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Greg Forter
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Introduction

This book approaches canonical modernism in the USA as a response to changes in the sex/gender and racial systems that took place between 1880 and 1920. The authors I discuss experienced these transformations largely in the mode of *loss*; they felt themselves cut off, that is, from the form of white manhood that had been dominant in the years prior to 1880. They responded to this loss in what I show was a melancholic manner. Their works attempted to grieve the loss, but the grief was characterized by a deep ambivalence and unconscious aggression that crippled and blocked the work of mourning. My chapters trace the vicissitudes of this dynamic in major works by four authors: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925).

Each of these works fantasmatically "works over" the historical materials it engages. Each of them gives a highly condensed, allegorical account of the processes endangering nineteenth-century white manhood, and each enacts a specifically *aesthetic* kind of melancholic grief. Nevertheless, a set of real, historical transformations subtends these aesthetic engagements. It may be helpful to begin by sketching the relevant processes in some detail.

From about 1830 to 1880, the dominant form of white manhood in the USA was characterized by an interplay of qualities that would separately have been seen as a gendered binary. On one hand, to be a (white) man meant to "make oneself" in the capitalist marketplace – to achieve economic autonomy, self-sufficiency, and ownership of productive property. The qualities that enabled such success were an aggressive assertiveness and competitive vigor thought of as innately male. Successful manhood was imagined, in other words, as the realization of an instinct for domination that was rooted in the male body, the expression of which could alone enable the economic and psychic autonomy so central to American conceptions of success.

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On the other hand, this aggressive competitiveness was viewed with suspicion for its threat to social cohesion. Were it given full rein beyond the manly sphere of work, the dominative will would make social order impossible to maintain. This instinct therefore had to be countered by a range of softer virtues – moral compassion, self-restraint, emotional sensitivity. These virtues were thought to be natural to white women in the same way that competitive aggression was thought of as natural to men; the virtues could, in fact, be transmitted to men only by women in the domestic sphere. The division of spheres was in this sense a mechanism for socializing men by giving them a place to develop their compassionate interiors – to cultivate feelings and dispositions that could not be safely indulged at work but were indispensable to men's roles as citizens, fathers, and husbands. "From this point of view, the social fabric was torn every day in the world and mended every night at home," writes E. Anthony Rotundo. "Men's sphere depleted virtue, women's sphere renewed it."[1]

In the final decades of the century, however, a range of developments disturbed the relative stability of this division. These developments had primarily to do with transformations in the economic sphere, where the promise of autonomous self-making was increasingly thwarted by a monopoly capitalism that reduced men to dependents in large bureaucratic structures. "The number of salaried, nonpropertied workers (virtually all white-collar) multiplied eight times between 1870 and 1910," writes Rotundo. "Twenty percent of the total male work force was white-collar by 1910."[2] This new kind of employment "offered neither autonomy nor ownership of productive property."[3] The result was a sense of dependence and disempowerment that many men felt as unmanning. Michael Kimmel quotes one observer, for example, who claimed that to "'put a man upon wages is to put him in the position of a dependent' and that the longer he holds that position, the more his capacities atrophy and 'the less of a man … he becomes.'" A second observer lamented "the 'steady degeneration of men' brought on by the 'spectacle of men working at tasks which every woman knows she could easily undertake.'"[4]

According to Kimmel, Rotundo, and others, American men responded to this disempowerment in a range of related ways. There was, to begin with, a discursive shift: a move away from the term *manhood*, defined in opposition to *boyhood*, and toward the term *masculinity*, defined in opposition to *femininity*.[5] What made one a man now was less that one had successfully grown up than that one was persuasively not a woman – a shift that bespoke a heightened need to police the borders between male and female identities. (This need was intensified by first-wave feminists' claims to the sexual and political rights of men, as well as by the emergence of gay subcultures whose "inverts" raised the visible specter of a "femininity" lurking in all men.)[6] More significant than this discursive transformation was a wholesale revaluation of the gendered division of spheres. The "civilizing" virtues of women were now recast as emasculating dangers, forces that turned boys into sissies and threatened the "feminization of American culture."[7] Men, accordingly, sought to expel the "feminine" within them while embracing as positive traits those attributes that had previously been coded ambivalently – primal male force, instinctual vitality, aggression, and bodily strength.[8] This response entailed in part what Kimmel has called "the consumption of manhood": the vicarious identification, through sports and other consumer activities, with older, more autonomous, and more artisanal forms of manhood. For:

> Just as the realm of production had been so transformed that men could no longer anchor their identity in … the market, [they] created new symbols, the consumption of which 'reminded' men of that secure past, evoking an age before identity crises, before crises of masculinity – a past when everyone knew what it meant to be a man and achieving one's manhood was a given.[9]

The processes described so far had explicitly racial meanings as well. The reconfigurations of capitalism that subordinated white men to bureaucratic structures simultaneously opened new labor markets for ethnic immigrants and African American freedmen, thereby troubling the link between selling one's labor on the open market and experiencing oneself as "white."[10] (This link had of course begun to be challenged by the abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War.) The cult of virility in this sense served as a compensatory preserve for an expressly *white* manliness. Through it, white men engaged in practices aimed at recovering a privileged identity imperiled by the incursion of non-white laborers in the workplace, as well as by the "feminizing" effects of capitalist modernity. At the same time, as Gail Bederman has persuasively shown, the fantasy of a lost male essence was often constructed through identifications with racial "darkness" and otherness.[11] The primitive vitality that men thought necessary to combating modern capital's enervations was drawn from conceptions of the racial other (especially men of African descent), whom white men imagined as having escaped the repressive constraints of modern civilization. An identification with the racial primitive thus worked paradoxically to bolster white manhood by providing it with a barbarous physicality that served as the antidote to bourgeois modernity's purportedly feminizing dangers.

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The effort to recover a lost essence of manliness was not, however, the only response to this period's social changes. Canonical modernism engaged in a rather different kind of project. That this project was at heart melancholic is the wager of all that follows; but aesthetic melancholia was itself the solution to an affective dilemma whose contours differed markedly from the one described so far. The authors I discuss sought to grieve not just for the loss of the aggressively masculine component of nineteenth-century white manhood, but also for the loss of its compassionate interior – its "feminine" capacity for sympathetic identification and abrogation of the self's borders. They tended to describe this femininity as a creatively lyrical and sensuous responsiveness. They tailored it to the demands of their creative aspirations, and did so in response to the increasing subordination of creativity to instrumental reason within bourgeois modernity, and the increasing denigration of non-commodifiable, non-instrumentalizable desires as feminine. The first of these (modernity's instrumentalization of creative labor) led these writers to conceive of creativity as a pivotal part of what modernity imperiled: to be an artist was for them to be forced to retrieve art from its ceaseless absorption into the commodity form. The second factor cemented the connection between this imperiled capacity and the feminine, even as it required the detachment of "feminine" responsiveness from its contemporary disparagement.

A striking result of these two factors was that the authors in my study came to yearn for a masculinity less rigidly polarized against the feminine. Their works attempted to embody a manhood that included a lyrically artisanal (i.e., precapitalist) and often explicitly "feminine" responsiveness. If one kind of masculinity that emerged in this period was thus built around a repudiation of qualities associated with white womanhood – feelingfulness, moral compassion, etc. – canonical modernism was distinguished in part by its effort to rewrite, reclaim, and celebrate the feminine as a repository of residual and potentially resistant value.

This effort was countered by an equally powerful yet conflicting inclination. Behind this latter lay the fact that for historical reasons none of these writers could avoid internalizing the imperatives of the emergent gender order.[12] All of them – including Cather – came in part to identify with the hard, invulnerable, and dominative white manhood consolidated in this period, and all came to denigrate a feminine responsiveness that they also experienced as intimately linked to their creative powers. The resulting ambivalence was both psychically devastating and decisive to the emergence of canonical modernism. It meant that the very qualities and capacities that these figures valued in the manhood they had lost were qualities and capacities that they felt impelled to disparage as unmanly. Out of this abiding conflict, socially induced yet lodged in the deepest, most intimate recesses of their beings, would emerge the set of melancholic strategies with which this book is concerned.

I am interested in the historical causation and psychic significance of this conflict. I am concerned with how these authors were shaped by and struggled against profound historical transformations, and with how their texts at least sought to grieve for a manhood neither ashamed nor disparaging of the socially "feminine" in men. But I'm also interested in this conflict because of the impasses to which it led. In each of the works I discuss, the effort to mourn came to founder upon the intensity of these authors' ambivalence toward the feminine. The books "resolve" themselves into assertions that the manhood they value *cannot* be grieved, that it is at once invaluable, socially unincarnatable, and impossible to relinquish. They thereby seek to memorialize blocked mourning as the most poignant and beautiful and *manly* response to socially induced loss. These works, in short, are literary crypts in which are secreted the lost identities that Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cather considered the only ones worth having – but that they insisted could be (re)claimed only by succumbing to that cardinal modernist sin, the sin of sentimentality.[13]

The melancholy aesthetics had political consequences of at least two kinds. First, it transformed the potentially radical memory of a less binarized male identity into a resigned capitulation to the necessity of losing it. For if the only viable identity resided in a lost past, and if to believe in its (displaced, differential) recovery was to engage in sentimental self-delusion, then it became hard to imagine a future that was not either existentially impoverished or "always already" foreclosed. A literature of melancholic remembrance turned out to be one that emphasized less the *difficulty* of claiming a usable past for transformative projects than the *impossibility* of doing so. To believe the past might inform the future – to make normative judgments about what was valuable in residual models of identity, then use that value to enliven a socially remedial vision – became the sign of an insufficiently "hard" relationship to loss.

Second, the conflict between a residual attachment to the feminine in men and an internalized hatred of that femininity resulted in these texts' unleashing of melancholic aggression toward the socially vulnerable: women, effeminate men, and racial minorities. This was in part a measure of desperation. Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cather redirected onto textual others the hostility aimed at the "feminine" within

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them, so that literary melancholy might even be seen as a defense against actual melancholia. The price of this move was an evasion of these authors' most socially trenchant insights. It entailed in each case a mystification of the social forces imperiling the beloved form of manhood. Women, minorities, and effeminate men became the textual scapegoats for a rage that these works show, in their more astute moments, to be more properly directed at the forces of modern capital, along with the regimes of race and gender peculiar to capitalist modernity.

The racial dimension of these strategies was key. Modernism's insistence on loss as irremediable, on the lost style of manhood as invaluable, unincarnatable, yet unrelinquishable, entailed a resigned but toxic embrace of normative white identity as well. That resignation was the end point and result of a complex engagement with racial "otherness." It was the effect of a failed attempt to resolve these works' ambivalence toward the feminine through fantasies of the racial other. The fantasies themselves imaginatively relocated the lost, invaluable form of manhood in an expressly racialized time and place – Faulkner's antebellum South, Cather's Blue Mesa, Hemingway's premodern Spain. They condensed in the *racial* other the *gender* identity from which these authors felt themselves severed by the forces of bourgeois modernity. Racial otherness thus figured here not – as in the story told by Bederman – the essence of primal maleness, but rather a set of de-binarized gender attributes that seemed to those in my study enlivening yet lost and unavailable to white people: physical vitality, spontaneity, and sensuous receptivity; a prelapsarian relation to language in which words were ontologically indistinguishable from things; and a creativity whose authenticity lay in its starkly simplified forms, in a refusal of technical and compositional complexity that gave one access to truths of experience obscured and debased by bourgeois modernity's dominant expressive modes.

I'm suggesting that Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cather sought to resolve their gendered ambivalence through fantasies of the racial "primitive." The relative importance of this impulse varied from author to author (it was at its most intense in Cather and Hemingway), and the forms it took were both politically promising and troubling in ways we shall discover.[14] For now, it's important only to note that the primitivist project was itself one that each author came to reject as sentimental. The reason for this is that each retained a naturalized, epidermal conception of race that proved at last insuperable. Far more than in the case of gender, race revealed itself in these works, if only in the final analysis, as bedrock of a kind that no amount of wishing for fluidity

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or racial "impurity" could overcome. The hard, unsentimental "truth" of identity turned out to require a textual acknowledgement that the qualities embodied by the racial primitive were (for white people) not merely lost but ontologically inaccessible.

It was in response to this recognition that the works I examine resigned themselves to the melancholy necessity of a whiteness whose brutality they themselves expose.[15] The scapegoating strategy to which I referred was one expression of this resignation. A second, equally significant expression took place at the level of form. It concerned these authors' well-known will-to-textual-disembodiment, their "impersonal" aspiration to negate and sublate authorial subjectivity into the austerity of literary forms. Critics have for years now argued that this will-to-impersonality in modernist literature encoded an aesthetic or "formal" misogyny. They've shown how the badge of modernist authenticity – a capacity for what T. S. Eliot called the "extinguish[ing]" of the author's "personality" – entailed a celebration of masculine detachment and rigorous, impersonal, hard-edged form, as well as an assault on personal expression as insufficiently controlled, overly subjective, and (therefore) degradedly feminine.[16] My claim is that this aesthetic of (masculine) self-abrogation was also a formal assertion of whiteness. "Whiteness is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible," writes Richard Dyer.[17] The will-to-authorial-invisibility, in this sense, was perhaps a formal attempt to preserve the authority of an imperiled white identity at a moment in history when the social distinctions between whites and non-whites were increasingly called into question.

As should be clear from these comments already, a central aim of this book is to enrich contemporary understandings of both *modern* and *modernist* masculinity. A related aim is to challenge some guiding assumptions in contemporary theories of mourning (and trauma). It's worth here pausing to outline the book's contributions in each of these areas.

With respect to the first (our understanding of modern masculinity), the chapters that follow are meant to unsettle the current consensus among historians of US manhood in this period – Kimmel, Rotundo, Bederman, and Elliott Gorn. These historians have focused largely on the story of modern manhood's emergence that my chapter began by sketching; they've stressed how that manhood was consolidated through efforts to recover a lost primal "essence" of manly power, and how such efforts involved the extirpation in men of a now-disparaged femininity. The arguments in what follows work both within and against such histories.

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I am concerned, first, to reveal the covertly racial underpinnings of this narrative: these historians are actually describing the vicissitudes of *white* manhood, not of manhood in general. (Bederman alone among these authors makes race a governing category in her analysis.) Second, I offer a potentially transformative revision to the historians' narrative itself. For if I am right that, for those in my study, the loss of "feminine" feelingfulness was as deep an injury as the threat to male power, it seems at least plausible that this was true for others during this period as well. Not only male and male-identified artists but white men more generally (as well as some women) were, perhaps, forced to grapple with the prohibition against forms of feeling that were once condoned as beneficently "feminine." This prohibition was likely felt as a truncation or cauterization of personhood that diminished the capacity for creative living (not just creative production). A fruitful area of historical inquiry might then be to trace this truncation in the lives of men who did not become creative writers: how did these men respond to the prohibition against feminine feelingfulness and compassion? Does attending to this response alter our understanding of the motives behind the emergent cult of virility? What was the extent and significance of melancholy as a more general cultural response to social change, and what were the circumstances that enabled less crippling, less socially destructive responses?

Like the historians of modern manhood, feminist critics of modern*ist* masculinity have been only partially attentive to the place of (male) femininity in its construction. Andreas Huyssen's early exploration of the Franco-Germanic tradition, for example, as well as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's work on the Anglo-American, define male modernism largely in terms of an anxious aesthetic repudiation of the feminine, whether that femininity was associated with the debased clichés of mass-mediated culture (Huyssen) or the assertive autonomy of the New Woman (Gilbert and Gubar).[18] More recently, Rita Felski has shown how theorists of modernity routinely align femininity with nature and premodern Being (unified, undifferentiated, present-to-itself), for which the internally divided, implicitly male modern subject yearns – even as he defines himself in opposition to it. The feminine emerges *as* modern, on this view, only in pathological or demonic form: as irrational impulse, voracious consumer desire, threats to the auratic character of art, and a propensity for artifice, excess, aesthetic ornamentation. Felski demonstrates persuasively that within the "decadent" strand of European modernism, the feminization of male writing served less to disrupt than to consolidate a misogynist association of femininity with

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inauthenticity. Decadents figured the female-identified male artist as uniquely able to transmute the artifice associated with women into self-consciously artificial Art: women simply *were* artifice, while men were able to perform and thereby redeem the artificial.[19]

I am largely in sympathy with where each of these arguments ends up. American modernists cultivated a textual misogyny similar to that of their European counterparts, and instances of male "feminization" in their works often served ultimately sexist ends. The key, however, is that they served those ends *ultimately*. What critics in this tradition miss is that this misogyny was rooted in an identification with the feminine that was not exclusively or merely politically regressive. A more complex picture emerges if one attends to what I call the *affective genealogy* of modernist misogyny: its genesis in historical loss and bereavement; the *yearning* for "feminine" aspects of the self that the modern gender binary disparaged; and the resulting ambivalence toward and struggle to mourn those feminine attributes.

Because of this genealogy, the writers I discuss defined the "feminine" in ways that exceed most critics' formulations. While they indulged at times in fantasies of woman as premodern plenitude and, less often, of femininity as inauthentic mimicry, their dominant tendency was to associate the feminine with a creative and sensuously vibrant responsiveness to one's inner life, one's body, and the social world (including the inner lives and bodies of others). This would doubtless be a gender-neutral capacity in the best of all possible worlds. But given what modernists had to work with, it's neither surprising nor in itself reactionary for them to have associated it with women. I would even suggest that the memory of this now-forbidden capacity functioned in their texts' more progressive moments in a manner analogous to the "critical nostalgia" that Felski attributes to certain constructions of woman as premodern plenitude:

> If nostalgia is conventionally associated with femininity, the home, and a longing for maternal plenitude, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has come under critical fire from those who pride themselves on the radical contemporaneity of their own ironized consciousness and their concomitant disdain for the taint of the sentimental … Yet a simple dismissal of all manifestations of nostalgia as reactionary is scarcely sufficient … While on the one hand nostalgic desire glosses over the oppressive dimensions of the past for which it yearns, on the other hand it may mobilize a powerful condemnation of the present for its failure to correspond to the imagined harmony of a prelapsarian condition. The yearning for the past may engender active attempts to construct an alternative future, so that nostalgia comes to serve a critical rather than a simply conservative purpose.[20]

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Though the language of nostalgia lacks, in my view, the conceptual precision necessary to understand these processes fully, one could restate my book's main project as an exploration of what made this utopian use of the past so painfully difficult for the authors I discuss – and what the political costs have been of embracing (i.e., canonizing) a literature that came to repudiate that effort.

The political costs to which I refer show up in unexpected places. There is, for example, a striking affinity between modernist strategies for grieving social loss and the dominant impulse in contemporary mourning theory. Indeed, if canonical modernism has pressing things to teach us about our own contemporaneity, these have largely to do with its capacity to reveal the limits of recent efforts to develop a politically progressive theory of grief. A number of influential theorists have been engaged in this project. They have sought to ground political grievances in socially induced loss or injury, and have often drawn explicitly on the language of mourning and melancholia. Their overwhelming tendency has been to celebrate melancholia as a countermemorial strategy of resistance; they construe melancholia, that is, as a memorial mechanism for keeping alive what the dominant culture encourages us to forget.[21] These critics therefore stigmatize mourning as a coercive social ideal that requires subordinate groups to relinquish what the dominant culture finds threatening. They imply that to seek to mourn social losses is to succumb to a sentimental, insufficiently rigorous response to such bereavements.[22]

Our most influential theories of mourning thus tend to repeat the celebration of melancholia that characterized canonical modernism in the United States. Given the conservative effects of that celebration in the modernist context, the affinity should give us pause. Contemporary theorists can embrace melancholia only inasmuch as they "forget" that it entails an *unconscious distortion* of the lost object's meaning – i.e., it's a species of forgetting, not remembering – while ignoring the suicidal self-aggression that accompanies blocked mourning (an aggression whose progressive potential for subordinate groups is far from clear). The near-canonization of such strategies in the present can even be seen as a sign of the ongoing influence of modernism's melancholy resolutions. One could trace a conceptual line, that is, from the strand of modernist literature examined here, through the emphasis on constitutive or "structural" (insurmountable) bereavements in Derridean deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and to the "melancholia thesis" in contemporary mourning theory.[23] Each of these formations not only evinces skepticism toward those spurious consolations entailed in believing that