Masculinity studies : The case of Brando

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The case of Brando

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ABSTRACT

This reflective article interrogates the role of masculinity studies in the women's and gender studies' classroom by looking at the work of American film icon Marlon Brando. Brando and his risky masculinity in the film represents a locale of 'dangerous desires' which reveal deep conflict in student perceptions of men, women, and gender.

KEYWORDS *Brando, desire, feminism, gender, masculinity, pedagogy, whiteness*

Adrienne kennedy, african-american playwright, says of her fascination with Marlon Brando in her memoir-cum-childhood scrapbook, *People Who Led to My Plays*:

> His roles seemed to convey themes.
>
> In *Viva Zapata*, a person has to fight and lead.
>
> In *Streetcar*, there is within the world violence, danger.
>
> In *On the Waterfront*, a person must try to attain honor. (Kennedy, 1996: 89)

Kennedy's language around universality coincides with the complex recovery of the subject that Ben Knights proposes we take on regarding *how* we study and teach masculinities. An interrogation of the effect of teaching and reading masculinity as an analytic, Knights' edited volume seeks to trace '"masculinity"...[as] an aspirational identity rather than descriptive fact' (Knights, 2008: 8). How, then, might we begin to read Kennedy's gloss of 'screen masculinity' icon Marlon Brando, in his naked-torsoed heyday (Bordo, 1999)? More germane to this forum, I would like to hover on Kennedy's

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FIGURE 1 *Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski. Still from* A Streetcar Named Desire *(1951), Director: Elia Kazan.*

A Streetcar Named Desire (1951), Director: Elia Kazan

Blanche DuBois (Vivien Leigh) heads to New Orleans to stay with her sister, Stella (Kim Hunter), and her new husband, Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando), after a scandalous affair in her Southern hometown. Blue-collar Stanley is prone to violent outbursts, even as he and the pregnant Stella share a passionate chemistry. Blanche, on the other hand, attempts to start a relationship with Mitch (Karl Malden), a friend of Stanley's, without revealing her past. Shot in black and white, the film climaxes with Stanley's rape of Blanche and her subsequent descent into madness.

implication of a masculinity at once moored to and removed from the masculine body, in order to think about the potential of Brando's performances in

the gender studies classroom, particularly one with the 'courage to refuse' received gendered wisdom and power that Knights points to in his introduction (2008: 28) and throughout the essays in the collection.

First, some context: I assigned the students in Georgetown University's first undergraduate 'Masculinities' course the text and film versions of the American film classic *A Streetcar Named Desire* fairly early in the term, along with a segment from Richard Dyer's work on 'The White Man's Muscles'. I had, I confess, high hopes – we had had compelling discussions about texts like the *Mad Men* pilot (a current US TV series that looks back to the early 1960s and changes in US culture) and Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* that went far beyond easy identifications of the victims and constraints of dominant masculinity. The day we started talking about *Streetcar*, we had a presentation involving some of the brightest students in the class. They began by passing around small sheets of paper with dialogue written on them. This dialogue, we were soon told, asked us to perform alternative line readings of how Stella could respond to her husband Stanley's infamous screams for her, hours after he has wrecked their apartment and ostensibly beaten his wife. Far from my experience earlier in the day of students confessing nervously to me in my office their uneasy desire for Stanley/Brando, these performances, on the surface, sought to right our alliances, imagining Stella with the agency of a Lifetime movie heroine (Lifetime is an American cable network specializing in movies about women in trouble), fighting back against her abuser (with inventive stage directions to turn away silently, or new dialogue saying 'no' to Stanley's pleas). Yet the camp melodrama that the students clearly wanted to elicit in our own renderings of Stanley and Stella's exchange also exposed the script they were working in – hyperconsciously poking fun at the constructions of feminist narratives around femininity, masculinity, desire, power, and, as Kennedy puts it, 'violence, danger'.

It is 'danger' in particular that I would like to tease out here – the danger of reading, for masculinity scholars and students, that which we always fear will reify existing power structures and social organization. My students' dual impulses – toward the recognizable affective performance of corrective proto-feminist melodrama, and toward the more dangerous desires that aligned them with the 'bad' Stella reaction, and hence with the seemingly irrecoverable, irresponsible masculinity embodied by Brando's performance – pulled them into a violent relation to feminist thought, in a way that no text before that had done. They felt exposed, their misplaced desire unwittingly endorsing a brand of Western masculinity that they had – politically, socially, emotionally – already 'outgrown'.

Of course, as with so much of the playwright Tennessee Williams' work, this was precisely the point. That Brando's performance forced the audience into uncomfortable, dangerous identifications captures the queer presence in

film that Williams' drama does on the page and on stage. But without a queer character – without a plotline or narrative that allowed that desire to be understood within identitarian frameworks of individual agency and choice – it became hard for my students to escape the teleology of rejection that the film enforces in its tacked-on ending (demanded of director Elia Kazan by the censorship rules then governing Hollywood), all long shots of Stella and her baby rejecting Stanley, cured of her dangerous desire by motherhood and filial loyalty. While the narrative disciplines Stella into socially acceptable submission, the audience in the film's post-release reception is left, as Susan Bordo breathlessly documents in her book *The Male Body*, reeling from Brando's body. But my students are responding in 2009, in a classroom invested in interrogating modes of masculinity largely in response to being tired of the focus on the women-as-victims/women-as-heroes scripts that they feel to be reinforced by even the best-intentioned, theoretically driven Women's and Gender Studies classes (including my own 'Transnational Feminisms' course offered the year before). These are bright, driven students at a top-tier American university, going against the grain of most of their peers in majoring or minoring in Women's and Gender Studies, who want masculinity studies, badly. But when confronted with Brando in *Streetcar*, their theoretical affiliations are no longer on sure footing.

So what is the masculinity studies teacher to do here? I don't have a prescription, but I do want to offer three different modes of engagement at the level of the text that we as a class worked through to help us question the boundaries of feminist studies and how our ways of reading were bound up in our ideas about narrative, representation, and gender. The first was to go back to the initial scene, of Stanley hollering, to watch Stella's desiring gaze and Stanley's submission to that desire and ask how the way it is filmed contributes to and reads against our critical desires as an audience. With its languorous soundtrack, its emphasis on first the close-up shot of Stella's face awash with desire, then the shot of Stella coming down the stairs with a view from and of Brando's muscled, half-naked back, it is like a romance novel gone haywire – the wrong bodice is ripped (Stanley's), and it is Stella's queer romance narrative that is legible. Even the neighbor, Eunice, cautions Stella's sister, Blanche, 'You don't wanna mix in this', after just hollering at Stanley herself. Eunice 'gets it', in other words, and it is Blanche's insistence on the bourgeois heterosexual romance script that does her in, even as she participates, off screen, in alternative/non-normative performances of desire.

As Ben Knights points out of the generally accepted representations of western masculinity, 'these tend to involve taking risks (with one's own body and the bodies of others), in courting danger beyond what would in any practical sense be required by actual circumstances. Exaggerated performance seems to derive from

FIGURE 2 *Stanley (Marlon Brando) kneels before Stella (Kim Hunter). Still from* A Streetcar Named Desire *(1951), Director: Elia Kazan.*

the male subject's obsessive need for reassurance about his own continuity, physical integrity, and even existence' (Knights, 2008: 9). Here, it is Brando's body (as well as Stella's and Blanche's) at risk, vulnerable, impractical, dramatic – begging for 'reassurance' even as it keeps going back to the line of fire. What would it mean for a version of feminism that courted danger and risk in the classroom, that read aberrant desire for the male body in need, exposed, laid bare as a moment not of triumph or failure, but of critical understanding? Brando's exaggeration in this scene is not quite hypermasculine in the traditional sense implied by 'violence'; it is instead the exaggeration of that representation's underbelly, that of affective call and response.

Our other tactic was to turn to the two characters no one wanted to talk about: the most 'victimized', Blanche, and her suitor, Mitch. Blanche's rape by her sister's husband Stanley in no way overdetermined my students' reading of her, as their responses to Blanche and her would-be beau were about their undesirability as

identificatory vehicles. No one wanted to perform, or watch performed, gender norms so fervently, so earnestly and desperately, as these two characters manifested. To do so is an embarrassment, a naked evacuation of power and desirability. More than that, it was, well, boring: watch Blanche do the Butlerian normative gender performance; watch Mitch discursively run through the heroic tenets of masculinity. It was too easy for the students to analyze, on the one hand, and too uncomfortable on the other to watch the failure of such performances, the failure of correspondence between speech and bodies.

Stella's and Stanley's gendered performances were, on the hand, embodied, complex – still failing, but in spectacular, interesting, dangerous ways for the audience. Stella and Stanley were the compelling couple, and I say couple because I believe our difficulty and pleasure in reading the text hinged not just on the desire/repulsion evoked by Brando's character, but on the act of witnessing the performance of power shifts within the relationship – the performance of a messy heterosexuality, one that genders harshly but unevenly, one that contains gaps for desire where, as good feminists, there 'should' be none.

Of course, Blanche (often seen as the surrogate Williams figure) can be read with just such complexity, but her desire, her embodied response to a masculinity that dare not speak its name, happens off screen, in the drama's past, and we can only witness the aftermath of that thwarting. In this sense, author Williams, director Kazan, and Brando himself come to create a hypervisibility for this intangible set of desires for the audience, that which literalizes all that cannot be said or seen. Brando's Stanley is all affect, all action, all desire; in this sense he embodies violence and danger on the masculinities front – he is beyond the script, just beyond full intelligibility, as Blanche performs for us in her attempts and failures to discipline both Stella's and Stanley's bodies through discourse.

To return to the opening quote from Kennedy, a playwright known for her experimental stagings of black women's bodies, we might do well to think about what Brando here, and what Knights in his collection, move toward in renegotiating 'the human' in masculinity studies, where 'this propensity to universalise the masculine subject of literature has occluded both male bodies and male sexuality' (Knights, 2008: 26). It is not that Stanley is an Everyman in this reading, but rather that he is the embodiment of disenfranchised desire contained in the shell of the dominant Western subject, 'The White Man'. In this sense, Stanley's whiteness (already complicated by his Polish ethnicity) calls up and upon the idea that, as Thomas DiPiero states in his compelling book *White Men Aren't*, 'white masculinity assumes what we might call the least common denominator of subjective identity, since part of its mythology has long been that it is an identity within which expressions of other identities are crystallized' (DiPiero, 2002: 7). The deceptively simple, or the attempt

toward the deceptively simple in understanding the complicated workings of desire, gives way to Brando's complicated, flexible and 'dangerous' performance of masculinity, exposing the links between power and desire, and hence exposing the subject as constituted by such contentious, incommensurable desires in its positions of power and weakness. That these structures of feeling, desire and power are culturally and socially constructed does not lessen their material or psychic pull, or the way they implicate the subject; Gender Studies' image or illusion of western, humanist choice and humanism becomes much more problematic than previously assumed, perpetually failing in the eyes of an ideal equality.

In this sense, Brando's performance in the Vietnam-themed epic war film *Apocalypse Now*, which we watched a week later in class, was easier for my class to read in its geopolitical context of neocolonial war and in the homosocial context of the front. As the subject staging his own death – the inevitable evacuation of a power which the attainment of its historical properties forecloses – Brando's large, bald frame infamously appears only in the third act (a move director Francis Ford Coppola quickly figured after Brando showed up not looking at all like his Stanley days). Lacking the complication of desiring Brando's body that they encountered in their reception of *Streetcar*, my students read the film as moral caution: against imperialism, against war, against strict versions of masculinity that construct racialized global social orders. But, following DiPiero's assertion again that 'the identity ''white male'' is about nothing if not a form of hysteria', offering 'models of impossible identification' (2002: 2–3), why is the staging of ethically ambivalent domestic desire so much harder to read? Without the same explicit grounding in larger, more assuredly life-and-death international issues, my students are left with more complicated critical desires – for and against – the seemingly useless male body of *Streetcar*.

Apocalypse Now (1979), Director: Francis Ford Coppola

One of the first films on Vietnam, *Apocalypse Now* also references Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The film centers on Captain Ben Willard's (Martin Sheen) mission to locate and assassinate a rogue officer, Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). Kurtz isn't found until late in the film, seemingly holding court over his own small army in the jungle. Though Willard completes his mission, he begins to recognize the 'horror' of the business of war himself.

One of the reasons why Judith/Jack Halberstam's (2000) thesis on 'female masculinities', which posits that masculinity can be inhabited and performed by

female bodies, was so potent in the field was that it offered another deployment of masculinity studies, one that offered resistant alliances rather than just condemnations of uses and abuses of the techniques and technologies of masculinity. The 'suspicion attached to interiority' and 'unease about affect' that Knights diagnoses (2008: 10) is not just about masculinity itself, but is characteristic of how we might feel, as feminist critics, about our complicated and even queer relationship to power relations examined through masculinity studies in particular, and to the teaching of the field. But like the gay male adoption of strong female screen stars, I wonder if Women's and Gender Studies might do well to have our own queer desires for figures like Brando, with his expansive career and literal corpus, his various reinventions of the self and of the screen, his creation of an iconography that he then proceeds to destroy and complicate in his life and with subsequent roles – almost as if the vulnerable patriarchs of *Apocalypse* and *The Godfather,* another American film by Coppola, are in themselves masculinity studies critiques on the electrifying presence of Stanley Kowalski. Could we, or could I, teach the course again with this sense of danger and failure as the explicit and transparent goal of the course, putting what I and my students often think of as traditional feminist politics on the line from the start? As Knights calls for, and Kennedy points to in her own heroic language of influence, Brando's *Streetcar* body can also point us, in the classroom and beyond, toward 'the courage to refuse' (Knights, 2008: 28), and to fail at, strict scripts of ethics attached to masculinity studies in the Women's and Gender Studies classroom, and to the texts we choose to teach. Sometimes desire and its unruly attachments can lead to queerer, deeper feminist readings, making unexpected affiliations part of the pleasure of the text.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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