvocal narratives of three women: an "adoptive mother," a "birth mother," and a "daughter."

13 The interconnectedness of blood, health and identity is evidenced by the daughter's quest to gain information about her biological parents. She knows little more than that her mother is white and her father black, having been separated from them when a young baby. Attempting to learn of her ancestry, she asks "*What Is In My Blood?*" and "I want to know my blood" (*Adoption* 25, 29, emphasis and capitalisation in the original). The implication is, of course, that by knowing where her blood has come from (in terms of genealogy) she can understand herself better. Blood is therefore shown to have great importance in the daughter's

quest to delimit the self. She sees it as a significant way of finding out about her familial (and, in this case, racial) identity. Alison Lumsden claims that the poems in this collection "assert the desire to locate oneself within the perceived certainties of a biological past - a desire reinforced by the photograph 'Human chromosomes' on the collection's cover" (80). It is notable in the context of this paper that the daughter is aware that, without an understanding of her genetic background, she cannot know her medical history. On visits to the doctor and dentist we are told they always ask her "the old blood questions about family runnings," to which she is forced to reply "I don't know what diseases / come down my line" (29).

14 Such ontological and teleological uncertainties that result from her mixed race status and lack of contact with her "real" parents are further complicated by the fact that her non-biological parents are white. This leads to an ambivalent attitude with regard to her desire to locate and define her biological identity, evidenced by a strong desire to "know" her blood, at the same time as wishing to reject the idea that blood connections are important. The denial of the significance of blood relationships is perhaps influenced by her adoptive mother's stance on the issue, for whom racial and familial "ambiguities" do not matter. She states:

Now when people say 'ah but  
it's not like having your own child though is it',  
I say of course it is, what else is it?  
she's my child, I have told her stories  
wept at her losses, laughed at her pleasures,  
she is mine. (23)

Indeed, the adoptive mother believes there are other factors that can supersede familial bonds:

See me and her  
there is no mother and daughter more similar.  
We're on the wavelength so we are.  
Right away I know if she's upset.  
And vice versa. Closer than blood.  
Thicker than water. Me and my daughter. (34)

Blood connections and racial lineage are thus shown to be unimportant in this particular relationship. For the adoptive mother, "all this umbilical knot business is nonsense" (23), an idea reflected in the literary form of the last two lines above. A rearrangement of the syntactical structure of the well-known axiom "blood is thicker than water" suggests that an emotional and psychic alliance that "is closer than blood" can override the complex nexus of familial and biological bonds.

15 Unfortunately the daughter cannot entirely abandon the quest to "know" her blood, despite her adoptive mother's willingness to disregard differences. This could be due to the fact that other people will not let her forget her racial identity and who: "keep trying to make



it matter, / the blood, the tie, the passing down / generations" (29). This constant reminder of her ambiguous identity is suggestive of an implicit form of racism that concerns notions of blood purity. Although there is no scientific evidence to prove that there is any difference between the blood of one race or another, the "one-drop rule" has had (and arguably still has) currency. This quantitative metaphor of blood is present in a racist ideology which advocates the belief that miscegenation will infect and contaminate "pure" white blood. The prohibition of blood-mixing in the Indian caste system, where those who have the lowest blood status are thought to be "untouchable" due to their "unclean" blood, also reflects this fear.

16 This idea of "purity" and "impurity," as well as the belief in racial differences detectable in blood, is demonstrated by a teacher at the daughter's school. When practising for a dance show, the daughter finds difficulty in performing the "Cha Cha" and the ironically named "Black Bottom." Because of the teacher's assumptions about essentialist characteristics, she shouts "[C]ome on, show / us what you can do I thought / you people had it in your blood" (25). This claim to know more about the protagonist's past than the daughter herself by a naïve reference to biological determinism puzzles and upsets her pupil who reacts:

My skin is hot as burning coal  
like that time you said Darkies are like coal  
in front of the whole class - my blood  
what does she mean? (25)

So, whilst the text clearly recounts the daughter's quest for blood identity as a means of locating and understanding her "self," it seems that it is external forces (such as her teacher and medical professionals) that have a greater influence than her own internal desires. Struggling to define herself in the midst of opposing and ambiguous identities, her adoptive status has implications, both for herself and for those around her. Thus we can read Kay's use of the theme of blood as both metaphor and metonymy. The daughter's search for her "blood" stems from a desire to feel at ease both within her family nexus, as well as the wider society she must inhabit. She longs for a stable and knowable identity, where her body is acceptable both to herself and those around her. The fact that this is so difficult to achieve, and that the text is not conclusive about the outcome of her search could be read as an allusion to the shifting and uncertain nature of identity for black women in this country.

17 These many references to blood discussed above show how racism and racial identity are intimately bound up with the body and issues of health. I have suggested that bodies that are ambiguous, ontologically unreliable or physically dysfunctional may be understood as articulating a feeling of social dis-ease in Kay's work. Whilst most of these texts show the

consequences of such alienation in ways that relate to the *physical*, in her recent short story collection, *Why Don't You Stop Talking*, there are also depictions of women suffering from a variety of *mental* "disorders." (Of course I recognize that mental disorders often manifest themselves in physical symptoms, but for my purposes here, I am choosing to analyse them separately.) As is well known, many white women have written about their personal experiences of "madness" in an attempt to offer a corrective to the patriarchal texts that have at times depicted femininity as almost synonymous with madness. One of the ways they have challenged this idea is by demonstrating that, rather than women's behaviour being anarchic or unfathomable, as it is sometimes designated in patriarchal discourse, it should be seen as a rational response to their oppressive domestic and social situations. Black women writers have entered this literary arena too, often depicting similar causal factors in the onset and progression of mental "disturbances"(for example, Jean 'Binta' Breeze's "Riddym Ravings (the mad woman's poem)" and Andrea Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'*) For black women, however, there may also be the added environmental component of racism to consider as a contributory factor in issues of mental health.

18 This emphasis on the environment as an aetiological contributory factor is fundamental to Kay's depictions of mental illness in several of her short stories. In the title story, "Why Don't You Stop Talking," Thelma, (the black female protagonist), is perceived as "mad" by others in her community largely because of her outspokenness. When pushed aside by a man in a queue at a cash machine, humiliated by a young woman in the supermarket, and shunned by another on the London Underground, she (understandably) cannot remain quiet. Similarly, on seeing a young mother shouting at her son, Thelma feels it her duty to stand up for the child, saying, "Easy does it love, he's just a little fellow." The mother reacts aggressively with "Mind your own fucking business [...] Beat it! [...] Shut your fucking trap" (45-46).

19 Whilst the story relates her dysfunctional family background as contributing to Thelma's behaviour, it is also the case that the present social situation in which she finds herself is far from hospitable. In her attempts to make conversation with others, for example, she receives panic-stricken looks. She states, "People often look like that when I talk to them as if I'm trapping them or something when I'm only trying to be friendly" (48). Because her interventions all elicit such overtly unpleasant responses, one suspects this socially alienating behaviour may be a reaction to something about Thelma other than her outspokenness alone. The idea that her outbursts are always in response to other people's impolite behaviour, and, as such, may be justified, is clearly never considered by her interlocutors. Rather, they are

repeatedly construed as inappropriate or the ramblings of a "mad" woman. Her claim that, "If I feel wronged, I have to speak up. Simple as that" (44), suggests that her responses are more to do with a social conscience than with insanity. Sadly, however, she has come to think she is to blame for the trouble she causes: "All my life I've been told by so many different people: 'That tongue of yours will get you into trouble one day'. And all my life it has" (50).

20     Thelma's realisation that, "Just because I talk a lot people think I'm mad" (48) highlights the association sometimes made between the outspoken woman and perceived "insanity." This belief has been applied to all women of course, but for the forthright black women such controlling labels sometimes ignore the racial and cultural element inherent in perceptions of madness. In Thelma's case, her behaviour, which does not conform to society's "norm," is stigmatized and misunderstood. Jane Ussher states that: "it is important to note that definitions of madness are consistent within, though not necessarily between, cultures [...] and a diagnosis of madness acts as a means of [...] controlling what is "normal" in a given society." She quotes one researcher who claims: "[W]hat we recognize as pathological behaviour is usually a matter of common consensus in a society, the standards of consensus vary from one society to another" (138, 139). In this way, the perception of Thelma as "mad" has not taken into account the possibility of such cultural differences. And the text implies that such unsympathetic responses from others, who have been quick to judge her behaviour as "abnormal," may have actually been a contributory cause of her madness.

21     The fact that there is an apparent mis-match between the ratio of Afro-Caribbeans in Great Britain (3%) and the number of black inmates in mental hospitals (17%) indicates that cultural perceptions of "madness" still affect the medical profession (Dennis 193). According to recent sociological research by James Nazroo, "it is well known that, as well as being more likely than any other ethnic group to be hospitalized for psychotic illness, Caribbeans are more likely to be compulsorily treated and to be treated on locked wards" (319). Similarly, in another study it is claimed that black people "are more likely to be ... diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' and treated with anti-psychotic drugs than white people are" (Babiker and Arnold 48). Astonishingly, according to Anna Marie Smith, "there are several "black-specific" categories of mental illness currently in use: 'West Indian psychosis', 'paranoia', 'religious mania' and, for Asian women, 'marital psychosis'" (88). Ussher notes that this is a factor in some diagnoses when labels of madness are more readily imposed on those from other ethnic backgrounds, and are therefore "clearly reflections of xenophobia or racism" (139).

22     In order for Thelma to avoid one of these stigmatising labels she must conform to

certain patterns of behaviour. If she does not remain contained within society's code of "acceptable" conduct (which in this case is to remain silent and hide her anger), she may be prejudicially assessed. As Smith points out, "Where black women break the boundaries of that containment [...] they are often pathologized" (88). Similarly bell hooks states "where black women exceed the boundaries of soliloquy, they are punished in terms of both physical abuse and madness" (qtd. in Smith 88). Women's anger has long been misunderstood and feared and, for this reason, has been perceived as symptomatic of someone who is "mad." By attaching this label to behaviour that is sometimes seen as potentially anarchic, women's anger has thus been controlled. The fact that those who have the power to make such evaluative judgements (in medical and legal professions for example) are largely white and male, has serious implications for black femininity.

23     Thelma's social environment is obviously one that has attempted to contain her anger. Whilst Thelma does manage to break out of such bonds (although of course at the expense of stigmatisation and isolation) there are many who remain unable to find a voice. For these, it may be that their only way of "speaking" is through exhibiting symptoms of mental illness. R. D. Laing (a key figure in the Anti-Psychiatry Movement of the 1960s) supports this idea that the behaviour exhibited by some people needs to be seen, not as the impenetrable conduct of an "insane" person, but as a means of communication. In this way, Laing believed, the "symptoms" exhibited by schizophrenics, for example, rather than being associated with pathology, could be usefully understood as "a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unliveable situation" (95). Although Laing's work does not specifically address issues of race, it is clear that his philosophy espouses the idea that "deviant" behaviour (regardless of an individual's age, race or gender) can be misinterpreted.

24     In "Shell" (*Why* 137-155), Kay describes such an "unliveable" situation and the resulting "deviant" behaviour. Doreen is a black single mother, silenced and criticized by her bullying son, Louis; deserted by her son's father; and shunned by neighbours. Unable to articulate her despair, Doreen descends into a form of "madness," and as she sinks deeper and deeper into herself, the pain of her life intensifies. Interactions with her son have reached a point where, "Louis has decided to talk at her though the idea that she might have anything to say hasn't crossed his mind" (143) and, "She doesn't bother to answer anymore [...] She can't bring herself to get involved" (138). Because she has no voice and no listener, the body becomes the primary focus of her attention. She stops eating anything nutritious, loses control of her bowel, defecating in the bath, finally developing a delusion that there is a shell-like growth on her back.

25 The course of her "illness" culminates in the belief that she has actually metamorphosed into a snail. Asked by her son why she will no longer be able to take him to school, Doreen answers "I'm a bit encumbered" (154). As well as the satirical aspect inherent in this interchange, Doreen's shell could be read as a metaphor for the burdensome role that she has involuntarily had to adopt in order for herself and her son to survive. In this way, her "encumbrance" is analogous to the story of racism. Irene's shell (although imaginary is nonetheless "real" in her mind) is emblematic of a stigmata that marks her as different, in the same way that visible differences in skin colour mark some as "other." The physical and mental "weight" referred to in *Off Colour*, that is connected with being black in a prejudicial society, could be allegorically associated with the "burden" Irene must carry. Such an encumbrance has literally driven her to think and behave in a way that could be defined as "mad" - crawling along the ground and eating buttercups for example. For Irene, however, the shell becomes, not only a weight or burden, but a comfort too.

She almost feels tenderly towards it, as if her shell is a lover, a solid companion that knows and accepts all her faults. Nothing could surprize or shock her shell now. Since she had it, the neighbours haven't bothered her. She has retreated. (150)

The difficulties she must face within her "real" environment (the "unliveable situation" if you will) are thus replaced by the protection of her imaginary one.

26 The above texts, by depicting a diversity of social pressures brought to bear on the sufferer, whether because of prejudice, misunderstanding of cultural specificities, or other oppressive forces, enable the reader to consider the predicament that has led to such "abnormal" behaviour. Rather than the conduct of the above protagonists being construed as "mad," it could be interpreted as the "symptoms" of a kind of "postcolonial disease" (Hussein 19) or "the schizophrenia of the colonial experience" (Peters 45), and as such should be read as a language that speaks of dissatisfaction, anger and confusion. The "treatment" Kay's protagonists receive, whether medical or social, is shown to be part of the cause and in this way could be described as iatrogenic. It has been well publicised by R.D. Laing and others, that the ways in which mental disorders are managed (with ECT and drug therapy for example) can create disturbing complications that perpetuate the behaviour previously considered "mad." I would suggest that these texts are articulating the notion that such "treatment," in all senses of the word, is a key component in the genesis and development of the protagonists' psychological state.

27 Another way in which sufferers can articulate dissatisfaction or anger with their social environment is through the medium of obsessions and self-harming behaviours. Like "Shell" above, several other stories in *Why Don't You Stop Talking* narrate the lives of protagonists

who become fixated on objects or ideas. However, unlike Irene whose shell obsession is purely imaginative, some of Kay's other characters translate their obsessions into reality by expressing a wish to cut themselves or abuse their bodies in some way. Such sensitive issues, rarely broached in fiction, have been, until relatively recently, much maligned and misunderstood by the medical profession and sufferers' families alike. For example, although the authors of *Self-Mutilation* admit that this kind of behaviour can be a cry for help, they also believe that the "treatment" for those who self-harm should involve a punitive element (Ross and McKay). Recently, however, deliberate self-harm (DSH) and obsessional behaviours are seen in more sympathetic terms. Gloria Babiker and Lois Arnold in *The Language of Injury - Comprehending Self-Mutilation* state: "More than perhaps any other human action, self-mutilation speaks of distress, torment and pain" (1). In a Laingian sense, DSH must therefore be seen as a behaviour that needs to be understood rather than condemned. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach claim that obsessions should be seen as "distractions from the real underlying feelings of distress" and are "attempts at solutions to painful problems" (174). For those black women who have the added feelings of alienation and estrangement from themselves and society and who may have no channel for their anger, self-injurious behaviour may be the only available "solution," and as such needs to be seen as significant.

28     Such pain and frustration is clearly felt by Irene in "The Woman with the Knife and Fork Disorder" (85-108). Having been left by a bullying husband, despised and victimized by her only daughter, Irene's mental pain becomes unbearable. Initially her anguish manifests itself in an obsession with cutlery, culminating in a belief that the knives and forks in her kitchen are "acting up" (89). Her unnatural focus on cutlery reaches the point where these inanimate objects become anthropomorphized in her mind:

She went to put a knife away in the knife section. When she next looked down that same knife had somehow cut loose and joined the teaspoons, lying blatantly across them, almost smiling, a wide silver smile. (88)

Irene's obsessions are treated with the anti-depressant Prozac by her doctor, a referral to a psychiatrist and the suggestion that she should have a brain scan. Whilst the doctor obviously sees the problem in purely physiological terms, Irene knows that her "disorder" may have something to do with the oppressive drudgery of her life that has meant she has been "drying her dishes and putting them away for years" as well as a (metaphorical) "broken heart." Inhabiting an unloving family environment, as well as feeling lonely because the friends she had shared with her husband, "plumped for Iain after the separation" have thus created an "unliveable situation" (85, 99, 102).

29     According to Babiker and Arnold, doctors are less likely to refer black patients for

counselling or psychotherapy, and "[T]hose who self-injure are thus given fewer opportunities to translate their expressions of distress from the 'language of the body' into verbal communication" (48). In Irene's case, this lack of opportunity to articulate the "real" cause of her problems is channelled or translated into her obsessional delusions. Because her attempts to "speak" through symptoms do not elicit helpful responses from her doctor (or her daughter for that matter), she considers another outlet, seeking solace in the idea of cutting herself. We are told: "Irene was seized by an overwhelming desire to take a sharp knife and stab it into her heart. The desire was so strong she could almost see herself doing it" (101). Although the act of self-harming exists only in her imagination, it is the *prospect* of pain that brings excitement and the beginnings of psychic relief: "She could visualize the dynamic and dramatic red of her own blood, sputtering, stuttering, *saying see, see, see, I told you so*" (102, my emphasis). By cutting herself, not only will she be able to assuage her mental pain, this quotation shows how the action itself will also "speak" for her, thus highlighting the linguistic component inherent in self-harming behaviours.

30 By literally inscribing the body, the ensuing scars can tell a story of inner conflict. Unlike the legitimate scarrification that results from rites of passage in certain cultures which could be read as symbolically telling a positive story of belonging, the scars that Irene wishes to make paradoxically could be interpreted as signs of *unbelonging*. Babiker and Arnold state that: "[M]any people *somatize* rather than *speak* [...] produce(ing) physical pain at moments when they cannot tolerate psychic pain" (8, my emphasis). In this way Irene's wish to "mark herself" and to "[R]ip her own useless, pathetic skin till it split, till she was wounded" (101) is thus a method of both easing and articulating her inner pain.

31 If we consider deliberate self-harm as another kind of language, "translating" psychic pain into bodily inscriptions/mutilations, what are the ramifications if the self-harmer focuses on the tongue as that which is to be injured? In the story "Why Don't You Stop Talking" this is exactly what happens. Above I argued that Thelma's anger, construed as "madness" by others, is an understandable reaction to an environment that is, at times, inhospitable. As well as outwardly directing her rage, however, she also turns her anger inward, believing she is to blame for other's aggressive behaviour. The story culminates in Thelma's conviction that "Every time my tongue gets me into trouble, it will be punished" (50). It is this organ that has, in her view, caused all the trouble. The disturbing image of Thelma slicing her tongue with a razor is accompanied by her knowing that "the pain feels good. The pain feels deserved." (50).

32 Because, as H. G. Morgan states, "the communication or language aspect of deliberate

self-harm is of great importance," by making the tongue the focus of Thelma's harmful intentions, creates a stark paradox (123). This has a particular resonance with the regime of slavery, when slave's tongues were sometimes brutally removed as a punishment. By injuring the principal organ of speech, Thelma is decreasing her own ability to speak, at the same time as trying to "speak" through the act of self-harming. However, there is no-one present to "listen," evidenced by her last words in the text: "I wish they could all see me now" (50). The fact that no-one can see the mutilating behaviour which symbolically "speaks" of her unhappiness, as well as the possibility that she will not be able to fully articulate her pain due to a mutilated tongue, is a disturbing metaphorical illustration of the historical silence and silencing of black women.

33 Because of the similarity between physical and mental pain, (The Oxford English Dictionary's definition states pain is both "a strongly unpleasant *bodily* sensation" as well as "mental suffering and distress," my emphases) the two sensations become conflated in their interchangeability. The blurring of the boundaries between mind and body that characterizes self-harming behaviour thus potentially permits a metaphysical unification. For Thelma, the act of self-mutilation permits her to "translate" the psychic into the somatic, enabling her to mesh mind and body together. Because, according to Elaine Scarry, "to have pain is to have certainty," deliberate self-harm can be seen as a self-affirming behaviour in that it makes the body real and undeniable (7). At the same time, of course, it is overtly self-destructive and needs to be understood as a literal embodiment of "an implicit connotation of something unbearable, unutterable that is communicated in this act" (Babiker and Arnold 1). For Thelma, like Irene above, this is the oppressive "weight" of domestic unhappiness and social prejudice. Because skin is where the nerve endings are situated which relay sensations to the central nervous system, by cutting it she will both stimulate and damage the nerve cells, symbolising her desire to feel and not to feel at the same time.

34 Another way of embodying and inscribing an "unliveable situation" is demonstrated in "Trout Friday" (67-81) which narrates the story of Melanie, a young black travel agent. As the title suggests, the text focuses largely on food and the way that Melanie has organized her life around routines and obsessions. For example, with regard to her teeth, "she makes sure she brushes for the length of time it takes to boil an egg. She has an egg timer in her bathroom" (68). She has also created a dietary regime for herself which involves having the same meals each week: "salmon Monday, prawn Tuesday, cod Wednesday, haddock Thursday and trout Friday." At weekends, "she splashes out and has takeaway: Peking duck with pancakes, lamb with spicy leaves and nan bread, or Kentucky Fried Chicken with large fries" (67).



35 Living alone after the death of her mother, her father having left when she was a young child, and losing her own baby through miscarriage, Melanie is isolated. The progeny of an Irish mother and a Trinidadian father, she had inherited skin colour "that was a mixture of the two" (69). The text demonstrates how this has caused Melanie to doubt her bodily racial identity:

[S]he didn't like it when one of the girls at work called her half-caste because it sounded insulting and she didn't like *mixed-race* because it made her feel muddled. Certainly not *mulatto*, it made her think of mules. Definitely not people who said to her, 'You're neither one thing nor the other' because that made her feel left out, belonging to nobody. (69)

As well as "belonging to nobody" in the relational sense, she also belongs to no "body" in the physical (racial) sense. She is between two ethnic identities, a fact that she is reminded of by a stranger who says, "Must be hard for you lot, the blacks don't want you and the whites don't neither" (69, 70). The ensuing racial and familial loneliness has caused her to develop ways of coping with the pain. By such strict control of her daily habits, which are largely centred on diet and liquid intake and therefore could be described as symptomatic of an eating disorder, she can maintain a certain kind of "sanity" in her unhappy life.

36 Behaviour that focuses on food and diet also come within the generic term of deliberate self-harm and, as such, exemplify Susan Bordo's claim that eating disorders need to be interpreted as a physical manifestation of inner conflicts. According to Eichenbaum and Orbach, for the woman who tries to change the shape of her body, this is an indication that she is attempting to change the shape of her life (174). The "shape" of the majority of Melanie's life is unchangeable and out of her autonomous control. Her skin colour is obviously immutable, and it is for this reason, I would argue, that her body size and shape become the focus of her attention. These obviously can be changed with just a little bit of self-control - for example by rejecting the "chunky chips cooked in olive oil" because they are "too fattening" (79). Rigidly governing her intake in this way in order to maintain a certain size stems from Melanie's bodily dysphoria. The prejudicial comments she is subjected to, as well as her familial isolation, are contributory factors in maintaining the belief that her body is not good enough without bodily "changes" or "modifications."

37 It is perhaps significant that it is the skin that is the main locus of the self-harmer. Either by slicing it or by changing its shape through abnormal eating habits, the surface of the body is the focal point of the self-harmer's attention. For many, in fact, "self-injury which does not involve breaking the skin (for example, banging and bruising) is not experienced as so effective or 'satisfying'" (Babiker and Arnold 68). As the boundary between the self and the

non-self, as well as that which "contains," skin symbolizes the limits of physical corporeality. The alteration or destruction of its surface indicates a blurring of inside and outside that parallels the lack of self-definition felt by Melanie, Thelma and Irene. As the place where pigmentation resides (that which dictates skin colour), another element can be added to the issue of deliberate self-harm for those with black skin. Because skin hue is arguably the most visible marker of racial difference, it is possible that its laceration could be read as symbolic of a racial self-hatred which results in an attempt to minimize by "interrupting" the pigment content. Because of the whipping, slashing and branding that was cruelly carried out on the skins of slaves, significantly referred to as a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" by one black American critic (Spillers 67) and defined as "the white masters' text" by another (Henderson 71), such self-imposed markings could also "tell a story" of oppression. Deliberate self-harm, whether read symbolically or figuratively, indicates a desire to be something or someone different. This disjuncture between the physical body and the world external to it, which for Irene, Thelma and Melanie, is due to racist, domestic, and societal oppression, can thus be perceived as a way of registering their rebellion and dissatisfaction for those who care to "listen."

38 Instead of adopting a simplistic, monovocal viewpoint, as has been the case in a (largely racist) dominant discourse, Kay's short stories utilize a more dialogic and interrogative form that has the effect, in accordance with Laing's suppositions, of suggesting that mental illness is a social construction with discernible causes. Elaine Showalter claims that "[T]he madwoman is the author's double, the incarnation of her own anxiety and rage" (4). If this is the case then Kay's texts of "madness" could be perceived as not only articulating her characters' anger, but also her own. In this way, her work may be usefully understood as signalling the discomfort of having to inhabit an environment that is inhospitable, and as such can be seen as "a sane reaction to an insane situation."

39 In conclusion, the black female body in Kay's writing is frequently either a sick body, suffering pain and disease, or a body in flux because of racial uncertainties. Such "dis-ease," I have argued, is a means by which the body discursively communicates, "speaking" that which has perhaps previously been unspoken. This article has attempted to show how Kay's texts often associate physical and mental dis-ease with a hostile social environment, causing her protagonists to feel uncomfortable because of their racial status. The external world, which for many of Kay's characters is domestically and racially oppressive, is "translated" into internal states of conflict, which, in turn, reveal themselves as physical or mental illness. Kay's recurrent use of this trope of the sick female body or the fluctuating, uncertain body, is

therefore both figurative and metaphorical. Firstly, it is figurative because, in terms of psychosomatic medicine, we know that the mind can powerfully affect the body, and therefore illness (both physical and mental) can occur as a result of a distressed mind. Secondly, the inscription of this link needs to be read metaphorically as an indication that for Kay and, by implication, other black women in Britain, there is a self-dislocation and a disequilibrium that is yet to be "healed."

40 Of course, it could be argued that Kay's frequent allusions to sick black feminine bodies reinforces the discourse that has constructed the black person, and particularly the black woman, as the carrier and bearer of disease and contagion. However, I would maintain that by showing the vulnerability of the black feminine body, she is subverting the image of the strong, enduring "mule" who is constructed as being able to bear greater pain than others. In this way, whether metaphorical or not, she is writing the sick body as a means of signalling the need for attention, diagnosis and possible reparation, in the same way that actual illness can be an indication of some other neediness. By articulating racism as that which can, via psychosomatic processes, be the cause of illness, I believe the poet is asking us to reassess these (often unopposed) medical mythologies of blackness.

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**Marlon B. Ross: *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era*. New York: New York UP, 2004**

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1 Despite the "mild trendiness" (398) that the topic of African American masculinity has acquired over the last decade, it remains a site in which much ground is still uncovered. Marlon B. Ross's comprehensive study *Manning the Race*, with its focus on the Jim Crow era, is an ambitious attempt to address this lack by charting in amazing detail the diverse and often competing discourses that laid out and shaped notions of a reformed African American masculinity in post-reconstruction America. Thus *Manning the Race* "explores how men of African descent were marketed, embodied, socialized, and imaged for the purpose of political, professional, and cultural advancement during the early decades of the twentieth century," and how these men "have attempted to formulate and re-form their experiences, roles, and self-concepts as men in a variety of genres, media, and social practices" (1). By pitting these discourses and practices against those of the Jim Crow regime, with its insistence on an ideal of normalized (i.e. white patriarchal) masculinity impossible for black men to live up to due to the restrictions placed on them, Ross on the one hand makes apparent how this regime was itself primarily "a sexual system of oppression" (2; Ross's emphasis). On the other hand he illustrates how black men challenged and often managed to displace the "gender and sexual norms" (3) on which this system operated in their attempts to reform the race through a reformation of black men in various (discursive) fields. As Ross not only draws on race theory and masculinity studies but ties his analysis of African American masculinity closely to the concerns of black feminist theory as well as sexuality and queer studies, he is at the same time able to show how African American men have often based their effort of manhood reform on the exclusion of or triangulation with others - American Indians, African American Women, Jews, criminal or "sexually deviant" men - and thereby adhered to and strengthened rather than subverted the sexual and gender norms of Jim Crow.

2 The focus of *Manning the Race* is on three different but interacting discourses: Part 1 of the study investigates "New Negro ideology" (18) as it was formulated by race leaders at the turn of the century in three "authoritative modes of expression: new-century race treatises and anthologies (race tracts and albums), New Negro personal narratives (autobiographical and fictional), and professional sociological studies" (16). Part 2 critically considers the field of race patronage in biracial political organizations such as the NAACP and in the cultural context of the "so-called New Negro Renaissance" (139) by examining a number of

institutional and personal patronage relationships involving both black and white, male and female, patrons and protégés. Part 3 centers on the genre of the black urban folk novel, analyzing works of male and female authors that stage the lives and development of both male and female protagonists and in doing so present reconceptualized versions of "black manhood, womanhood, and gender relations [...] under the conditions of modern urbanity as a site of racial oppression" (306). The primary concern of each part is to examine in which manner these discourses attempt to construct African American masculinity against the powerful, violent and often literally life-threatening limitations of Jim Crow. Although Ross is anxious to point out the importance "of moving beyond an exclusive attention to the black body [...] as the sole stigmatized object of racial and sexual subordination" (4), *Manning the Race* nonetheless does not leave the black body unconsidered but demonstrates convincingly how in each of the discursive fields that it investigates the notion of the trespassing body - the (black male) body in motion across color, class, and gender lines - becomes a highly important and contested site. Thus the study is not only organized around three different kinds of discourse but also

around three kinds of racial/sexual movement: (1) the individual and collective migratory body [...]; (2) the black male person in social circulation within biracial institutions and patronage networks; and (3) the "footloose" mass migrant restlessly seeking community amid the changing racial and class affiliations and sexual boundaries of the northern city. (12)

3 When Part 1 of *Manning the Race* therefore engages with the above-mentioned "three New Negro expressive modes" (17) of African American race leaders at the turn of the century, one of its primary interests is to show to what extent the respective versions of New Negro ideology hinge upon notions of and "insistence on the manly freedom of mobility" (17) and to illustrate how in all the considered genres mobility is put to different uses in order to "reconceptualize radically the worth, status, and iconography of the race" (22). It is made obvious that often the individual leader's attitude to mobility also depends on his answer to the question of "the race's sexual identification and gender-role performance" (24). On the one hand, "sexually assertive" race tracts such as Charles Chesnutt's 1900 "The Future American"-trilogy and William Pickens's *The New Negro* (1916) hail the mobility of the Great Migration as a sign of progress promising "a more sexually competitive and competent, and thus a more modern, racial identity" (26). With their reliance on "the cool cowboy pose," New Negro personal narratives such as Pickens's autobiography *Bursting Bonds* (1923), or, curiously, Ida B. Wells's autobiography *Crusade for Justice* (1970), tend to posit a strong link between mobility and "sexual independence [...], rugged individualism, and compulsory masculinity"



(93). On the other hand, African American sociologists', for example W.E.B. Du Bois's, George Edmund Haynes's, or E. Franklin Frazier's, linking of mobility and mass migration with dangerous sexual deviance/license enabled them "to construct their own masculinity as normal, their sexuality as self-disciplined, and their social status as professional" through positing themselves as static and hence stable counterweights to the footloose masses (147).

4 Ross's discussion demonstrates, however, that despite their contrary evaluations of mobility and their varying attitudes to whether one should attempt to "resex" or "un-"/"desex" the race (24), nearly all the "expressive modes" treated in Part 1 - including central works of the New Negro movement from Booker T. Washington's *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900) to Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) - "scrip[t] racial progress in masculine terms" (86) and revert to various forms of conventional (white) patriarchal "gender typing" (87). The latter is expressed, for example, in "Washington's patriarchal household, Du Bois's gentle but manly Talented Tenth patronage, Adam's chivalric sketching, and Pickens's conquering race-tribes," or in Locke's placing of the "Brown Madonna" on the frontispiece of his anthology, whose "iconoclastic break with the predominant disrespectful racial image of the black woman [...] is *not* a break with the more general sexualized/spiritualized dichotomy familiar in European traditions" (87-88; Ross's emphasis).

5 While Part 2, "Negotiating Racial Uplift: Gender Rivalry and Erotic Longing in the Making of New Negro Patronage," certainly presents one of the most intriguing ideas of *Manning the Race*, namely that "patronage desire gets structured along libidinal lines as though it were a mode of sexual desire" (195), it does, unfortunately, not succeed in making its claim fully convincing. Even though the two chapters comprising Part 2 present various (readings of) instances to corroborate its central claim - Ross discusses, for example, Du Bois's relations to various NAACP patrons and protégés, NAACP co-founder Mary White Ovington's study *Half a Man* (1911) and her memoirs *Black and White Sat Down Together* (published posthumously in 1995), McKay's attacks on Locke as a black patron, Langston Hughes's relation to the white patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, or Carl Van Vechten's patronage efforts - these instances seem not enough to warrant the general nature of Ross's claim concerning the libidinal nature of patronage relations. Although Ross's arguments are often convincing, the straightforward sexual nature of the implications that he detects in the discussed relationships is not always manifest. Nevertheless, Ross's lucid discussion of tropes employed in the discourse of patronage is immensely fruitful and illustrates that, even if race patronage should not in all cases be actually structured like sexual desire, it is certainly

frequently conceptualized as such in personal and critical accounts of patronage relations to various rhetorical purposes. Thus Ross's discussion of the implications of the designation of a white woman as patron rather than matron, or of a black male patron as midwife (see esp. 225, 264-265), and particularly his detailed analysis of the "sexual logic" of the "two complementary, contrary paradigms" through which Negro Renaissance cultural patronage was rhetorically rendered, namely "prostitution (usually heterosexual and interracial) and affiliation (usually patriarchal and familial)" (255) demonstrate how such patronage was shaped as a "conflictively gendered racial institution" that often worked to strengthen rather than undermine the white patriarchal norms on which the Jim Crow regime was built (253).

6 Part 3, "'A City Jungle This': Footloose Desire and the Sexual Underworlds of Harlem Renaissance Fiction," offers a detailed reading of the (re)constructions of black masculinity and femininity in male- and female-authored black urban folk novels published from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. Against the backdrop of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) as well as three of its African American precursors - James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924), and Walter White's *Flight* (1926) - Ross explores how the discussed novelists challenge and revise the "Van Vechten trend" (306) of representing black urban sexuality as sensational spectacle and thus offer reconceptualized versions of urban African American masculinity and femininity. Ross shows how novels such as Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho* and McKay's *Home to Harlem* (both 1928) "see[k] reciprocity and consolidation within the race by binding the hero to best pals who are erotically 'queer'" without, however, "making such sexual variance a spectacle to be eyed pruriently by middle-class white readers excited by Carl Vechten's depictions of black exotic erotica in *Nigger Heaven*" (308). At the same time, by pitting these two novels against narratives with female protagonists (in addition to Fauset's and White's above-mentioned ones, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* [1928] and Wallace Thurman's *Blacker the Berry* [1929]), *Manning the Race* succeeds in illustrating not only how novels such as Fisher's and McKay's can achieve their versions of "moderated manhood" (357) only by "leav[ing] intact conventional femininity" (363), but also that the utopian notion that "alternative sexual arrangements" such as same-sex relationships "offer some relief from racial and sexual domination" should not go unquestioned (393). Thus particularly Thurman's *Blacker the Berry* points to the dangers that the enacting of same-sexuality - still generally perceived as deviant although works such as Fisher's and McKay's suggest otherwise - could pose.

7 In presenting its readers with a broad range of the multiple, often competing conceptualizations of black masculinity circulating during the Jim Crow era, *Manning the*

*Race* successfully challenges the notion "that we know 'the black man' in [...] the facile epithets projecting clichés such as 'emasculatation' and 'hypermasculinity' onto lives and histories denied the most rudimentary assumptions of human conflictedness, intricacy, and richness" (398). Ross's analyses offer abundant proof that the concept of black masculinity - even within the limits of a single historical period such as Jim Crow - cannot be reduced to such grand narratives. The particular strength of *Manning the Race* thus stems from Ross's ability to cover a vast amount of ground by presenting an immensely broad range of various concepts and discourses, while at the same time discussing each of the sites opened up in astonishing detail. If there is one drawback to Ross's work, it consists in this close attention to detail which sometimes, as for example in Part 2, causes the reader to get lost momentarily in the intricacies of the argument. Generally, however, *Manning the Race* is strongly coherent - an effect it particularly achieves through the central concept of mobility, which recurs throughout all parts, and the fact that the study often allows us to trace one and the same author's efforts of reconceptualizing and reforming black masculinity through various genres and discourses. Thus, Ross's *Manning the Race* is highly recommended to anyone interested in the history of African American masculinity and, together with bell hooks's *We Real Cool* (2004), certainly ranges among the most important recent publications in the field.

**Deborah Caslav Covino: *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2004**

By Beth Pentney, Simon Fraser University, Canada

1 The booming makeover industry, especially its intersections with reality-television programming, has captured much feminist academic interest as of late. Deborah Caslav Covino's *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture*, narrowly predates a flurry of publications exploring the American penchant for aesthetic transformation (Heller forthcoming 2006, 2007; McGee 2005; Wegenstein, under review; Weber 2005). Her work identifies the importance of the study of the makeover in popular culture, and sets a high standard with which to compare more recent investigations into makeover culture. Using Julia Kristeva's theoretical conceptualizations of the abject from her *Powers of Horror* (1982), Covino traces the impetus behind the explosion of aesthetic surgical procedures. The cosmetic surgery industry markets its services almost exclusively to women, relying on Western ideologies of beauty and femininity for self-justification and product-promotion; thus, Covino focuses primarily on female subjects. She situates her work among feminist theory of cosmetic surgery, but determines that a new mode of analysis is necessary in order to move beyond previously reductive interpretations of female cosmetic-surgery patients (as either victims or agents of makeover culture).

2 Covino argues that the emergence of an "aesthetic surgical imaginary" has shaped our perceptions of physical and psychological health, such that the objectification of abject bodies engages a process of expulsion and amendment, which fosters social affirmation for the individual undergoing surgical change. Moreover, she underscores the ability of the aesthetic surgical imaginary to harness objectification, abjection, and identification for the purposes of bolstering the aesthetic-surgery industry, as it links physical transformation with autonomy (through social conformity, thus reflecting the inherent paradox of its ethos).

3 Covino begins by tracing the foundational psychoanalytic framework of the abject, summarizing briefly Kristeva's development of Lacanian theories of the Symbolic and the Semiotic in relation to language acquisition and the repressed maternal. She suggests that the cultural application of abjection theories is relevant in the climate of makeover culture because the aesthetic surgical imaginary promises successful social integration and happiness for women through its services. The abject is central to the perceived need for aesthetic surgery and feeds into the industry's claims to be able to fulfill the desire of "the fantasized image of oneself as free from the visible signs of temporality, discontinuity, and variance" (2).

Covino twists the traditional understanding of the abject: rather than perceiving it as exclusionary for its repulsiveness, she bases her argument on the notion that the aesthetic surgical imaginary conveys the promise of success through the self-objectification of abject body-parts in order to access community, a process Covino likens to Kenneth Burke's "consubstantiality," or "shared substance" (33). Amendment of the abject through surgery is the key to unlocking the desired inclusion in a community of "clean and proper bodies," which we are socialized to find desirable.

4 The irony, Covino reminds us, is that the abject can never permanently be amended, because the body defies all attempts at control, border enforcement, and rigidity, despite aesthetic procedures. Moreover, the abject is inseparable from that which seeks to be rid of it, since the clean and proper body must be defined by what it is not (or by what it will not admit that it is). Covino provides as an example of this inseparability the industry's attempts to differentiate "good" scars from "bad" scars: the fear of the unruly abject body emerges in industry discourse as a desire to control the shape that the body will take post-operatively. While great care is taken by surgeons to ensure that the marks of aesthetic surgery are hidden and minimal, ultimately, even the "good" scar reminds us of the potentially improper, disorderly, uncontrollable body (39). So how, then, does the industry succeed in denying its inevitable failure to amend the abject body, and instead convince millions of people that it holds the tools to accomplish beauty, acceptance and self-determination? Covino contends that the sustained industry and media discourse of an essential, natural, ideal beauty, as well a rhetoric of democracy, and a philosophy of individualization, all converge in the aesthetic surgical imaginary, and thus deflect attention from the illusion of permanence achieved by cosmetic surgery. The inevitable upkeep required to temper the signs of aging become routine maintenance, dependent on the determination of the committed patient, if she is to retain access to the community of clean and proper bodies.

5 Once Covino situates a discussion of the abject within the current American makeover phenomenon, she takes up a more direct reading of makeover reality television by exploring The Learning Channel's *A Personal Story*. She focuses on the "I-centered narratives" of the patients and the formulaic unfolding of each episode, where erasing physical markers of abjection is celebrated and normalized through successful cosmetic-surgery procedures and social affirmation. The goal of the series, according to Covino, is not to educate the female viewer about aesthetic-surgery procedures (and their potential dangers and costs), but instead "to normalize, routinize and legitimize the industry as a response to the personal desires of individuals" (69). The heavy emphasis on the individual (as indicated by the title, as well as

voice-over patient narration) sidesteps the industry's responsibility to account for its part in the social and cultural construction of the abject body, while the actual removal of the abject remains peripheral and controlled on *A Personal Story* (71). The denial of the abject on a program that requires the abject for its formula seems paradoxical, but there are several paradoxes within this genre, as Covino points out. She suggests that, as a product of capitalism, *A Personal Story* "conceals the processes of production" so that the viewer does not focus on the financial or physical cost of surgery (74). This process deemphasizes the producer/consumer market relationship and instead celebrates self-determination as the required currency for aesthetic surgery. Her analysis of several episodes in detail is helpful in illustrating these and other points.

6 Covino's final chapter builds upon her analysis of *A Personal Story* and links the philosophical engine of the aesthetic surgical imaginary with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, as well as the widely distributed American retiree magazine *Modern Maturity*. These cultural texts reflect the tenets espoused by the aesthetic surgical imaginary, particularly the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's well-being (88). Here, Covino continues to highlight that, whatever the medium, the presence of choice is illusory for women and men who are faced with options that really only spell out conformity, revealing the extent to which abjection becomes "a kind of lapse in determination, or the consequence of sloppy self-will" (93). Whether Oprah doles out free makeovers to women who fail to "pass" in a youth-dominated beauty culture, or *Modern Maturity* encourages dying-management (including preparation for one's funeral) in its "Death" issue, attempts to control the abject or the outdated "promote the view that the aged body is an unnecessary deviation from the good body" (101). The result, Covino reaffirms, is the complicity of makeover culture with the aesthetic surgical imaginary in their construction and objectification of abject bodies, and the resultant amendment and identification for the purposes of perceived entry into a community of clean and proper bodies (105). Covino identifies a growing body of critical analysis in response to the rise in aesthetic procedures and clients, but rather than aligning herself with conclusions that lament the dangers and immoralities of aesthetic surgery, she offers an alternate solution.

7 She suggests "we need a new lexicon to talk about the distorted body" (107), one that acknowledges the abject as correlative to the beautiful. She calls this epistemological refiguring "inspired abjection," and describes it as a response to social abjection that is "most fully capable of a complex vision of variant bodies and involved in the creative desire to both escape and describe the temporal and corporeal" (108). Covino's vision encourages

acceptance of the abject, for the purpose of limiting beauty fetishism and "present[ing] conjunctions of the extraordinary and the ordinary" (109). This prospect might appear to be unrealistically egalitarian and reliant upon naturalized binaries of beauty/abject, but Covino is careful to relinquish fantasies of reclamation or celebration: "There is no gain in wrenching beauty so that it includes wrinkles and spider veins" (108). Rather, she points to some present examples of inspired abjection in works of art and literature, and contends that inspired abjection does not require a devaluation of ideal beauty or its supporters. *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture* provides an important perspective for thinking about the relationship between the subject and the aesthetic-surgery industry, one that moves outside of the well worn dialectic of the cosmetic surgery patient as either victim or agent. Covino also offers a productive endpoint from which to build upon, through her call for a consciousness of inspired abjection, which is sure to foster continued debate about the role of makeover culture and the reception of makeover television.

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**Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, ed.: *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. New York:  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2005**

By Sonja Altnöder, University of Konstanz, Germany

1 With the performative turn's emphasis on the discursive construction of gender categories, a growing awareness has emerged within the interdisciplinary field of gender studies that "insistence on coherence and unity of the category [woman, SA] refuse[s] the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler 1990: 14). Hence, the project of countering the internal structure of white hegemony in the field of gender studies - although well under way for considerable time - has gained added momentum and amplified scope. One of its latest additions is Oyèrónké Oyewùmí's anthology *African Gender Studies. A Reader* (2005). Bringing together a wide range of voices and disciplinary perspectives of African scholars, the collection interrogates some well-established concepts and ideas of (Western) gender studies so as to "correct the longstanding problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities" (xiv) and to re-define "gender" as an analytical tool applicable to African contexts.

2 On a critical note, however, the editor seems to establish a dichotomy between two homogeneous cultural spheres in her brief but lucid preface: Africa and the West. While at least the former's uniformity is clearly deconstructed as the anthology's contributions cover a wide range of cultural contexts, it still comes as a surprise that the homogeneity of the "West" and "Western" gender studies respectively remains largely uncontested, especially when considering that all but five of twenty-two contributors are African scholars in the diaspora, holding positions in the U.S. academia. Hence, although this anthology is primarily concerned with portraying thoroughly African perspectives within the vast field of gender studies, these perspectives themselves are located at the interface of "Africa" and the "West."

3 The anthology is divided into seven thematic sections and twenty-one chapters. Each of the sections is briefly introduced by a concise sketch of its thematic outline and a short summary of each of the following contributions. As the editor thus deliberately lets the texts speak for themselves critical conversations may emerge first and foremost within the sections but are intended to subsequently reach beyond these confines. Against this backdrop, this review will explore how the juxtaposition of the texts compiled in this anthology as well as their different disciplinary approaches - ranging from the social sciences to literary theory - ultimately culminates in a patchwork picture of African gender studies.

4 In the first section, "Transcending the Body of Knowledge", Oyewùmí's opening essay resumes the preface's assessment of Western gender categories as deeply entrenched in the "bio-logic" (xviii) of Western culture. The author's - perhaps not too unexpected - perception that social roles in Western culture are intrinsically determined by the body flies in the face of the aforementioned performative turn's emphasis on the perpetual (re)construction of, for instance, gender roles within and beyond existing social norms. In contrast to this perception of an underlying 'bio-logic' of social roles in Western culture social roles in Yoruba culture are depicted as inherently circumstantial and relational, and therefore not only as entirely free of any biological influence, but also of gendered restrictions. Yet, again quite contrarily, Akyeampong and Obeng's study on the development of power and authority in the Asante nation reveals that it was precisely their bodies that have effectively come to exclude women from hitherto unlimited access to positions of power: it is women's menstruation that keeps them from powerful positions in this society before they eventually become "ritual men" (30) - and hence eligible for positions of power - after menopause. Accordingly, these contributions outline a critical dialogue on the subject of gendered bodies. Nevertheless, one significant gap in both essays remains the lack of consideration for any colonial influence on the significance of "gender" in the two societies.

5 The second section, "Decolonizing Femininism", explores the relationship between feminism and colonialism and emphasizes the different experiences of feminism and feminist ideologies for women in the West and women in former colonies as either a liberating ideology or an extension of white supremacy rule. Nnaemeka's contribution focuses on the (im)possibility of achieving global sisterhood in the light of the specific construction, teaching and dissemination of knowledge about the - simultaneously raced and gendered - Other. Lazreg, on the other hand, openly advocates a non-reductive, all-inclusive femininity based on the acknowledgment of a common humanity at the center of womanhood, which transcends both cultures and races, and ultimately fosters a new consciousness of an inherently decentered, "transindividual" (78) subject. Both essays convincingly argue that the project of "decolonizing feminism" entails the subject's understanding of his or her own stance towards the other(ed) culture.

6 Moving from a critique of Western gender studies and (post)colonial feminist discourse to the third (and longest) section, "Reconceptualizing Gender", the following essays demarcate "alternative conceptions of the social world and the place of gender in it" (81). To begin with, three case studies explore such alternatives along the lines of the concepts of matriarchy (Amadiume), social roles in Yoruba society (Oyewùmí) and woman-woman

marriage among the Gikuyu (Njambo & O'Brien). Furthermore, this section includes a personal account - notably written by one of the male contributors to the anthology - illuminatingly portraying the author's subjective experience of genderless social categories in Yoruba society, so often alluded to in previous and subsequent contributions (Adéèkó). The section concludes with a theoretical text on the liberating scope of women's "essential roles" in African as opposed to their limiting qualities in Western societies (Kopytoff). Quite strikingly, and despite the success of all these contributions in broadening the perceptual and conceptual range of the social construction of gendered roles, all but the two contributions on Yoruba cultural structures seem to reveal possibilities for transgression which nevertheless remain - more or less subtle and acceptable - deviations from gendered societal norms.

7 While the previous sections primarily discussed and contested the contemporary significance of the concept "gender" in diverse African contexts, the fourth section, "Gender Biases in the Making of History", challenges not only male dominance, but also the ensuing invisibility of women in the field of historiography. Containing two theoretical essays and a case study the section is opened by the editor's third contribution to her own anthology, illustrating the introduction of the concept "gender" into Yoruba history in Rev. Johnson's historiographic record *The History of the Yorubas* (completed in 1897). Here, the use of the English language is shown to introduce gender differences into a cultural system where originally gender was unspecified by assuming men's and neglecting women's presences in positions of power. Along similar lines, the following reading (Zeleka) of four well renowned history textbooks reveals considerable gaps and silences on the issue of women's representation both in the textual and visual material. The last contribution to this section counters women's invisibility by portraying the significantly different life narratives of two female leaders in Senegalese politics, Arame Diène and Thioumbé Samb. (Indeed, this text speaks eloquently - albeit critically - to Kopytoff's essay in that it contradicts his introductory assumption of a relative ease with which women in formerly colonized countries seem to ascend to positions of power. But while the two Senegalese leaders became involved in politics during their countries' phase of transition, Kopytoff focuses on the postcolonial period instead.)

8 The fifth section, "Writing Women: Reading Gender", addresses various issues of the representation of Africa and African women in colonial and postcolonial writing. Comparing the symbolic significance ascribed to white and black women in sexual relationships with white and black men, Busia's essay "Miscegenation as Metonymy" succinctly explores relationships of power at the race-gender interface in colonial novels. Nfah-Abbenyi then

analyzes the concept "gender" and feminist theory in postcolonial (women's) writing. Posing the pertinent question of how the concept of "gender" can be localized so as to become a suitable analytical tool in postcolonial contexts, the author reevaluates key themes of Western feminist theory. In another case study, Gadzekpo portrays the involvement of women in Ghanaian print culture during the colonial period. Within and beyond the gendered space of so-called "women's columns", newspapers provided a forum for mainly elite women's self-expression, even though on the one hand, anonymous pen names contributed to women's invisibility while on the other hand, even female contributors were perceived as male when writing about "men's issues" as, for instance, politics.

9 In response to the challenging observation that development programmes hardly target the material needs of local populations, contributions in the sixth section, "Development and Social Transformation", offer both theoretical conceptualizations of sustainable transformative initiatives as well as a case study of women's successful empowerment. In a very brief but concise essay on women in development, Pala calls for the acknowledgment of both women's and men's needs within local communities and, shifting her focus to women's issues, continues to list three central points for successfully drafting and implementing development projects. These rather general directives then re-surface in Steady's subsequent description of an "investigative framework for gender research in Africa". The author emphasizes the need for oppositional discourses and feminist challenges to Eurocentric paradigms which should eventually yield to Africa- focused and gender-sensitive approaches to development. She concludes by listing nine important research questions for development and transformation programmes. Concluding this section with a succinct case study of the Yum initiative, Banoum illustrates the benefits of women's self-empowerment through traditional, indigenous knowledge systems. The women in this study successfully negotiate the tensions between dependency on a global market and traditional concepts that were also depicted as key issues in the previous two chapters.

10 The seventh and last section, "Critical Conversations", establishes an illuminating dialogue between Appiah's epilogue to his influential monograph *In My Father's House* and Nzegwu's challenge to his subjective albeit authoritative depiction of the concepts of matrilineality and patriarchy under the intersecting - and often contradictory - influences of Ghanaian and North American cultures. Lewis further provides a detailed survey of approaches to gender studies in African and postcolonial contexts, highlighting shortcomings of traditional trajectories but concluding with an identification of newly emergent, innovative patterns. (Lastly, Murunga's review essay of three books tackling the issue of "African

Women in the Academy and Beyond" succinctly sums up some of the major concerns voiced in the contributions to the anthology under review here. Most importantly, it once more foregrounds issues of "representation, equity and access to knowledge" (398) in the academic context that allegedly also influenced all the contributors' awareness of the concept "gender".

11 In conclusion, it is important to stress that the broad scope as well as the variety of voices and perspectives compiled in this anthology indeed contribute vitally to a broadening and (re-)conceptualization of gender studies. Nevertheless, three points of criticism remain: The first revolves around the the afore-mentioned positioning of most authors in-between African and Western cultures. Furthermore, the collection's primary interest in North and West African indigenous cultures, which not only narrows the frame of the patchwork picture of African gender studies, but neglects the hybrid nature of postcolonial societies. A third and last critical observation concerns the anthology's general conflation of gender studies with women's studies. Despite the editor's own cautioning against such reductive tendencies, the contributors to the anthology (including the editor herself!) focus chiefly on women's issues in the particular African contexts they study. Nevertheless, as the anthology targets a primarily Western readership, it is one of the collection's biggest assets that at no point do any of the theoretical texts, case studies and personal accounts attempt to apply such reductions to the concept of Africa, but instead respect and in fact point out the multiplicity and diversity of cultural contexts to be discovered on this continent. Hence, *African Gender Studies* does indeed present a very useful and recommendable tool for the study of "gender" in African contexts, which will, moreover, surely leave a challenging imprint on the Western reader's own conceptualization of "gender".

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## List of Contributors

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