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- 1 “One cannot be black without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them”<sup>1</sup> states Judith Butler, as cited by Armengol in this last chapter of *Masculinities in Black and White* (134), and it is this affirmation that would probably constitute the case of every discourse upon black and white masculinities in this book. Armengol’s study, winner of the 2015 Javier Coy Research Award for Best Monograph (SAAS-Spanish Association for American Studies), explores hegemonic structures around white masculinities approached by either white or African-American authors. In particular, five American authors are examined, within the content of their gender, race and sexual orientation (male and female, black and white, gay and straight). Thus, three different angles of approach are created (gender, race, sexuality), each to be juxtaposed to their subcategories.

2

In his introduction to the book, Armengol stands upon reflections on the “ontology of whiteness” and the relevance of scholarly discussions on racial/white/identity to date. Within the framework of the apparent tendency of current critical study on the constructions and impact of blackness on whites, the present work defines its purposes: It focuses on representations of whiteness –and, in particular, white masculinities– via dialectic exchanges between black and white authors. It seeks to shed light on perceived ideas and depictions of whiteness. In doing so, “it hopes to challenge essentialist notions of *race* and, in particular, traditional academic divisions between *black* and *white* texts, showing how the differences between black and white authors in their racial views may oftentimes be less significant than the differences among each group”

(6). The problematics of definition surrounding African-American literature are also discussed here in relation to the extent of how “African” some white works should be considered and vice versa.

3

The book comprises five chapters, each approaching from a different angle the construct of white masculinity. Frederick Douglass, and particularly his work *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, is the focus of the first chapter. While most of the existing scholarship has focused on Douglass’s construction of black masculinity, his “struggle to recover his freedom as integral to the recovery of his *manhood*, thus suggesting the feminizing effect of slavery on black men” (14), Armengol illuminates the *Narrative* from a different perspective: he maintains that slavery appears to extend its detrimental effects on white men too, influencing both victims of slavery and its perpetrators. Moreover, he argues that racial abuse of black women contributed to the gender subjugation of the white men’s white counterparts, divesting them thus of every humane quality, and turning them paradoxically into slaves to their own supremacy.

4

For most scholars, Douglass has been identified with the notion of heroic slavery. Namely, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892) and the *Heroic Slave* (1852) have been seen as a readings of both humanist and male pride to such an extent that the two notions coincide with and define one another. As a result, issues of black or white women’s suffrage have been marginalized, as Nancy Bentley and Richard Yarborough have shown in their studies on Douglass. Armengol challenges such readings on Douglass by critiquing the already established scholarly assumption that links whiteness to masculinity and feminization of black men. His reading of Douglass’s *Narrative* attempts to demonstrate that white, male hegemony is not only to be held responsible for feminizing black slaves, but also for “unmanning” —that is de-humanizing — white men themselves, depriving them of their own humanity. Class, gender and race appear to constitute parts of the same complex puzzle of hegemony.

5

Armengol maintains that, when it comes to slavery, Douglass focuses on the *cause* rather than the *fact* of slavery. Throughout his *Narrative*, Douglass differentiates among different types of *slaveholders* based on their attitudes towards slaveholding, *overseers* (where the author explores authority between masters and slaves but also between white masters and overseers), and *slaves*, who constitute a third category with internal distinctions among them, depending on their relative compatibility to their master’s status. Distinctions here expand to illuminate slaveholding as a system that spread from race to class as well. Also, slavery was seen by Douglass as posing distinctions not only between white and black men, but also between men and women as victims of the unspoken patriarchal laws of female subordination.

6

The second chapter focuses on Herman Melville’s deconstruction of white (male) supremacy in his 1855 novella *Benito Cereno*. Despite Melville’s traditional attention to men exclusively, scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Leland Person and Wilma Garcia have looked for female presence and female representations in Melville oeuvre, or they have attempted queer readings of Melville’s works, exploring alternative versions of phallic hypermasculinity. Therefore, in many of Melville’s secondary male characters, what appears is an affiliation to female characteristics that “cross conventional gender

norms as well, depicting non-normative models of maleness based on gentleness and cooperation” (47). In addition, Melville has traditionally been seen as an advocate of human rights (even though questioned by recent scholarship), as in *Benito Cereno* (1855), where the detrimental effects of racism for both whites and blacks are demonstrated. In Melville’s novella, white supremacist views prove both “distorted and distorting, not just blind but blinding, limited and limiting” (59).

7

Chapter 3 focuses on Ernest Hemingway and the interplay between gender and race in two of his autobiographical works: *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) and *Under Kilimanjaro* (2005). More specifically, it elaborates on “the interdependence in [Hemingway’s] autobiographical work of gender and race in general, and masculinity with whiteness in particular, with re-vision of his gender ideals. Particularly the view of trophy hunting as a trope of white manhood, appears to go hand in hand with his re-vision of sexual and racial hierarchies”. (81-82) According to existing scholarship, gender seems to oscillate between sexism (Judith Fetterley, 1978) and sexual ambiguity (Spilka, Kennedy, and Comley and Scholes), while Hemingway’s views on race range from invisibility of blackness (Kenneth H. Harrow) to an ambiguous connection of racial and sexual transgression (Carl Eby). Armengol distinguishes two periods in Hemingway’s writing: his hard masculinist pose in the 1930s and a more “relaxed” masculinity over the 1950s, reflected in his more progressive views on women and black people, often manifesting whiteness as lacking masculinity, and the “Negro” better approaching the notion of ideal manhood. Of course the idea of linking white supremacy and masculinity is ubiquitous in this chapter too. Armengol comments: “If, as it seems, maleness and whiteness were constructed together, and if hegemonic (i.e. white) masculinity has traditionally been defined in opposition to both women and black men (Segal XXXIV), then it should come as no surprise that the celebration of white manhood in Ernest Hemingway’s *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) depends on the parallel subordination of both women and non whites” (75). Nevertheless, even though *The Green Hills of Africa* proves to be sexually and racially biased, *Under Kilimanjaro* opens to a radically different perspective of the author’s views on masculinity in conjunction with femininity and race.

8

In the next chapter, attention is relocated to another dimension of maleness and that is homosexuality and its role in the construction of masculinities either black or white. James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) remains in the spotlight as one of the most daring gay novels by an African-American author. Armengol focuses on the issue of race in Baldwin’s early fiction, demonstrating the significance of race as a hegemonic structure as well as its dependence on heterosexuality and masculinity. More specifically, he argues that race is deflected onto sexuality with the result that whiteness is transvalued as heterosexuality, just as homosexuality becomes associated with blackness, both literally and metaphorically (94). Via the associations between color and sexuality, Armengol demonstrates the inseparability and interdependence between the two. This expands to the category of social class, with David’s urbanity oscillating between the purity of his feelings and white heterosexual ideals and Giovanni’s status as “dark” not only because of his southern peasant Italian origin, but also because of the illicit passions he ignites. Thus, the racialized body links homosexuality with darkness, and hegemonic heterosexuality with whiteness. In this context, Armengol concludes, homosexuality (darkness/blackness) in Giovanni comes as “otherness” to David. Baldwin’s novel appears

as a critique to the idealization of masculinity in the American society that goes along with false perceptions about morality and “otherness.”

9

The crossings of racial boundaries are examined in this last chapter of Armengol’s book and particularly through the eyes of Martha Gellhorn, a war journalist, writer, and former wife of Ernest Hemingway. In the autobiographical story “White into Black,” Gellhorn explores the artificial divisions of race between whites and blacks as well as the terrible implications of those distinctions. The reversal of racism is being looked at, this time with herself being discriminated against for her whiteness during her stay in Haiti in 1952, a place where “foreigners never go.” As a “white Negro,” she comes to realize the implications not only of racism but also of the trauma inflicted by the colonial past. Thus, the story reveals racism as having to do a lot less with skin color and a lot more with the power of hegemony against the “Other.” Looking at the relationship between race and gender, various scholars have underscored that second-wave feminism hegemonically raised the white woman to the position of symbolizing universal womanhood, while black rights movements have stressed masculinization as the only venue of seeing the black race. Thus, black women’s presence was silenced, sexualized, or molded to the stereotype of a submissive servant. Within this spectrum, Gellhorn falls prey to discrimination not only because of her “deviant” color, but also because of her gender.

10

The unveiling of unspoken gender has been an issue concerning both society and scholarly thought, in an ever-changing global society that now, more than ever, challenges traditional schemata about gender identities. What about the issue of race though? Ongoing discussions on color in the political arena, and racist incidents of violence still occurring, prove that there is still a long way to go, especially when it comes to the thorny issue of racialized masculinities. Armengol has produced an exemplary study of the interface of race and gender although his scope is limited to only five authors and a few texts. Nevertheless, the book is a significant contribution to the discussion on race and gender with illuminating ideas and a solid use of bibliographical sources.

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## NOTES

1. Judith Butler, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge.” *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993: 170-171.

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