

## AWP 2022 EVENT OUTLINE:

EVENT TITLE: The Queer Art of Problematizing Masculinity

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Feminist economist Heidi Hartman defines patriarchy as “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.” Masculinity is one of the defining forces of our contemporary world; its presence or absence is always a salient choice in prose. This is an exploration of craft choices across genre that problematize masculinity with intentionality and artistic rigor.

EVENT CATEGORY: Multi-genre Craft

EVENT ORGANIZERS: A.E. Osworth & Sarah Madges

EVENT MODERATOR: Sarah Madges

Sarah Madges is a writer and literary organizer whose work explores gender, sexuality, and trauma. They hold an MFA from the New School, copy edit for *Guernica*, and have words in *The Rumpus*, *the Village Voice*, *A Shadow Map: An Anthology by Survivors of Sexual Assault*, and elsewhere.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS & BIOS: A.E. Osworth, Nick White, Meredith Talusan

A.E. Osworth is a transgender novelist. Their first book, *We Are Watching Eliza Bright* (Grand Central Publishing, 2021) is based on Gamergate and is narrated collectively and unreliably by Reddit. They teach digital storytelling at The New School and fiction at Catapult.

Nick White is the author of two books of fiction: *Sweet and Low*, a collection of stories, and *How to Survive a Summer*, a novel. He teaches creative writing at Ohio State University.

Meredith Talusan is an award-winning author and journalist who has written for The Guardian, the *New York Times*, The Atlantic, and WIRED among many other publications, and has contributed to several essay collections. Her debut memoir, *Fairest*, was published from Viking / Penguin Random House in 2020.

#### OPENING MODERATOR REMARKS & HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENT:

Good morning and welcome to “The Queer Art of Problematizing Masculinity.” Thank you so much for joining us bright and early to contend with queerness, masculinity, and craft! A few reminders before we begin: If you need or wish to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you. Please do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities, and make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of barriers. Following the author readings and moderated conversation there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A. Please make sure that your question is a question—not a comment or observation—and if there is a particular panelist you wish to answer it, please identify who.

With that said, I am thrilled to be here with all of you, and these incredible writers, who interrogate and queer masculinity in their work in various ways: A.E. Osworth, Nick White, and Meredith Talusan. In their works we see masculinity in heteronormative, even homophobic frameworks, but also embedded within gay and queer communities. Where characters do not embody or embrace a masculinity delimited by heteronormativity and cis bias, there is confusion, friction, and even violence.

## [ADDITIONAL POTENTIAL OPENING REMARKS/CONTEXT:

Austen Osworth's novel, *We Are Watching Eliza Bright*, depicts the reactionary sexual politics of the Reddit manosphere—men who have felt excluded from the world that values the “alpha male,” and whose anger about their relegation or rejection in the social-sexual hierarchy fuels gatekeeping and violence both threatened and enacted.

Nick White's short story collection *Sweet & Low* investigates how queer masculinities are constituted in rural spaces—and the prevailing rugged, stoic masculinity against which they are defined. His work deconstructs core qualities of Southern and queer fiction to expose flawed people who only appear to fulfill their social and professional roles in line with the norms of their immediate context, complicating how we think about sexual and gender identity, and belonging.

Meredith Talusan's memoir *Fairest* chronicles her coming-of-age in the Philippines as an albino first-born son, who, in moving to the US for college, must contend with her unique positionality within Western systems of race, class, and gender. Her work probes at the demands of masculinity from within Harvard's gay community, of which she was and felt a part for years before she transitioned.

## PARTICIPANT EXCERPTS:

Osworth: segments from Chapters 22 & 23, *We Are Watching Eliza Bright*.

White: pp 46-50 (or just 46-47), “Gatlinburg,” *Sweet & Low*.

Talusan: pp 137-138, *Fairest*.

#### MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. **Everyone:** How do you **contend with masculinity** in your work? What is your relationship to it, and what do you think is **most important when trying to represent or refract light** on masculinity?
2. **Austen,** you've said you problematize masculinity by looking at the kernel that drives it, that we assume is a de facto feature, and to witness it without flinching, examining the impact it has on the characters—not just the cis woman protagonist, but the cis men as well. What did you hope doing so would accomplish, or inspire in your readers? Do you worry about reifying its mythos by adopting this collective voice?
3. **Everyone:** Representations of masculinity are often bundled up with anger and violence, and also a kind of code or membership. Do you have a vision for a different type of masculinity, or a vision for queer masculinity (if there would be any distinction)? Is there, or can there be such a thing as **authentic masculinity**, and what is it?
4. Feminist economist Heidi Hartman defines patriarchy as “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.” **Austen,** I felt that the passage you read reflects that. For **everyone**, do you think that the oppression of queer people is a part of this same system of rules? (In terms of hierarchy, **Meredith** writes about the

desirability of white and/or ubermasculine people in the gay community.)

5. **Austen**, your many-gendered queer artists' collective that is the Sixsterhood, and second narrator, appears as a kind of antidote to the toxic masculinity and misogyny of the Reddit hive mind. **Nick**, what do you see as an antidote, or way forward, if you see one, for characters like those in *Sweet & Low*, conditioned to silence or violence in the absence of another viable way to challenge the status quo?
  
6. A lot of the characters in your works define themselves in opposition to prevailing norms of their immediate context, either willfully or because they are excluded on the basis of their identity from the get-go. But defining yourself in opposition to something, a set of values, a type or presentation, isn't depicted as net-bad or net-good. **Nick**, what do you think about this kind of **constituting of a self**? Was it important to depict your characters' identity and presentation as bound by parameters, rather than borne of a place of possibility?
  
7. Austen, you take pains to insist that what happens in virtual space, in-game, is "just as real" as what happens in meatspace—and your characters' game avatars are treated as interchangeable, additional selves. **Meredith**, you also write about various versions of a self, in different contexts—your book is divided into three parts, or selves—sun child, Harvard Man, Lady Wedgewood. How did you create yourself as a character, honoring the complexity you hold but integrating past and current selves—and how did representations or discussions of masculinity come into play?

8. **Nick and Austen**, a lot of your work deals directly with anger, especially misdirected anger—and treats **male violence** almost as an inevitability. Not just in Chekhov's gun way, where in "Gatlinburg" the man who nonverbally threatens the characters winds up in a physical altercation, or what happens with the escalation of violence toward Eliza. The narration itself is resigned to what will happen. What do you intend with this it-had-to-end-up-this-way tone? Do you see this rote, toxic masculinity as inevitable in life, and therefore in fiction and non?