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Are You a “Real Man”? – The Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity in American Culture

Nobody was born a man; you earned manhood provided you were good enough, bold enough.

Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night*

This paper is intended to introduce the central issues of the construction of American masculinity. First of all, it will discuss masculine gender identity from psychological and historical perspectives. The latter perspective will present a number of factors that shaped specifically American construction of masculinity, such as the myth of the West and the capitalist workplace. Next, I will analyze the “crisis” of masculinity that was announced at the end of the nineteenth century and numerous ways employed to deal with it. The aim of this paper is to present the basic elements and dynamics of the construction of masculinity as well as its tensions.

The process of constructing masculine gender identity will be presented with reference to the works probably of the most prominent figure in the growing field of masculinity studies: Michael Kimmel’s “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective” (1987), “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity” (2001), and “Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832 – 1920” (1994). Other relevant sources include Elisabeth Badinter’s *XY. On Masculine Identity* (1992) and Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization* (1995).

The above-mentioned texts analyze the construction of gender identity as a historical process as well as a psychological one. The psychological process of constructing masculinity takes place primarily at the oedipal stage of development. The boy passes from the stage of identification with his mother to identification with his father. Some psychologists argue that the boy goes through a stage of protofemininity¹ before the oedipal crisis and separation from the mother take place (see Badinter). According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the stage of identification with the mother, the Imaginary Order, is a blissful stage of unity without difference and absence. After the oedipal crisis the child

¹ The concept of protofemininity was introduced by Robert Stoller in the 1970s and challenged Freud’s proposition about innate masculinity (Badinter 46).

enters the Symbolic Order. This change is connected with the acquisition of language and the feeling of lack and separation (Moi 99-101). The renunciation of the mother and identification with the father mark the construction of not only gender identity but also sexual orientation. Through the process of identification with the father, the boy becomes both masculine and heterosexual, which explains why the two categories are so strongly linked in collective consciousness.

As Kimmel claims in his text "Masculinity as Homophobia," the flight from the feminine represented by the mother is the most crucial element of masculine gender identification process. Yet, according to Kimmel, this is not a unitary process completed once and for all in early childhood. The renunciation of the feminine is enacted throughout the whole life. Men constantly feel pressured to prove their manhood, especially when other men scrutinize it. Thus Kimmel claims that masculinity is a homosocial enactment of the repudiation of the feminine. This process is also connected with the repression of homosexual desire, which remains in every boy from the protofeminine preoedipal stage (276). Hence, according to Kimmel, the repudiation of the feminine and homophobia are strongly interconnected and reinforce each other. Both are salient for the validation of masculinity especially in the homosocial sphere. In Kimmel's view homophobia is not only irrational fear of gay men, but the term also encompasses gay panic – the fear of being latently gay – as well as the fear of being emasculated by other men (277). The juxtaposition of the homophobic character of masculinity's enactment and homosociality necessary to validate it creates a strong double bind tension, which is central for the structure of masculine identity. Thus, masculinity is primarily the rejection of the feminine and the homosexual rather than simply affirmation of the masculine. This strong current of anxiety and decisive role of the negative code leaves masculinity fragile and unstable.

Elizabeth Badinter, in her book *XY. On Masculine Identity*, proposes a similar perspective on the masculine gender identification process. She claims that out of two main processes of identity construction, inclusion based on resemblance and exclusion based on difference, masculine identity is produced mainly through the latter process (33). The negative process of masculine gender identification can be illustrated with cliché phrases such as "boys don't cry," "men don't dance" or titles of self-help books such as *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*. Novelist Zane Grey claimed that: "All boys love football. If they don't they're not real boys" (quoted in Kimmel, "Consuming" 35). In mass imagination there exist numerous similar bans, including asking for directions or figure skating, which have been collected on sites such as "Top 74 Things 'Real Men,' Don't Do," "Things A Real Man Doesn't Do at Christmas," or "Twenty Things... You Never Hear Real Men Say."²

Moreover, the very phrase "real men" suggests an excluding dynamic characterizing the construction of hegemonic masculinity as, if there are "real men," it can be induced that there are also men who are not "real." The word "real" is not used as often in the case of women. A popular search engine reports 768,000 uses of "real man" and only 173,000 of "real woman."

Badinter's main thesis is that masculine identity is constructed in the process of differentiation – to be a man means not being like women, children, and homosexuals (32, 115). Nowadays, the feminine and the homosexual remain the most important categories of differentiation for men. Badinter claims that the renunciation of the feminine as the mother has always been an important element of the process of creating masculine identity. It was realized in many cultures in the separation stage of rites of passage. She agrees with Kimmel that men validate each other's masculinity. In her analysis of rites of passage she stresses that only men engender other men. Moreover, Badinter emphasizes the importance of fear in the process of masculine gender identification – the fear of emasculating women and the fear of showing any signs of femininity, which are related to homophobia as defined by Kimmel.

It is important to stress that there is nothing timeless about the homophobic aspect of masculinity. In her study, Badinter quotes numerous examples of rites of passage that are inherently homosexual. Many critics also point to the fact that in the Ancient Greek culture, male homosexuality was explicitly acknowledged (Easthope 12). Anthony Easthope, in his psychoanalytical examination of masculinity, claims that male autoerotic and homosexual desire was culturally repressed with the growth of Christian influences. Over the next eighteen centuries homosexual behavior was linked to the notion of the sodomite – a category that referred to a particular sexual behavior, without turning it into a stable identity (Badinter 94-106). Finally, it was the end of the nineteenth century that witnessed the creation of the homosexual as a social category in contrast to the sodomite. As Foucault puts it: "the homosexual of the nineteenth century became a personage: a past, a history and a childhood; a morphology too, with an indiscreet anatomy and perhaps mysterious physiology.... The homosexual is now a species" (43). The creation of a separate category strengthened the exclusionary character of masculinity – adding another othered group for differentiation.

I have argued above that, on the psychological level, masculinity is a constant process of exclusion and rejection of the feminine, the child, and the homosexual, and that the success of the process can be validated only by other men. Although the psychological level is common to many, if not all existing, cultures (due to the fact that all boys are assumed to pass through the oedipal stage), at this point I want to focus specifically on American masculinity and the particular historical processes that shaped it.

In his article “Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1920,” Kimmel presents the emergence of contemporary masculinity. It dates back to the 1830s – the peak of the industrial revolution and the emergence of the capitalist marketplace (13). Before the 1830s two models of masculinity prevailed: the “Genteel Patriarch” and the “Heroic Artisan.” The former derived his male identity from land ownership, whereas the latter represents an urban model of hereditary craftsmanship. By 1830, both models were replaced by “Marketplace Manhood,” which has remained valid until today. The new model is embodied in the figure of a businessman. Marketplace masculinity is based on an endless process of proving one’s manhood in the sphere of economic competition. Men derive their identity from the accumulation of goods which are a sign of economic success – “who has the most toys when he dies wins.” Constant competition and fluctuations in the marketplace leave masculine identity unstable and in incessant need of validation. Hence, men needed to stabilize their gender identity by excluding women from the public sphere of the marketplace. The strict border between the public and domestic spheres was one of the factors ensuring the stability of male gender identity.

In her study *Manliness & Civilization*, Bederman complicates the historical narrative offered by Kimmel. She agrees that between 1820 and 1860 the model of middle-class masculinity was shaped by the competitive capitalism based primarily on self-employment. According to Bederman it embodied the ideals of “manliness” – self-restraint, high-mindedness, and strong character (12). In pre-Civil War America the total number of self-employed businessmen and farmers constituted 88 percent of male population (Hantover 291). Yet, between 1870 and 1910, economic conditions changed considerably in respect to self-employment, which slumped from 67 to 37 percent during that period (Bederman 12). Self-restraint and hard work were not enough to prove successful in the new market conditions. To make the matters worse, the characteristics required in the emerging corporate culture were typically feminine – tact, teamwork, subordination, and ability to accept direction (Kimmel, “Consuming” 21). Apart from the feminization of marketplace on this symbolic level, in the mentioned decades the participation of women in the work force increased several times (Hantover 292). According to Bederman, these changes produced a need to remake the concept of Victorian *manliness* at the end of the nineteenth century. The concept was being slowly replaced with the term *masculinity*, which stood for “aggressiveness, physical force and male sexuality” rather than moral values connected to manliness (17-18).

Kimmel and Bederman differ in their choice of the critical point in the construction of the American masculinity; for Kimmel it is the emergence of the “Marketplace Manhood” in the 1830s, whereas for Bederman it is the crisis of the ideals of “manliness”

and the gradual emergence of “masculinity” that began in the 1880s. Kimmel diagnoses the development of the first symptoms of American gender identity “crisis” in the early nineteenth century, yet, he claims that American men had numerous ways to deal with it at hand, such as going West, proving oneself in the homosocial marketplace, as well as practicing self-restraint and discipline. Both social historians agree that it is at the end of the nineteenth century that the most intensive attempts to remake masculinity took place.

Apart from the changes in the workplace, another factor that is interpreted by both Kimmel and Bederman as threatening to American mid-nineteenth-century masculinity is the rapid increase in Eastern and Southern European immigration. Most of the immigrants were male and joined the working-class. These overlapping groups constituted competition not only in the marketplace but, more importantly, in the traditionally middle-class sphere of politics. According to Bederman, immigrants and the working-class were successfully competing for the power to govern American cities (13). As middle-class men identified strongly with the public sphere, and as masculinity was identified with citizenship, the above-mentioned phenomena were interpreted as a serious challenge to masculine identity.

To these mid-nineteenth-century social phenomena one must add a factor that is assessed by Kimmel as the most significant challenge to the power of men – the women’s suffrage movement (“Contemporary ‘Crisis’” 142). As the division into the female domestic sphere and male public sphere constituted the basis for masculine gender identity, the women’s movement was a serious challenge to men’s gender identity and authority. Kimmel illustrates this claim with the fact that at the end of nineteenth century, the notion of *manhood*, which differentiated men from children, was exchanged for *masculinity*, which clearly defined men in opposition to women. Like Bederman, Kimmel acknowledges the importance of the emergence of the notion of “masculinity,” yet he contrasts it with manhood, whereas Bederman juxtaposes it with manliness.

The crisis in the workplace and public sphere coincided with several other phenomena threatening the stability of nineteenth-century masculinity. Whereas on the social level employment patterns were central for the changing concept of American masculinity, the level of cultural imagination was influenced primarily by the notion of the Western conquest. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner – in one of the most influential works ever written on American society, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” – announced the end of the frontier, emphasizing simultaneously its key role. Interestingly, his work turns out to be also crucial for the definition of American hegemonic masculinity. Turner’s thesis is inherently nostalgic and romanticizing, as he praises the phenomenon that had been announced as past in the 1890 census. The West is presented by Turner in terms of “the myth of the garden,” referring to the revitalizing power of nature

(Smith 253). As he poetically puts it: “here was a magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and was rejuvenated” (quoted in Smith 254). He claims that “the Great West” ensured “perennial rebirth” of America (Turner 81). The West stands also for innocence of the primitive contrasted with the assumed corruption of European civilization (82). In Turner’s text the West and frontier are linked to democracy and the emergence of American character, but also less explicitly to white American masculinity.

As Alan Trachtenberg claims in *The Incorporation of America. Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982), Turner’s hypothesis “fails to acknowledge cultural multiplicity; in the Southwest alone, Anglo-Americans, Spanish Americans, Roman Catholics, Mormons and Indians all contributed to a heterogeneous culture. It [the hypothesis] makes its claims on the basis of a decidedly partial experience – of chiefly Anglo-Saxon settlers and farmers flowing from New England into Midwest” (17). The West is presented by Turner as free, primitive, fresh, and virgin wilderness, unoccupied by Native Americans. Turner fails to account not only for non-white male presence on the frontier but also for female settlers. Thus, the frontier character that is glorified in his work can be interpreted as the essence of American nineteenth-century hegemonic masculinity.

Turner defines American (masculine) character as “[t]hat coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which are traits of the frontier...” (85). Thus the American character, which can be read as American white masculinity, is depicted with reference to power (masterful, dominant, powerful), physical strength (coarseness, grasp of material things), and vitality (buoyancy and exuberance). It is worth pointing out that, unlike in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, powerful masculinity was not linked to the religious sphere – Turner’s hero works “for good and for evil.” This becomes more comprehensible as we acknowledge that in the nineteenth century religious devotion became identified with the feminine sphere and thus it posited a threat of emasculation (Green 11-12, 32, 47). The fact that American character according to Turner “lacks in the artistic” can be read as an attempt to contrast the frontiersman with the overcivilized artist or intellectual as well as with European corruption.

Excessive civilizing and feminization (identified with religious influence) were central motifs of the late-nineteenth-century “crisis” of American masculinity. Turner not only defines American character but also reasserts the power of white masculinity with references to physical strength and frontier experience. Thus, Turner’s work pronounces a crisis – the end of frontier – and simultaneously answers the crisis. American mascu-

linity praised by Turner differs from civilized manliness analyzed by Bederman; it stands in stark opposition to civilization and sentimental religion. Turner's romanticization of the West can be interpreted as a way of dealing with the crisis of the end of the frontier by preserving it as myth. The myth is perceived as timeless and ahistorical rather than historically specific; thus it is able to posit a revitalized model of masculinity. Turner's vision powerfully contributed to the creation of the myth of the West and the trapper/cowboy figure that was to be glorified later in adventure stories, dime novels, and westerns. There is one more important implication of Turner's identification of American character with masculinity – this equation leads to the conclusion that a crisis of masculinity inevitably equals a national crisis.

Martin Green, who analyzes the myth of the West from a contemporary perspective, also links American character with masculinity. In his work *The Great American Adventure*, Green claims that adventure stories are the expression of tightly intertwined nationalism, democracy, imperialism, and masculinity. The West paradoxically serves to promote egalitarian democracy (as an escape from the city and civilization's hierarchy) as well as imperialism linked with territorial expansion (4, 7, 9, 16). Together, the two notions produce a peculiarly American nationalism as represented in adventure stories. Green argues that the above-mentioned concepts are inseparable from masculinity. American hegemonic masculinity, in his analysis, becomes differentiated from the devoted Quaker, on the one hand, and the brutal savage Indian on the other. It combines high-mindedness and civility with militarism (10). Thus, American adventure stories served to express the American credo, character, and masculine identity.

The gesture of identification of masculinity and citizenship or humanity is not restricted to American culture. Kimmel analyses aspects of classical social theories (Marx, Weber, Tocqueville, and Freud) to claim that they all describe masculinity rather than femininity or neutral humanity ("Masculinity" 267-69). Yet this connection seems to be especially strong in American culture. Two of the theorists chosen by Kimmel (Weber and Tocqueville) refer to "an American" rather than any democratic citizen. This is connected with the fact that the division into the public and private, the masculine and feminine, was stronger in America than in Europe. The insistence on gender segregation can be illustrated with the fact pointed out by Green, namely, that American nineteenth-century literature is strictly divided into the feminine romance and masculine adventure stories, without the tradition of European novel of manners. Only the masculine genres were seen as embodying the American character, citizenship and nationalism. Thus, as masculinity was defined within the public sphere, the changes in the social, economic, as well as political and national situation led to instability of masculine identity and a prevailing sense of its crisis. The process of remaking masculinity had begun.

In order to revive and stabilize the shaken concept of masculine identity, a number of strategies were employed. First of all, on the level of discourse, the theme of the feminization of American culture was diagnosed as central to the “crisis.” The threat of the feminine as the mother figure was voiced in protests against the feminization of American boyhood. The very concept of the feminization of American culture is inherently paradoxical. The anxiety-drenched American masculinity of the nineteenth century strongly reinforced the cult of true womanhood with the sanctification of motherhood at its center. Yet, as Joe Dubbert argues in his analysis of the progressive era: “American women had been too successful” in this task and consequently were treated as a threat to American boyhood (291). Thus, the feared feminization seems to be a direct result of the Victorian true womanhood ideology. Many solutions to this problem were proposed, including an increase in the number of male public school teachers and, most significantly, the foundation of the Boy Scouts of America in 1910.

The menace of feminization was voiced not only in misogynist words but can be found also in works of the supporters of women’s rights movement, among them the prominent scholar John Dewey. In one of his most influential essays, “My Pedagogic Creed,” Dewey argues: “I believe that next to deadness and dullness... our education is threatened with *no greater evil than sentimentalism*” (7, emphasis added). Sentimentalism in the nineteenth century was closely connected with the feminine sphere of family and religion. The danger of sentimentalism can be read as the danger of feminized education and feminized boyhood.

Since the feminine was projected as a civilizing force, it was frequently connected with the icon of industrial civilization – the city. On the one hand, the city in the American imaginary at the time contributed to feminization because of increasing bureaucracy, “sapping innate masculine vitality in the service of the corporation” (Kimmel, “Consuming” 23). On the other hand, quite an opposite image of emasculating corruption that conflated the city and the feminine was embodied in the figure of the prostitute. Hence, divergent anxieties connected with nineteenth-century rapid urbanization, including both moral depravity and excessive bureaucratization, were projected onto women.

The city was also closely associated with other marginalized groups, the immigrants from abroad and black people migrating from the South, who concurrently contributed to the growth of metropolitan areas in the North. In the dominant mythology, they were perceived as less virile races, positing the threat of cultural degeneration. Since cultural projections of otherness represent a set of fears and desires of the hegemonic group, they often overlap. Hence, immigrants and black people were, analogically to women, represented in the collective imagination as oversexed and impure (Kimmel, “Consuming”

representations themselves were feminized. In the case of European immigrants, the fear of their degenerating influence was reinforced by America's projections of Europe as overcivilized to the point of corruption.

Finally, at the end of the nineteenth century, as I have already mentioned, a category of the homosexual was created. Bederman connects this fact with the diagnosis of neurasthenia – weakened overcivilized masculinity and the feminization of men. Arguably, however, the invention of a new category for differentiation can be perceived as a way to stabilize masculine identity. If the meaning of what a man is comes from what he is not, then adding the negation of the homosexual strengthens masculine gender identity.

Thus, American masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century was defined by projection of unmanly features onto the othered groups: women, European immigrants, Native Americans, blacks, and homosexuals. American masculinity has been constructed on the basis of exclusions, of which many are still rehearsed today (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 267, 284). In his analysis of masculinity as represented in American adventure stories, Green also stresses the importance of the negative code of male identity: "'Manhood' was also paired with some contrasting terms – as the affirmed or superior value – in dozens of polarities of thought. Any male had to strive always to be a man and not a boy, in Hemingway adventures; a man and not an animal, in religious exhortation; a man and not a slave in slavery narratives, a man and not a coward, a man and not a woman" (8). The contrasts and polarizations were especially strong in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as their goal was to reaffirm and strengthen American masculinity, shaken by a slump in self-employment, the end of the frontier, the rise in immigration, black migration, and the women's rights movement.

Bederman and Kimmel analyze the practical methods that were employed to deal with the sense of crisis. Middle-class men, at the end of the nineteenth century, tried to prevent the feminization of boys and socialization of "sissies" by reviving the ideal of self-restraint with primitive physical strength. The stress on physical exercise and preoccupation with the male body did not, however, affect Victorian repressive attitudes towards sexuality. Repressed sexual desires were projected outside ("Consuming" 18). Thus, it was women who were presented as sexual temptation and danger to strong and controlled masculinity. Male sexuality, on the other hand, was presented as "a capital of energy" that could revive the weakened manhood (Bederman 102). Although the discourse of sexuality was turning away from the Protestant notions of guilt and sin, the emphasis on the control of male sexuality, especially the bodily fluids, remained valid although became secularized. The ideas of spermatic economy and ascetic life, which at the beginning of the century were believed to shape strong will and self-restraint, were supposed to increase the physical strength of male bodies and save them from neurasthe-

nia. The degree of desperation in the sexual panic of the late nineteenth century is indicated in numerous publications and self-help manuals such as “Thirty-nine Signs of Masturbation” (“Consuming” 28), which were packed with notions like “spermatorrhea” or “seminal leakage” (Bederman 82).

While the attitudes to sexuality began to change with the growing influence of Freudian psychoanalysis at the beginning of the twentieth century, other methods applied to revive male neurasthenia have remained popular until today. Engagement in manly aggressive sports was supposed to turn boys into men, not sissies. The athletic craze, according to Kimmel, popularized various kinds of sport, of which boxing, hunting, and baseball were the most prominent (“Consuming” 34-37). The career of boxing and prize-fighting resorted to working-class for models of more primitive and stronger masculinity. The savage past of potent masculinity was projected onto the lower classes and appropriated by the middle-class audiences. The degree to which this sport was in vogue is manifested in the slogan: “Boxing for Babies,” inspired by G. Stanley Hall’s pedagogical strategies of the day (Bederman 77). Hunting also experienced a renaissance especially after the establishment of the Boone and Crockett Club by Theodore Roosevelt and the publication of his memoir from safari, *African Game Trails* (1910). The killing of animals was intended to recreate a primitive struggle for survival in which one becomes a man (Bederman 211). Finally, baseball was particularly attractive as it combines civilized rules with physical strength, and was soon to be heralded the national American sport (“Consuming” 35-37).

An important element of the increased preoccupation with sports and the body was the emphasis on out-door activities. Whereas women suffering from neurasthenia were advised to remain at home, men were encouraged to escape from civilizing domesticity into the wilderness of the playground or ranches. As the literal escape was not available for all, the urban out-doors began to be represented in terms of “jungle,” for example in Upton Sinclair’s vision of Chicago *The Jungle* or Robert Wood’s *The City Wilderness*. This rhetoric was intended to reinforce the division into the domestic and public spheres, which ensured firm and stable boundaries between sexes.

Apart from active ways of reaffirming masculinity, an important struggle with over-civilization was fought on the level of fantasy and fiction, which is indicated by the rise in readership of adventure stories (Kimmel, “Consuming” 21; Bederman 23; Green 17). In his analysis of the adventure story, Green claims that the essence of the American adventure can be summarized as the story of “a genteel hero who has to abandon his privileges and apprentice himself to an uneducated Man of the Woods in order to become a true American” (39). This structure echoes the main tension of the late-nineteenth-century discourse of civilization as interpreted by Bederman. The civilized

man – a representative of “the American race” – appropriates the primitive races – Native Americans or Africans – in order to advance his race by reviving its strength (Bederman 21-31). The American in this paradigmatic plot is simultaneously gendered male and identified with the white race. Time in adventure stories is represented as space – primitive past, a significant element of the then-prevalent theory of social evolutionism – is projected anthropologically onto non-white races and geographically onto Africa or the West.

The discourse of adventure stories blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. As Green points out, many adventure stories were autobiographical in character, such as Kit Carson’s or Theodore Roosevelt’s. The historical characters of Daniel Boone, Kit Carson or David Crockett gained a mythic dimension, and their lives were fictionalized in novels.³ The mythical elements are incorporated into reality – rivers, mountains, forts and cities, not to mention Roosevelt’s hunting society – are named after Daniel Boone, Kit Carson or Davy Crockett. The exemplary appropriation of the discourse of adventure stories was performed by Roosevelt. The name of his regiment, Rough Riders, alludes to Western horsemen, which reinforces the link between the myth of the West and imperialism (Bederman 191). His companions are nicknamed in an analogical cowboy-like way: Cherokee Bill and Happy Jack of Arizona (Green 151). Roosevelt consciously constructed his image as a ranchman-cowboy dressed in Indian clothes living on the border between civilization and the primitive in order to enhance his masculine strength (Bederman 76-177). He managed to capitalize on the myth of the West in order to claim for himself a powerful image not only as a politician but also as the symbolic leader of the American race.

Although a number of different strategies were applied, the nineteenth-century “crisis” of masculinity was not overcome until the outbreak of World War I, which brought a sense of stability into masculine gender identity. The wartime performance of men was an extreme version of a number of the above-mentioned strategies employed for the re-definition masculinity. The escape from civilization and feminization into outdoor homosocial sports or prize fighting, and going into war, can be seen as analogical on the symbolic level. As Mailer put it in his recent essay “The White Man Unburdened”: “After all, war was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious extrapolation of sports” (4).

The process of the construction of masculinity, viewed from psychological as well as historical perspective, is based on a negative code: it consists primarily of differentiation,

³ Kent Ladd Steckmesser analyses the ways in which historical characters of the American West were constructed and reconstructed in fiction. The novels allegedly based on their lives often bear small resemblance to historical facts. See his *The Western Hero in History and Legend*.

exclusion, or escape. It is marked by anxiety and phobia. It is parasitic in respect to other social groups, which are used as screens for projections of fears and desires. Moreover, as masculinity is based on the unstable concept of success in the public sphere, it is fragile and susceptible to social changes and social crises. Masculine identity could also be compared to the liminal stage in the process of the emergence of social identity as defined by Conrad Kottak in *Researching American Culture* (1982). The liminal stage corresponds to the unstable, in-between, marginal phase that precedes aggregation – gaining a new identity, e.g. that of an adult, or that of a new culture. This sociological concept is used to describe rites of passage and immigrants' assimilation. It could turn out useful also in analyzing male gender identity. Several characteristics attributed to the liminal stage by anthropologist Victor Turner could also be applied to describe the process of masculine gender identity construction (quoted in Kottak 44). First of all, as Kimmel stresses, masculinity is a homosocial enactment, which corresponds to the fact that liminal groups form *communitas* – closed homogenous communities (Kottak 44-45). Also the male insistence on the rigid boundaries between the sexes can be read as forming *communitas*. The second important feature of the liminal phase is the acceptance of pain and suffering (Kottak 45). As David Savran claims in his book *Taking It Like a Man*, masochism is a salient part of contemporary American masculinity. Finally, masculinity can be read as remaining in the transition phase of identity construction as it is under constant process of validation and test. The final stable and safe phase of aggregation seems unattainable for men.

Thus, the peculiar construction of masculinity can be interpreted as a perpetual sense of crisis, which results from the social pressure for continuous validation of male identity. This claim has been voiced by many scholars examining gender relations. Hélène Cixous claims that, due to the phallocentrism of Western culture, men are drenched with a pathological fear that they might become women (884). The diagnosis that masculinity has been in "crisis" ever since its emergence is also openly pronounced by John MacInnes in his essay "The Crisis of Masculinity and the Politics of Identity." He claims that "masculinity can be seen as an ideology produced by men as a result of the threat posed to the survival of the patriarchal sexual division of labor by the rise of modernity" (311). The concept of masculinity is not based on a timeless, stable essence but rather on shifting ideals of modernity, rationality, and progress. As these very ideals have been used to attack male domination since the First Wave of feminism, MacInnes concludes that the patriarchal conception of masculinity cannot escape crisis.

If one assumes that masculinity's central dynamic is a sense of crisis, the examination of its socially recognized "crises" seems to be worthy of special attention. The process of masculine gender identification is manifested more explicitly and conspicuously at mo-

ments when it is being most seriously challenged and undermined. The strategies employed in the nineteenth century to stabilize the concept of masculinity, such as the narratives of escape from civilization and women or the appropriation of non-white cultures to define and empower hegemonic masculinity, are salient elements of American masculinity. The examination of the "crisis" faced by the nineteenth-century men seems to be even more significant today as a new crisis of masculinity has been announced and the turn of the centuries again is a bad time to be a man.

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