

Josep M. Armengol. 2014. *Masculinities in Black and White. Manliness and Whiteness in (African) American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 190 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-48560-1.

ESTHER PUJOLRÀS NOGUER
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Esther.Pujolras@uab.cat

As Richard Dyer insightfully noted in *White*, if the supremacy of whiteness is to be dismantled, whiteness has to be made strange (1997, 4, 10). In *Masculinities in Black and White. Manliness and Whiteness in (African) American Literature*, Josep M. Armengol takes on Dyer's proposal, and succeeds in making whiteness strange. From a corpus that consists of mainstream American texts—Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855) and Ernest Hemingway's autobiographies, *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) and *Under Kilimanjaro* (2005), along with other less illustrious works in the form of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and Martha Gellhorn's "White into Black" (1983)—Armengol's persuasive analysis demonstrates how race and gender are, as Dyer asserts, "ineluctably intertwined" (1997, 30). Hence what follows is a study in American masculinities where whiteness is identified as an inherent component of the heteropatriarchal model that has traditionally defined manhood in American literature. This conflation of masculinity and whiteness brings to the fore what, to my mind, is probably the most thought-provoking postulation on Armengol's part, namely, the blurring of boundaries between the categories "white" and "black" that permeate his approach to American literature. At this point, it is paramount to highlight the parenthesis in the title—(African) American—as endemic to Armengol's theory that the label "African-American" should be questioned, and, as a consequence, "traditional academic divisions between 'black' and 'white' texts [...] may oftentimes be less significant than the differences among each group" (6; emphasis in original).

The first chapter, "Slavery in Black and White. White Masculinity as Enslaving in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*," offers a compelling examination of whiteness from the perspective of a black male slave. In this sense, Armengol's argument that class and racial interests coalesce in the formation of whiteness as ideology comes to fruition in his realization that "white working-class men's assertion of their racial (and gender) supremacy over both black men and women implied their

own [undesired] virtual transformation into white slaves” (25). When placed alongside traditional readings of Douglass’s emblematic slave narrative, which veer around the representation of black masculinities, Armengol’s steady focus on whiteness is enlightening in both its revelation that whiteness is, after all, a construction, and that maleness is its unavoidable companion.

“Of Gray Vapors and Creeping Clouds’: White (Male) Privilege as Blinding in Herman Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’” is the rather elusive title of chapter two, which renders a captivating reading of this notorious short story. This is one of the most solid sections of Armengol’s book since it provides readers with an alluring and, in a way, *obvious* interpretation of “Benito Cereno” (1855). It is Captain Delano’s unequivocal belief in the supremacy of whiteness that propels his demise, and yet Delano’s *white* faith would have remained imperishable unless the black slaves had intelligently appropriated *white* knowledge and transformed it into their own *black* supremacy. In other words, and as Armengol succinctly exposes, the black slaves act according to what the whites expect from them, that is to say, submissiveness and inferiority, but, as their rebellion demonstrates, they are far from submissive and inferior; they have liberated themselves from the internalization of the equation of blackness equals inferiority, and have instead managed to inscribe intelligence onto blackness. In an instructive and enticing manner, Armengol discloses the obvious, to wit, the invisibility and taken-for-granted normative stature of whiteness in which Melville’s story is rooted.

Armengol’s reading of Hemingway’s autobiographies, *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) and *Under Kilimanjaro* (2005) is, following the ethos of the book, substantiated by a deviation from classical critical interpretations which define Hemingway’s work as essentially the outcome of a profoundly sexist view. Without entirely disengaging himself from this view, Armengol, as the title of the third chapter promises—“Revisiting Masculinity and/as Whiteness in Ernest Hemingway’s *Green Hills of Africa* and *Under Kilimanjaro*”—does attempt to revisit masculinity but, unfortunately, his allegation that Hemingway’s patriarchal masculinity, boldly exhibited in *Green Hills of Africa*, was somehow ameliorated via his more empathetic stance on blackness in *Under Kilimanjaro*, sounds excessively celebratory. Although one can surmise that age endowed Hemingway with a more mature, allegedly more restrained manliness, his apparently real romance with a black woman cannot possibly guarantee that his masculinity changed significantly. Also, the transformation from “heroic male pitting himself against nature” (83) into “eco-friendly man” (83) that this chapter delineates proves to be a suspicious rendering of Hemingway. Nature has often been utilized to propose an alternative model to patriarchal masculinity. In truth, the alternative masculinity of the “eco-friendly man” is often deceivably—and firmly—anchored in patriarchy.

The annihilation of the polarization “white” and “black” in American literature that Armengol’s pervading argument relies on is convincingly validated in chapter four, “Dark Objects of Desire: The Blackness of (Homo)Sexuality in James Baldwin’s

Giovanni's Room.” The choice of text shows, on the one hand, Armengol’s intuitive disposition and, on the other, and in view of the dissection of the text conducted in this chapter, his academic expertise. *Giovanni's Room* (1956) is, as Armengol incisively points out, a novel usually discarded by American literature syllabuses. Neither of the main protagonists of the novel, David and Giovanni, are black, a fact that contributes to the identification of *Giovanni's Room* as a rarity within James Baldwin’s work since his other novels always feature black characters. This chapter ascertains precisely how intentionally disruptive Baldwin’s novel is. What Armengol unfolds in his perceptive analysis of the novel is a complex array of confluences: race with class, whiteness with blackness and homosexuality with heterosexuality. Giovanni is indeed white but his whiteness is severely tainted by his working-class and Italian background. In its turn, David’s Anglo-Saxon whiteness is fatally *spoiled* by his homosexuality. As Armengol’s reading of Baldwin’s *Giovanni's Room* testifies, within patriarchy, heterosexuality and whiteness are indissoluble, and homosexuality is spuriously linked with blackness. However, what his otherwise excellent analysis fails to fully elucidate is whether Baldwin’s text perhaps unintentionally—or indeed intentionally—perpetuates the association of blackness and homosexuality with deviation.

There is a recent trend in North American history that seeks to establish alliances with Postcolonial studies. The methodology that results from such a convergence, as Ann Laura Stoler’s “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies” confirms, shapes America as a postcolonial scenario. The confluence of America and postcolonial configures a fertile critical space whereby racial categories can be dissected and disassembled. Martha Gellhorn’s autobiographical essay, “White into Black” (1983), seems to bend effortlessly to an analysis of racial and gender constructions from an American/postcolonial angle. In this respect, Armengol’s recovery of Gellhorn’s text in his last chapter, “Race and Gender in the Mirror: A (White) Woman’s Look at (Black) Racism in Martha Gellhorn’s ‘White into Black’” is highly stimulating and perspicacious. In this chapter, Armengol steps outside his comfort zone—American studies—to embrace postcolonial criticism, which is a brave and noteworthy move, but which lamentably does not allow him to steer the text with the dexterity he shows in the preceding chapters. The blurring of the *white* and *black* levels that worked so finely in his critical reading of Melville’s “Benito Cereno” and Baldwin’s *Giovanni's Room*, cannot be applied to Gellhorn’s narrative. To put it differently, the transposition of American *white* and American *black* onto Haitian—postcolonial—ground cannot be sustained. While this is indeed Gellhorn’s *own* translation, it is one that Armengol incorporates decidedly in his analysis to the extent that he turns it into the epicenter of his study. The reversal of racial roles that Gellhorn supposedly experiences—in the non-white environment of Jacmel (Haiti) the white woman becomes *black*—falls prey to dangerous essentializations since the construction of blackness follows a different, albeit intimately connected, path to that of whiteness. An excessive confidence in the work of Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1998)

somewhat debilitates Armengol's interpretation. Fanon's concerns were entirely devoted to the configuration of blackness and his gender stance was inexistent, which makes his critical work insufficient to grasp the complicated racial and gender experience that furnishes Gellhorn's text. I believe that an analysis of Gellhorn's compelling experience in Haiti through Sara Ahmed's lucid examination of whiteness (2004, 2007) would have strengthened the import of this overlooked narrative and would certainly have contributed to unmasking the narrator's invisibility towards her *own* whiteness. Unlike the self-centeredness elicited by ontological investigations of whiteness, Ahmed's phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on the surroundings, allows the white body to be apprehended as "a body at home": a body that acts *freely* upon a space that *it* occupies (2007, 156). In Haiti, Gellhorn's whiteness turns her body into a body-not-at-home but the cause of her white body's displacement cannot be explained through an internalization of blackness, a position that Armengol endorses, and which perilously and unfairly victimizes the white body. Ahmed's phenomenological frame of reference places its emphasis on the construction of whiteness itself and from this methodological framework, a white body cannot, under any circumstances, replace a black body.

One of the defining traits of colonial texts, as Armengol rightly states, is the feminization process that non-white bodies undergo in the colonial imagination. However, his assurance that there is a recurrent absence "of *actual* women from colonial texts" (132; emphasis in original) should be amended since this absence affected all non-white bodies, male and female; the colonial imagination, as Robert C. Young notices in *Colonial Desire*, feminized and stereotyped non-white bodies in an attempt to preserve the imperial mechanism—genuinely heteropatriarchal—which was built upon the conjunction of whiteness and maleness (1995, 111). This is the point of convergence between American studies and postcolonial studies; this is where America becomes truly postcolonial. And Armengol's book is appreciatively aware of this.

In 2015 *Masculinities in Black and White* received the Javier Coy Research Award SAAS (Spanish Association for American Studies). The prize is recognition that Armengol's book makes a significant contribution to American literature and, I would add, whiteness studies. *Masculinities in Black and White* is "part and parcel"—an idiom the author perhaps tends to overuse—of a valuable body of works determined to topple whiteness from its pedestal and make it auspiciously and dutifully strange.

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Esther Pujolràs Noguera is a lecturer in American and post-colonial literature at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and has specialized in African literatures and cultures. Her current research focuses on the convergence of race/ethnicity, constructions of whiteness in Indian Ocean writing, and postcolonial Life-writing. She is a member of the research project *The Aesthetics of Remembering. Empathy, Identification and Mourning*, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2015-63739-P), and of the research group "Ratnakara. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures." She has published articles and book chapters on African and Indian literature and cinema. She is the author of *An African (Auto)biography. Ama Ata Aidoo's Literary Quest* (2012).

Address: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística. Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres. Edifici B. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Carrer de la Fortuna. Bellaterra. 08193, Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 935811567.

