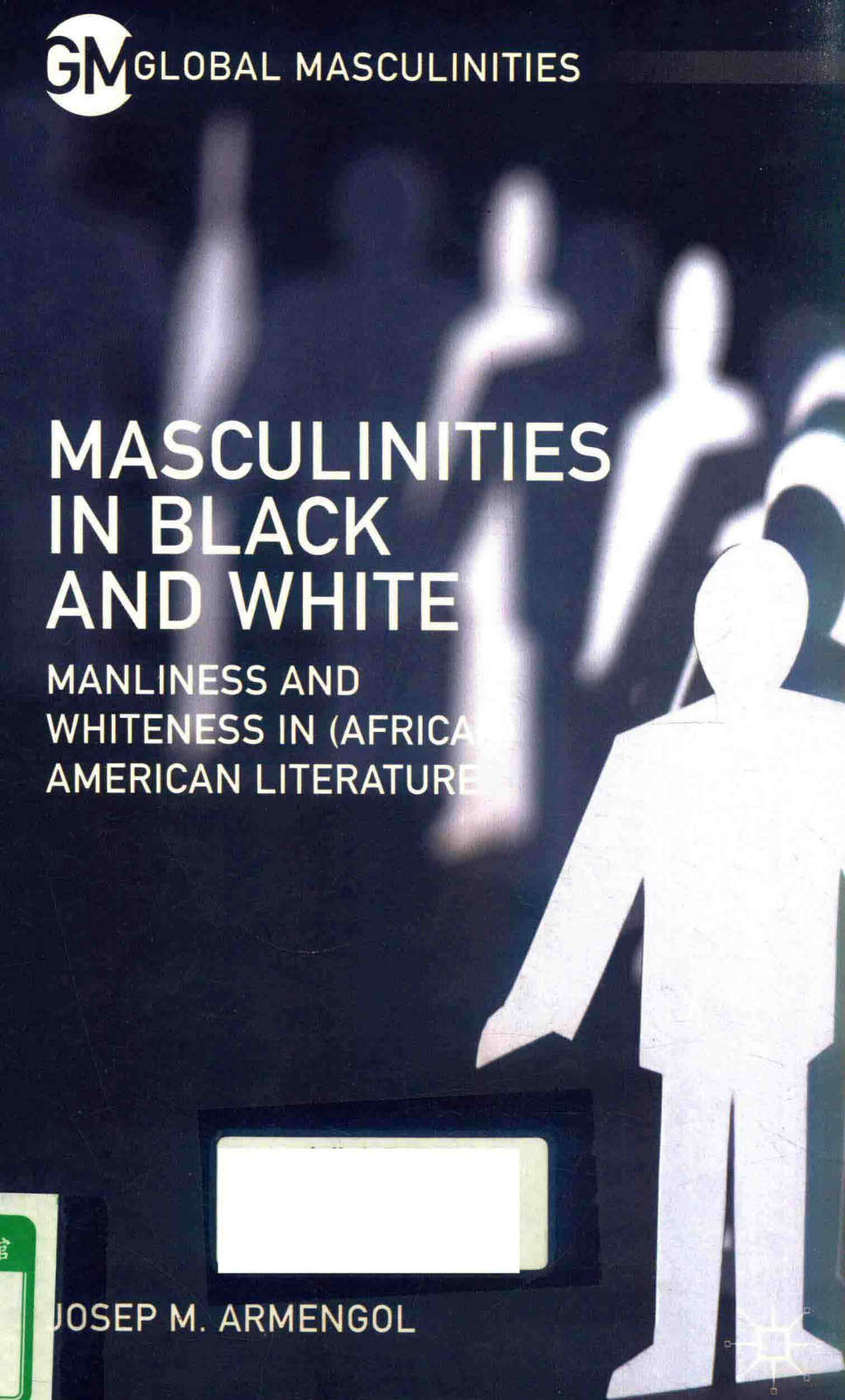
GLOBAL MASCULINITIES



MASCULINITIES IN BLACK AND WHITE

MANLINESS AND WHITENESS IN (AFRICA AMERICAN LITERATURE

JOSEP M. ARMENGOL

Masculinities in Black and White

Manliness and Whiteness in (African) American Literature

Josep M. Armengol

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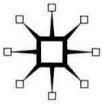

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Masculinities in Black and White

Global Masculinities

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Josep M. Armengol

To my mother, Maria Rosa Carrera, and
my grandmother, Rosa Campi, in loving memory.
For nobody knows more about men than women do.

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Note from the Series Editors

In Sweden, a "real man" is one who does childcare for his own children, and liberals and conservatives argue not about whether there should be government-mandated paternity leave but about the allocation of time between new mothers and fathers. In China, years of enforcing a one-child rule have led to a population with a vast demographic imbalance in the number of males over females, with consequences yet to be determined. In Iran, vasectomy becomes increasingly popular as men seek to take more responsibility for family planning in an atmosphere of restrictive gender roles. In the Philippines, government-supported export of women as nurses, maids, and nannies to first-world countries alters the lives of boys and girls growing up both at home and in the developed countries, and Mexican-American men adapt to their wives' working by doing increased housework and childcare, while their ideology of men's roles changes more slowly. And throughout the world, warfare continues to be a predominantly male occupation, devastating vast populations, depriving some boys of a childhood, and promoting other men to positions of authority.

Global Masculinities is a series devoted to exploring the most recent, most innovative, and widest ranging scholarship about men and masculinities from a broad variety of perspectives and methodological approaches. The dramatic success of Gender Studies has rested on three developments: (1) making women's lives visible, which has also come to mean making all genders more visible; (2) insisting on intersectionality and so complicating the category of gender; (3) analyzing the tensions among global and local iterations of gender. Through textual analyses and humanities-based studies of cultural representations, as well as cultural studies of

attitudes and behaviors, we have come to see the centrality of gender in the structure of modern life and life in the past, varying across cultures and within them. Through interviews, surveys, and demographic analysis, among other forms of social scientific inquiry, we are now able to quantify some of the effects of these changing gender structures. Clearly written for both the expert and more general audience, this series embraces the advances in scholarship and applies them to men's lives: gendering men's lives, exploring the rich diversity of men's lives—globally and locally, textually and practically—as well as the differences among men by social class, "race"/ethnicity and nationality, sexuality, ability status, sexual preference and practices, and age.

MICHAEL KIMMEL AND
Judith Kegan Gardiner

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Introduction

"Does Race Still Matter?" Thus read the provocative headline on the front cover of the February-March 2008 issue of *U.S. News*, featuring a full-color face picture of the then candidate to the US presidency, Barack Obama. Inside, the cover story by Jay Tolson deals with what this journalist defines as Obama's success in challenging "the rules of race and politics." The son of a black Kenyan father and a white Kansas-born mother, Obama is said to propose a politics of "unity" that acknowledges differences of identity while underlining "the need for compromise . . . to achieve the common good" (38).[1] In Tolson's view, Obama's political strategy is admirable in his effort to go "beyond identity," especially given Obama's struggle with the "historical" and "personal" circumstances of being an African-American in a country "whose original sin was its enslavement of Africans and whose enduring shame has been its unequal treatment of black people" (39). While acknowledging the achievements of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the decade in which he was born, Obama is seen as *not* "stuck" in those events, but as looking at "America whole" (Tolson 42). As Kenneth T. Walsh (43) argues in another article from the same *U.S. News* issue, Obama's candidacy has resulted in his emergence not so much as "a black candidate but a candidate who happens to be black," helping to move the country beyond America's tragic history of slavery, segregation, and racism.

This *U.S. News* issue speaks volumes, I believe, about the ongoing debate, social and academic, between, on the one hand, those who claim the continuing relevance and need for racial and identity politics and, on the other, those who insist on the need to move "beyond" race as well as other (limiting) identity categories. Thus, if the golfer Tiger Woods hates being associated with one

race or another, the infamous 2009 arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates by a local police officer at his *own* home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, following an anonymous caller's report of a "suspicious" black man supposedly breaking into the residence, reminds us of the continued relevance of "race," as well as its (implicit) association with poverty, to American culture.[2] Although popularized by these and other examples,[3] the debate has long played a central role in academia as well, which seems to be equally divided as to the (ir)relevance of race and identity politics as analytic categories. Thus, the Nobel Prize-winning African-American writer Toni Morrison has recently suggested that labeling affirmative action as "a black thing" was "an enormous error" since, in her opinion, "the problems are about poor people—that's it" (Kachka). Indeed, in a letter of endorsement to President Obama's 2008 candidacy, Morrison, who had called Bill Clinton America's "first black President," claimed that she did not care much about Obama's race, insisting that "I would not support you if that was all you had to offer or because it might make me 'proud'" (McGeveran).[4]

Morrison's view of "race" as a limited and limiting category has indeed been taken up by numerous scholars, black and white.[5] In *Black Gay Man* (2001), Robert F. Reid-Pharr, for instance, set out to question the notion of black "authenticity," positing blackness, and thus "black" culture, as (white) constructs, emphasizing throughout the "essentially permeable and thus impure nature of all American identities" (12). In a similar vein, Paul Gilroy has not only destabilized the notion of whiteness and racial purity, but has also supported a turn toward what Goodale and Engels (83–85) have defined as a "post-racial" world. For Gilroy, just as current discursive formations contain "vestiges" of America's biracial heritage, so will future discursive formations retain ancestral (postcolonial) vestiges of racial "purity." In his words:

> Much of the contemporary discourse producing "race" and racial consciousness can be identified as an anachronistic and even vestigial phenomenon. Where [biological] screens rather than lenses

> and mirrors mediate the pursuit of bodily truth, "race" might best be approached as an after image—a lingering symptom of looking too intently or too casually into the damaging glare emanating from colonial conflicts at home and abroad. ("Race" 845)[6]

If Gilroy criticized race as a "colonial" category, other scholars have recently argued against what they see as equally obsolete racial labels and classifications, as well. In his book *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), for example, Kenneth Warren posits what he sees as the inevitable decline of African American literature, for, if it *was* mostly defined as a corpus of literary texts focused on the political disenfranchisement of black people, then it *is* now simply inapplicable, according to Warren, to post-civil rights (black) authors and texts. While the debate on the (non)existence of whiteness and other identity categories has become more heated than ever since the 1980s due to the influence of poststructuralist thinking, the discussion may indeed be traced back to the nineteenth century, if not before. In "What Is a White Man?" (1889), the writer Charles W. Chesnutt, for example, already noted that, despite the Southern whites' obsession with preserving racial purity and preventing interracial marriages, miscegenation had made "such progress" in the United States that "the line which separates the races must in many instances have been practically obliterated" (37). Highlighting the disparity, and thus absurdity, of legal distinctions in different (Southern) states between whites and blacks, as well *among* colored people themselves,[7] Chesnutt comes to the conclusion that the "purity" of the white race remains at least open to questioning, "pending of other complications which have grown out of the presence of the Negro on this continent" (38, 42). Like Chesnutt, the African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston, in her well-known 1928 essay "How It Feels To Be Colored Me," underlined the relativity of blackness, insisting that she did not always feel "colored" but only when "thrown against a sharp white background" (1506–1507), while James Baldwin went further when he denied the very existence of whiteness, claiming that "there is, in fact, no white community"

since "no one was white before he/she came to America." As a matter of fact, America became white, Baldwin elaborates, through the discrimination and denial of black people, even though Africans were "not black" before their arrival in the United States, either, when they were classified as such by the slave trade.[8] His conclusion, then, is that whiteness is nothing but "a moral choice (for there are no white people)" ("On Being White" 90, 91, 92).

Despite these insightful reflections on the *ontology of whiteness*, there is little doubt that *racial prejudice*, though often disguised, remains deeply ingrained in American society, pervading current social structures and relations. Toni Morrison herself—while radically questioning, as has been pointed out, the value of affirmative action as "a black thing"—has insisted that race is yet to run its course as an American topic, warning that "crude and crass as most of it is" and "uninformed as almost all of it is," "the discourse about race *is* important" (Kachka; emphasis added). While most of the existing scholarship on race has traditionally focused on blacks and nonwhites, the Nobel Laureate has also reminded us, however, of the imperious need to analyze blackness in relation to whiteness as the two categories are not only mutually dependent but actually inseparable from each other. Indeed, in her seminal *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), she did already prove the continued "Africanist" influence on (white) American culture in general, and literature in particular, arguing the impact of race and racism on both blacks and nonblacks, on the objects but also the subjects who "held" but sometimes also "resisted" those racist notions (11). Despite trying to deny blackness as part of the United States, American culture, in Morrison's view, has always defined itself both in relation *and* in opposition to "a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" (5). In this sense, it becomes especially relevant to see not only how (white) American culture has constructed the Africanist "other," but also, and especially, the self-reflexive mediation on "the self" deriving from such construction. For, it was through racial difference that the construction of the American as a new

(white) man took place, a man who recurrently used a nonwhite, Africanist persona as a projection of his own fears and desires. If "the subject of the dream is the dreamer," then Americans, as Morrison elaborates, used an Africanist presence to really talk about *themselves.* "It requires hard work *not* to see this" (17), she emphatically concluded.

Following in Morrison's steps to include both "the racial object" *and* the "racial subject" in American (literary) studies, a number of race scholars, black and white,[9] do indeed seem to have started revisiting the construction of whiteness in American culture and literature. If 1980s scholarship on race and ethnicity was almost synonymous with black studies, race scholars have since the 1990s been paying increasing attention to the social construction of whiteness.[10] In so doing, they have pursued, generally speaking, two main critical lines. The first, as instanced by the scholarly work of Theodore Allen, Eric Lott, David Roediger (*Wages*; *Towards*), Valerie Babb, and Alexander Saxton, among others, has shifted the focus of attention from black to white, analyzing the social, political, and historical construction of whiteness as well as its influence on whites themselves, rather than on nonwhite peoples and cultures. The second, as exemplified by John Edward Philips or Shelley Fisher Fishkin, has set out to explore the interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness, exploring the influence of blackness on (white) American authors such as Melville, Twain, or Thoreau, to name but a few. In *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (1993), for example, Fisher Fishkin focused on the previously "ignored" or "obscured" African American roots of Twain's fiction, especially *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, concluding, provocatively enough, that "the vernacular voice in American literature—the voice with which Twain captured our national imagination in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that empowered Hemingway, Faulkner, and countless other writers in the twentieth century—is in large measure a voice that is 'black'" (4). Similarly, other scholars contend that to study the African influence on white culture is absolutely essential if we are to fully understand

and appreciate the complexity of American culture. In Philips's words:

> African culture among whites should not be treated as just an addendum to studies of blacks but must be included in the general curriculum of American studies. Black studies must not be allowed to remain segregated from American studies but must be integrated into our understanding of American society, for our understanding of white American society is incomplete without an understanding of the black, and African, impact on white America. (237)

If, as it seems, much of the existing critical work on whiteness seems to revolve around either its construction and effects on the whites themselves or, alternatively, its indebtedness to "black" culture, the present study will focus on literary representations of whiteness, and white masculinity in particular, by a (select) number of American authors, black and white.[11] In doing so, the book aims to expand, and complicate, whiteness studies in several ways. If, as we have seen, several works have discovered the African influence on (white) American literature,[12] this study assumes hybridity as *intrinsic* to American culture, with its multicultural component as a *fact* from the very beginnings of America as a nation. Through the analysis of whiteness in the works of both black—that is, Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin—*and* white—namely, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, and Martha Gellhorn—American authors, my analysis thus aims to achieve two different albeit related objectives. On the one hand, it seeks to facilitate a (cross-racial) dialogue between these authors, especially by exploring both the similarities and differences in their conceptions and representations of whiteness. In so doing, it also 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.

The study does indeed attempt to take this view to its logical conclusion. For, if, as has been suggested, African and white