

*DIXIE MATTERS: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTHERN
FEMININITIES AND MASCULINITIES.*

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This volume, edited by Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis, bears testimony of its editor's continuous and praiseworthy efforts to study contemporary Southern literature and widen its scope within American studies. Dr. Niewiadomska-Flis is a conscientious and enthusiastic researcher in the field of Southern American studies and one of the most outstanding young European specialists in the field. *New Perspectives on Southern Femininities and Masculinities* is her latest contribution where she attempts "to demonstrate how gender is socially constructed and constrained through cultural conditions below the Mason-Dixon line and reconceptualize southern gender(s) along the lines of race, class and sexuality" (Introduction). As a collection of essays ranging from an analysis of nineteenth-century Southern writings to an in-depth study of twenty-first-century Southern fiction, this volume poses a challenge to the naturalization of gender-based experiences in American Southern literature.

Taking into account the distinctiveness of the American South and its exceptionalism and at the same time recognizing its controversial interrelations, Niewiadomska-Flis rightly divides the volume into four sections: "Women in the Domestic Space of the Segregated South," "Race and Class through a Gendered Lens," "Performing Gender and Sexuality," and "New Perspective on *Gone with the Wind*". The contributors to these sections are well-known specialists from different European countries and the United States with a long list of publications on Southern literature and culture, scholars who are all closely involved in the Southern Studies Forum, an international association for US Southern studies.

In the editor's "Introduction" there is a sufficiently detailed description of the book's contents, structure and formal aspects. The contributions are highly valuable in the context of previous scholarship in the same field and they help bring into focus new dialogues with historiographical literature that has questioned the position of Southern women in the region since the end of the 1980s, as well as with the more recent research on the role of Southern men. The handling of key concepts,

themes and ideas in these articles is precise and rigorous, and it reveals the competence in the field of the authors. Their analyses open up new visions to understand how both Southern femininities and masculinities have been closely interconnected with race, class and sexual identities since the antebellum period.

In the first section, “Women in the Domestic Space of the Segregated South,” Youli Theodosiadou (Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture in the School of English at Aristotle University, Greece) contrasts two seminal nineteenth-century Southern texts –African American Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and aristocratic Mary Chestnut’s *A Diary from Dixie*– to claim that in the antebellum South both black and white women’s conception of their own identity depended on the constructions of gender and sexuality dictated by the patriarchal ideology. Susana Jiménez Placer (Associate Professor in American Studies at the Universidade de Santiago, Spain) analyzes Alice Childress’ *Like One of the Family* and Katherine Stockett’s 2007-bestseller *The Help*. She compares the dynamics of resistance deployed by black women domestics in the second half of the twentieth century and how their strategies of survival have been fictionally interpreted by African American and white women authors. Marie Liénard-Yeterian’s (Associate Professor at Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, Nice, France) delves into the study and differences between *The Help* as a novel and its filmic version.

In the second section of the volume, “Race and Class through a Gendered Lens,” its contributors tackle new approaches to analyze the crossings between race, class and gender in Southern literature. Gérald Préher (Assistant Professor at the Institut Catholique de Lille, France and a member of Jacques Pothier’s research group *Suds d’Amériques*, Université de Versailles–Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, France) studies the 1960s South in Shirley Ann Grau’s “The First Day of School” and Joan Williams’ “Spring is Now,” and racial relations in segregated education. Agnieszka Matysiak (Department of American Literature and Culture at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin) turns to Rebecca Gilman’s *The Glory of Living* (1998), an acclaimed play, finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Taking into account the conventions of Jacobean tragedy, Matysiak explores Gilman’s female characters and their submission in Southern patriarchal culture and interprets the play as a dramatic rewriting of classical models which enhances new dimensions for the liberation of women’s discourse.

In the third section of the volume, “Performing Gender and Sexuality”, Niewiadomska-Flis includes two essays that show the idea that gendered identity is performative in different Southern texts. Constante González Groba (Professor of American Literature at the Universidade de Santiago, Spain) offers a detailed and enlightening study of how the disruption of the rigid dichotomies of gender and race is illustrated by the figure of the tomboy in the writing of both nineteenth-century and twentieth-century white Southern women writers. Gisele Sigal (Université de

Pau-IUT de Bayonne) analyzes Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *Jingling in the Wind*. She departs from the idea that gender is inclusive rather than exclusive, and problematizes the notion of a clear-cut gender split into feminine and masculine to show that the text is an expression of Roberts' androgynous vision.

The fourth and last section of the volume, "New Perspectives on *Gone with the Wind*," includes two significant contributions that reread Margaret Mitchell's classic and its male characters. Emmeline Gros (University of Perpignan, France) studies the complexities of heterosexual masculinities in the South and how hegemonic masculinity, aligned to whiteness, stood as the normative practice. Finally, Beata Zawadka (Associate Professor in the Department of English at Szczecin University) interprets the novel as a rewriting of the male pastoral tradition and relates it to other fictions written under the influence of Mitchell's bestseller, texts that have expanded and confronted Mitchell's construction of a Southern past founded on white supremacy.

In conclusion, *New Perspectives on Southern Femininities and Masculinities* is a well-researched volume that offers new and significant interdisciplinary perspectives and a wide range of historical and literary critical research on the representation of southern femininities and masculinities across a diversity of writings. The book has outstanding academic relevance since it covers many outstanding aspects in contemporary Southern studies and makes a thorough analysis of the themes it proposes. This monograph will be a luminous reference for students interested in the latest approaches to the study of the interrelatedness between femininity/masculinity and race and class identities in one of the most appealing American lands of extremes.