

Unraveling Masculinities: A Cultural Shift

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Abstract:

In *Masculinity in Transition*, K. Allison Hammer critically examines the role of normative (toxic) masculinity in fostering numerous societal ills in the United States. Hammer offers a refreshing perspective by weaving alternate forms of queer and trans masculinities into complex ideologies. Tracing normative masculinity in the contexts of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacist fraternal bonds, Hammer emphasizes the potential politics of solidarity in unruly alliances of alternative embodiments and masculinities, while arguing for a reconceptualization of masculinity enriched by care and collaborative bonds.

Entwerrung von Maskulinitäten: Ein kultureller Wandel

German Abstract:

K. Allison Hammer untersucht kritisch die Rolle normativer (toxischer) Maskulinität als Ursache gesellschaftlicher Probleme in den USA. Dabei bietet Hammer eine erfrischende Perspektive auf alternative Formen von queeren und trans Maskulinitäten. Hammer ordnet normative Maskulinität in den Kontext von Rassenkapitalismus, Siedlerkolonialismus und Rechtsextremismus ein und betont dabei das politische Potenzial von Solidarität in ungeordneten Allianzen alternativer Verkörperungen und Maskulinitäten. Gleichzeitig plädiert Hammer für eine Neukonzeptualisierung von Maskulinität, bereichert durch Fürsorge und gemeinschaftliche Bindungen.

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Unraveling Masculinities: A Cultural Shift

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Toxic masculinity as a popularized term referring to establishing pre-determined norms, roles and sets of behavior prescribe what masculinities should be and how they should position themselves for political dominance, racial superiority, and capital hegemony. Toxic masculinity fuels fascism and white supremacy, instrumentalizing violence to guard privileges and entitlements. Masculinity studies have traditionally attempted to define and trace the crises of American masculinity by turning to biology in order to understand toxic behavior. By deconstructing canonical texts and reimagining masculinities in their cultural milieu of racial capitalism, settler colonialism and white supremacist fraternal orders, K. Allison Hammer offers a fresh perspective on masculinity as a complex gender formation.

Exposing the ills of fragile masculinity that plague the United States, along with its contradictions, is only one aspect of Hammer's book. Along with an exposition of toxic masculinity, the book presents the idea of unruly alliances that allow for cultural healing through collaborative efforts. Hammer delves into the history of white normative masculinity through critical rereading of films, novels, poems, and artists. Deconstructing canonical works that either subvert cisnormativity or serve as ideological tools to secure normative masculinity, Hammer theorizes instances of unruly alliances that evade normative strains and narratives of fraternal white supremacy. Hammer also defines trans-exclusionary narratives of misogyny in film and literature that deny the categorization of trans women as women as *transphallo-misogyny* which is challenged by counter-narratives of female phallicism. Reframing Jacques Derrida's theory of friendship and *lovence* "without the fraternal adherence to the principles of selection and hierarchy" (p. 8), Hammer offers a reconceptualization of masculinity that is enriched by revisiting texts and performances of care and collaborative bonds, while also detecting a politics of solidarity in alternative embodiments and masculinities.

Masculinity in Transition contains six chapters divided into three parts. The first part focuses on phallic supremacy and how it is instrumentalized to ensure the dominance of white normative masculinity. The author introduces a new trans theory of female phallicism that aims at reimagining the phallic as a creative and caring energy outside normative boundaries. Through an analysis of the work of Latin@ performance artist Nao Bustamante, Hammer reveals how the binary matrix of gender and race is deconstructed, disrupted, and subverted. Furthermore, Hammer's reading of the film *The Crying Game* (1992) exposes a crucial aspect of *transphallicismisogny* in perpetuating "ongoing cycles of poverty and violence experienced by trans women of color" (p. 50). Hammer thus shows how female phallicism can cause "a breakdown of the centralization of white, male bonding as the only form of politics and bodies that matter" (p. 54). Through a critical reading of poems by Emily Dickinson, Samuel Ace and Andrea Gibson, Hammer explores imagined boyhoods of unruly alliances as part of an "unfinished project of gender, encapsulating the spirit of the trans and genderqueer poets who explore masculine undecidability" (p. 82). According to Hammer, this deconstruction of masculinities separates the creative and sexual potentiality of masculine energies from violent tendencies, and instead allows for alternative imaginings of embodiment and masculinities.

Part II serves as a reinvestigation of twentieth-century film and literature, examining how the Western as a film genre both encapsulates and challenges the power structures around which normative masculinity operates and navigates. Hammer traces how masculinity is intertwined with national progress by critiquing the Netflix series *Godless* (2017) and the HBO series *Westworld* (2016–2022). Both are analyzed by centering sisterhood and solidarity as the basis for questioning unruly alliances yet to come. Here Hammer rightly criticizes *Godless* for not centralizing the suffering of the marginalized black community, who are portrayed as victims, as the show's storyline privileges the triumph of white women over violent white men while ignoring black activism during the Black Lives Matter movement (p. 129). Hammer looks at the efforts by Gertrude Stein and Willa Cather, who, inspired by "the spirit of *lovence*, which can counter exclusion and discrimination" (p. 162), offered care and aid to traumatized and disillusioned American World War II veterans. However, Hammer's nuanced reading of the contradictions of nostalgic masculinity points to the "butch exceptionalism" (p. 8) of Stein and Cather who relied on the white, rugged, and authoritarian American masculinity whilst being tender, caring, and sensual in their writings. Such juxtaposition combines brilliantly with

uncovering the potentiality of past unruly alliances of affection and care through loving that transcends death.

The final part of *Masculinity in Transition* connects to our current post-epidemic discussions of solidarity and care by showing how unruly alliances were formed during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s in response to the conservative policies of Ronald Reagan that continue to haunt contemporary politics. Stressing how normative masculinity strives to be impenetrable by following a formula of resilience and hierarchical hegemony that ultimately bring about its own failure, the author gives examples of unruly alliances of care found in trans and queer masculinities. Hugh Steers' paintings dislocate a normative narrative that denies care and disability as forms of masculine embodiment and fuel for sexual desire. Hammer insightfully argues that the painter juxtaposes the vulnerable body with youthful energy to disturb familial, nationalistic, and linguistic norms. Similarly, Hammer asserts that Marlon Riggs' film *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1994) imagines queer masculinities through mutual aid that come out of vulnerability and communication of affective care in times of illness.

The transformation of masculinity exemplified in literary works and films discussed by Hammer becomes a testament to the idea that our overcoming of toxic masculinity is intimately tied to rethinking our established normative understandings of masculinity. Normative masculinity and capitalism ally together to dominate public spaces in barring non-normative ways of being. In chapter six, Hammer specifies collective bonds and resistance to labor-abusing capitalism as the unruly alliances that "open outward to recognize shared alienation as part of the neoliberal condition" (p. 252). Hammer illustrates their argument with readings of Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1997), positioning class and labor resistance as unruly alliances. These alliances are centered around queer and trans masculinities as both works aim at "suggesting the potential for a horizontal and heterogenous workers' movement founded upon a shared sense of economic penetrability" (p. 216) and "transforming masculinity and work through care" (p. 246). Chapter six concludes with a brief and timely analysis of how caring masculinities render obsolete such tendencies to read labor and class categories as inferior. Hammer here emphasizes the need for a revision of the American Left that can actively lead the white working class into relational rather than reactionary politics based on economic equality.

Overall, this book offers a refreshing perspective on masculinity through what K. Allison Hammer calls a “reading again” of canonical works in which they delineate unruly alliances that were formed out of care, mutual aid, coalitional bonds, and mentorships. Such formations allow not only for exposing the ills of heteronormative systems on masculinity but also for a politics of solidarity that necessitates “hold[ing] accountable those political, cultural, and familial systems that produce and are produced by masculine normativity” (p. 258). The book’s critique brilliantly adds to the current discourse on the tragedy of today’s white American men: despite rallying around Trump, they are actually hurting themselves by voting for a Republican president whose policies make their lifespans shorter by explicitly supporting the Second Amendment and gun ownership while cutting welfare, suicide prevention programs and school protection programs. A strength of *Masculinity in Transition* are Hammer’s detailed notes on primary and secondary sources, as a bibliography for masculinity studies. This well-researched and accessible book, in which the analysis is complemented by images from the works analyzed, is a major contribution to the understanding of Western masculinity as a cultural-ideological construct and to the scholarship on the emergence and recognition of alternative masculinities. As such, the book is highly recommended for scholars of gender and masculinity studies, particularly those interested in tracing fragile masculinities, their contradictions, and unruly alliances outside normative ideological constraints within and across cultural moments in the United States.