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Marked: Masculine Performativity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

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MARKED: MASCULINE PERFORMATIVITY IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB* AND BRET EASTON ELLIS' *AMERICAN PSYCHO*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the qualities and behaviors of white, heteronormative masculine performance in America, using Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* as exemplar literary portrayals and departures from such identity constructions. American masculinity, in its heteronormative white formulation, is treated within the majority of cultural productions in America as a "universal" identity, and as such, it is largely invisible in terms of cultural criticism. Both *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* are present as artifacts typifying the frustration of masculine identity reconciliation, with the intention of demonstrating a willingness of embracing non-prescriptive identity construction. Building off of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Michael Kimmel's *The Gendered Society*, this essay describes the homosocial and socio-economic influences upon masculine identity construction and problematizes such methodologies of identity building with the notion of intentional "othering" of the self through Butler's concept of inscription.

Throughout the essay, I discuss the overlapping categories of masculine identity which influence its construction, including capitalism, materiality as identity markers, homosocial influences to performance, and the willful marking as "other" to create authentic (non-constructed) identity. In this last category of marking, the narrator, "Joe," of *Fight Club* is successful in the creation of an authentic masculine identity because of a willingness to destroy the body and other markers of capitalistic success, thereby permanently divorcing his identity from the prescriptive markers of accepted masculine performance in America. Ellis's Patrick Bateman, conversely, is unable to craft a

sustainable identity because of an inability to counteract his dependence upon such socially accepted markers of masculine performance. Ultimately, this essay advocates the destruction of prescriptive identities of any kind which assume a stable subject in favor of a fluid gender spectrum along which identities may move and from which identities may borrow without constraint.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says.

– Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996)

This discourse on gender has been circulating in the academy since first wave feminism met and clashed with the predominant political discourses early in the 20th century in America.¹ Feminism, fueled by historical injustice and resisting culturally-induced invisibility, becomes a model and practice for combatting rigidly prescriptive identity politics. However, even cultural movements with the best intentions can sometimes fall short of creating a truly egalitarian discourse, in that there is a resistance to the assumptions made by certain incarnations of white feminism, which intimate solidarity based solely upon biological sex. This fallacy is easily construed as another attempt to reify a stable political subject through social construction. Judith Butler states: “It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion” (Butler viii). As such, biological sex and its counterpart, gender, must be

¹ Pamela Caughie describes the genesis of the term Feminism (specifically capitalized) by citing Nancy Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*: “feminism was both a continuation of the women's movement of the nineteenth century and its fight for full citizenship of women, and an expansion of that movement to include the recognition of women's sexual desires and freedom” (6).

defined and separated into discreet categories of identity, though the former is a blunt instrument for such identification.

American cultural perception is fervently engaged with simultaneously differentiating between internally inconsistent groups, and conversely universalizing those groups, which acts to blur or erase the differentiation through political and legal machinations. This erasure finds its genesis and cyclic reinforcement through socially constructed identification. But first it is important to define two principal categories for consideration: biological sex and gender. Sociologist and renowned masculinity studies scholar Michael Kimmel defines each: “‘Sex’ refers to the biological apparatus, the male and the female – our chromosomal, chemical, anatomical organization. ‘Gender’ refers to the meanings that are attached to those differences within a culture” (*The Gendered Society* 3).² As such, the problematic construction of early feminism, which begins in the late 1800’s and includes first and second wave feminism (and certain offshoots of masculinity studies) acted to replace one form of normativity and hierarchy (that which is based solely on biological sex) with another (a form of hegemonic assumption about universalized gender construction).³ As such, these formations could not be easily reconciled with members of any respective biological sex that nevertheless did not

² Kimmel sets up an opposing dichotomy between biological determinism and differentiated socialization which he explores in greater detail later in this essay. In this arrangement, he asks probing questions such as “Is biology destiny?” and “is it that human beings are more flexible and thus subject to change?” (*The Gendered Society* 2).

³ Caughie defines the temporal parameters of first wave of both non-western and Western feminisms as being “coterminous” and “connected to women’s participation in the anti-colonial nationalist movement from the late nineteenth century to the 1930’s” (95). The second wave is described in terms of three phases which begin in the 1960’s continuing into the early 1990’s, with the third phase continuing from the mid- to late 1990’s into the present critical discourses (Caughie 95).

identify within earlier narrow conceptions of gender.⁴ Whereas sexual biology can be viewed in relatively (though not entirely) stable categories, gender, as a socially evolving concept, cannot and should not be composed of any such characterizations.⁵ As such, there are arguably as many genders as there are social groups or even individuals in the world. Every person, even within the same geographic region or family, performs gender in different ways. This essay will first seek to analyze, through Butler and Kimmel, gender construction methodologies and problematize them, so as to lay the foundation for the analysis of the gender politics at work within this essay's primary texts, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Gender must then be understood to be a lens and a spectrum, constructed both systematically but arbitrarily, through which people may interpret their world and their interactions within it.⁶

⁴ Caughie discusses in her essay "Introduction: Theorizing the First Wave Globally" a "proliferation of differences" which "in turn made feminists aware of the need for a 'reorientation'" (7). This was an indication of the hegemonic feminist identity politics which problematized Western feminism, especially when viewed in non-Western contexts. Western feminism, then, is characterized as having a proprietary stake in feminism and the notion of "women" as a stable subject, and as such scholars such as Butler push back upon such ownership in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

⁵ Julie C. Brown, a PhD candidate in Science Education at the University of Florida, describes such instability in biologically determined sexual categories. She says "Classifying biological sex as a binary is often problematic because not all individuals adhere to these norms" (Brown 692-3). She then goes on to describe examples of exceptionality in genetics, as with individuals with two X chromosomes which typically denotes female, and yet the SRY gene (which determines physiological male development) is present in one of the chromosomes in the pair as well as Klinefelter syndrome, in which the individual has two X chromosomes as well as a Y chromosome (Brown 693). Both of these circumstances would problematize the popularist view of two discreet biological sexes.

⁶ Kimmel describes this social phenomena as "Gender, we now know, is one of the axes around which social life is organized and through which we understand our own experiences" (*The Gendered Society* 5).

II. BACKGROUND

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Michael Kimmel's *The Gendered Society* will function as the primary scaffolding for this essay, informing on the interpretations of the primary texts, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*. Butler provides a meticulous methodology for dissecting the power structures at play in the politics of identity construction, while Kimmel builds off of Butler's conception of gender but applies it to the universal constant: white American masculinity. In defining this identity matrix as a universal constant, traditional masculinity can be understood as the historical hegemony of an American social ideology that is shaped by and created for the white American male.^{7 8} However, it is precisely this history of performative social dominance which simultaneously creates a loss of autonomy, of sorts. The prevalence of a concept of universal masculinity, which emerges in a cyclic pattern in American politics and culture, masks an underlying problem which this essay will address: "men, themselves, are invisible as men" (*The Gendered Society* 6).⁹ Men are directly associated with

⁷ Kimmel describes men, read as American men, as being "ubiquitous in universities and professional schools and in the public sphere in general" (*The Gendered Society* 6). This sets up the universal invisibility of men.

⁸ Nell Irvin Painter, notable scholar in critical race theory, describes the universality of whiteness in terms of the same sort of methodological tendencies seen in white feminism and masculinity studies. Painter says, of universal whiteness, "Statutory and biological definitions of white race remain notoriously vague – the leavings of what is not black" (978). She goes on to describe how whiteness has, in a more modern (read post-1900) critical discourses, become "unraced" (Painter 978). This echo of masculinity is hardly coincidental, and creates similar questions around gaps in the discourse.

⁹ James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* describes the invisibility of whiteness simultaneously directly and indirectly in a discourse which must be acknowledged as a key moment of intersectionality between masculinity studies and critical race theory. Baldwin, in a letter to his nephew, states "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is not basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*" (8). This functions in multiple ways within the discourse of this essay, in that Baldwin's advice means demonstrating a willingness to "mark" oneself (which be discussed in detail later in the essay) as a countercultural means of resistance. He goes on to describe white people, which for this discussion should be read as white *men*, as being "still trapped in a history which they do not understand;

governance, power, and sometimes cruelty and domination, yet it is only recently that scholarship has moved towards considering exactly what constitutes a male identity, or *masculine as gender*.

There are pushbacks against Kimmel's particular brand of gender studies, of course. Notably, Miles Groth, the general editor of *International Journal of Men's Health and Studies*, was quite critical of Kimmel's stance from the texts, *Angry White Men* and *Guyland*, regarding feminism and men's studies. Groth describes Kimmel's feminism as an "artificial code," further going to describe such feminism as not having equality as the aim, but rather calls such a claim a "misstatement of reality" (119). The majority of the review by Groth seems to lean upon Kimmel's methodology and supposedly intentionally misleading information within the text. However, Groth is guilty of attempting, through backhanded gestures and pithy remarks, to push a socio-biological determinist model of masculinity, something antithetical to gender studies scholarship. In one particular instance, Groth attacks Kimmel's opposition to the suppression of male emotion by claiming "the fact that suppression of emotion is necessary for the self-sacrificing role that society expects him to fulfill – as providers and protectors," and thus, completely misses the point (117). Kimmel and most masculine scholars, like R.W. Connel, seek to resist such societal expectations. These associations, then, must be said to universalize men to such an extent as to create a generic

and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (8). This lack of understanding, aside from the hegemonic racial politics, also demonstrates an invisibility of history, or rather, an invisibility of the cultural markers which denote white identity.

masculinity, free from tailored performativity and socio-economic factors which contribute to unique individual agency and identity.¹⁰

It seems appropriate to return to Butler for a moment. Her work is so formative precisely because it challenges created and assumed binaries even within activism-driven political identities, namely feminism. It is exactly this idea of assumption which is imperative to this essay, as Butler asks “is the failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression itself a kind of epistemological imperialism,” by which she means that the assumption of a “monolithic” and “monologic[al]” gender oppressive politic is in itself a version of the same mechanisms which act to oppress those whom the feminist movement would seek to liberate (18).¹¹ To put it another way, to assume that oppression based on gender or indeed any “othered” population of people is universal across geographic and socio-economic boundaries demonstrates a similar egotism to that of the hegemonic superstructures which act to oppress the “other” in the first place.

Within the context of Butler’s argument, she is referring to the assumptive properties of Western white feminism as generalized to a broader global context, but the problem

¹⁰ Butler’s scaffolding is necessary, as she begins to problematize such universality in gender: “The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through sustained set of acts, posited through gender stylization of the body” (Butler xv).

¹¹ In “Butler’s Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment”, Veronica Vasterling addresses critiques of Butler’s radical feminist constructivism, citing Seyla Benhabib’s assessment which “accuses Butler of a complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy” and casts doubt as to whether “Butler’s theory of performativity can explain not only the constitution of the self but also the resistance that this very self is capable of in the face of power/discourse regimes” (17). Vasterling reaches a compromise, which echoes the intervention of this essay, in which she describes the inviability of “women” as a stable category while also acknowledging the impossibility “fulfill[ing] the promise of inclusivity this category holds out” (35). Vasterling asserts, and I agree, that Butler is aware of the unrealistic ideal of an all-inclusive signifier, but rather seeks to show the problematic nature of trying to find one. Rather, Vasterling contends that “‘women’ is permanently open to different interpretations,” and that realizing this opens the category of women to “enable solidarity and empower feminist politics (35).

raised in this assertion is very much the same as universalizing the masculine gender into broad, predictable patterns of performance and motivation.¹²

It is important here to differentiate and clarify the operating definition for masculine identity construction for the purpose of this essay. Masculinities scholar R.W. Connell defines versions of masculinity germane to this discussion: The “essentialist definition [which] usually pick a feature that defines the core of the masculine...” while the “positivist social science” simply states that masculinity is what men are, while the “normative” definition which describes how men *ought* to be, and finally the “semiotic” definition describes masculinity “through a system of symbolic difference” (68-70). However, Connell finally asserts that masculinity must ultimately be understood as “a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture”, an understanding of masculinity and gender which confirms Kimmel’s assertions (71). This essay will build off of Connell and Kimmel to define masculinity by examining the conditions, characteristics, and performance of heterosexual white masculine identity. This is in no way to exclude the queer or racialized expressions of masculine identity, which is a common practice when considering the masculine identity

¹² Baldwin, it may be argued, is at times guilty of the same normalizing generalizations as early feminists and the hegemonic power structures. Baldwin asserts that “[white people] have had to believe...that black men are inferior to white men,” and later states that “when a white man faces a black man, especially if the black man is helpless, terrible things are revealed” (9, 53). He tempers these ideas at certain points, but such notions still assume the idea of a stable subject for white people in general, white men specifically, and assumes a commonality based upon the quality of being Black which acts to normalize the Black experience in America. This can be problematic, though these assessments are based on many of Baldwin’s personal experience.

as a universal constant.¹³ Nor does this paper seek to discount the existence of feminine masculinities, or the masculine performance of the feminine elements within society.¹⁴ Rather, the rationale for making this clarification is that white heterosexual masculinity is the *most* generalized and therefore *least* gendered construction of masculinity, and such assemblages can be said to characterize the protagonists of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, which function within this essay as case studies for the phenomenon of the un-gendered male.¹⁵ While the ontology of such masculinities, here defined as existence which is dependent upon the status of "recognized gender", certainly exerts a violence upon the identity politics, it is that self-same ontological approach which creates a "veil of assumed gender". This approach enshrouds and obscures the white heterosexual male as subject, preventing performance and identity politics from being analyzed or critiqued.

¹³ Indeed, in an article by Bryce Traister, he contends that "the construction of the heterosexual male cannot proceed independently of a concomitant construction and consideration of the homosexual male," (275). As such, it is clear that hetero/homosexual identity constructions follow similar pathways up to a point, and are part of a globalized and infinite group of masculine constructions. Further, heteromascularity, as a critical conversation, might be said to "parallel – some might say feed off – gay and queer studies in the sense that it seeks to reveal hitherto invisible, not to say closeted, history of the constructed masculine subject" (Traister 277).

¹⁴ The concept of "female masculinity" is discussed in greater detail in Judith Kegan Gardiner's 2012 article "Female Masculinity and Phallic Women – Unruly Concepts". This essay acts to problematize the monopoly of masculine identity performance by those whose biological sex is male. She is interested in "the theories that address gender variation, particularly the way that female masculinity still rests on binary conceptions of power that connote maleness and also on psychoanalytic assumptions" (Gardiner 598).

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, cited here by Stephen Legg, popularized the concept of assemblages, which problematizes linear social constructions as it functions to show, among other things, the urge to "de-territorialize" whereby some concept may be said to be "consistent" but have "fuzzy borders" (129). Furthermore, seemingly disparate parts of such assemblages, like gender for instance, contain "state[s] [which] contain traces, remnants, seeds, and potential for the alternate state, and need not exist in hostile opposition" (Legg 129). Within the context of this essay, gender functions as such an assemblage which is often characterized by definition by negative (masculine is masculine because it is not feminine), but this is problematic because of the disparate qualities of so-called discreet categories of gender which demonstrate overlap. See also, Deleuze and Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987).

Fight Club and *American Psycho* represent key moments in masculine identity construction. This pairing is intentional, as the novels represent the outcry of the masculine crisis which emerges around the respective time of their publication, and the novels demonstrate a progression toward authentic masculine identity, which here can be understood as a move away from prescriptive gender performance in favor of a more malleable interpretation of masculinity, or more specifically, an identity construction which defies the notion of a stable masculine subject.¹⁶ The crisis, then, emerges as a direct result of the attempts in the 1920's, then the 1950's, and finally in the 1980's to reify the masculine role within society.¹⁷ Each plot is wholly concerned with the pressures on the protagonist subjects of *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*, "Joe" and Patrick Bateman, respectively, to conform to some version of accepted and constructed masculine identity within their specific social spheres.¹⁸ Chuck Palahniuk's narrator, who is never named and will therefore be referred to as "Joe," is an insomniac struggling to fulfill the expectations of his boss, colleagues, and family, but in such a way that his forced identity is wholeheartedly and fundamentally antithetical to his internal version of

¹⁶ Citing David Savran, Scott Duguid describes the "second half of the twentieth century" as a "turning-point" for masculinity, as the rise of "identity politics and various cultural nationalisms (most notably Women's Liberation, Black Power, and the gay and lesbian liberation movement)" (23). Given the clear exclusion of white heteronormative American masculinity, the crisis of identity becomes a self-evident cultural push against the perceptive marginalization of this predominant power structure.

¹⁷ Bryce Traister says, of the 1950's image of assumed stable masculine identity matrix, "far from supplying a stable image of hegemonic male dominance, a regime of the "domesticated male" contributed to a male culture of anxiety and resistance that masqueraded as the fulfilled suburban corporate male" (278). This anxiety and resistance are a reverberation of the combatting ideals of corporate happiness and production with the "cowboy" model of masculinity.

¹⁸ The name for the protagonist, "Joe", is derived from the articles the narrator and Tyler read in the novel which give first person accounts of various organs and tissues from the perspective of "Joe", a generalized male. As the narrator is unnamed except through aliases in the novel, this name seems appropriately generic and is used to further emphasize the identity struggle of *Fight Club*.

self. As such, his ego, in the neo-Freudian sense of the word (where the psychic nature of “Joe” is unable to reconcile his identity with the outside world), is manifested in a personality named Tyler Durden which resists and counters the attempts of “Joe” to accept his socially constructed identity and the accompanying behaviors (S. Brown 198)¹⁹ The subsequent violence (to “Joe’s” person and to his associates) is an outward manifestation of his internal inability to reconcile himself with the masculine identity created for him by his geographic, socio-economic, and political superstructures.²⁰ Fight Club, then, the brainchild of “Joe” and his alter ego Tyler, allows an escape from those superstructures and the accompanying identity, as “Joe” points out, “Who I am in fight club is not someone my boss knows” (Palahniuk 49). Tyler Durden finds it necessary to mark, and therefore devalue in terms of performative social value, his host, “Joe”, as well as their disciples in order to escape the assumptive masculine identity paradigm.²¹

¹⁹ In Steven R. Brown’s article, “Political Implications of Ego Psychological and Object Relational Personality Theories”, he describes the mechanisms of Freudian psychic constructions, as such psychic reality is concerned with “the inward-looking ego’s defenses against inner reality, and with the person’s psychological capacities rather than his ability to apprehend external reality and take it into account” (197). This reconciliation between outward and inward reality is problematic for both Palahniuk’s “Joe” and Ellis’ Patrick Bateman.

²⁰ Superstructures, here, must again borrow from the concept of assemblages, and be viewed as the amalgamation of United States historical politics towards gender, regionally specific expectations of gender, chronological expectations of gender performance, and even familial/personal-historical mandates of expected masculine performance.

²¹ Fight Club, then, might be interpreted not only in terms of “othered” masculine performativity, but also as having ritualistic connotations. Rosalind Morris asserts, of Butler’s performativity, that she would “probably eschew ethnographies in which discrete ritual act or series of acts is seen as the source of sexual and gendered identity” and as such, “rejects the notion of founding acts” (576). This would seem to diminish the idea of rebirth, or re-gendering, which characterizes Fight Club meetings, as opposed to “works which treat ritual as a site of resistance or transgressive practice” (Morris 576). However, Morris asserts and I agree, that such a treatment of Butler’s gender performativity may confuse performance with performativity (576).

Ellis' narrator, Patrick Bateman, actively avoids such marking with sincere but diminishing care during the progress of his journey. Patrick represents a simultaneous extreme adherence to accepted cultural performativity and an extreme departure from those same behaviors. While "Joe" is concerned with reconciling an authentic persona within his naturalized context, Patrick Bateman does not feel he possesses a stable personality, but is rather a garish amalgamated caricature of upper strata masculine performativity. Contrary to "Joe's" ambivalent knowledge of his identity and alter ego, Patrick is aware of his private dalliances with non-normative/destructive behavior patterns, but does not view them as indicative of himself; rather:

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I am simply not there*. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is a fabrication, an aberration. (Ellis 377)

As such, the gender of Patrick's true nature must be just as nebulous as his perceived personality of himself. However absent Patrick feels his authentic personality to be, he still adheres rigidly (at first) to the culturally generated gender norms of his biological sex, socio-economic status, and peer group. Part of the "growth" of Patrick, here synonymous with degeneration, is manifested as his murderous urges preclude his assumptive inclusion into these "in-groups" he finds himself unable to accommodate. These discreet categories of "fraternity" as it were are most assuredly conflated for

Patrick to form a largely homosocial personality emulator, in which Patrick may simply attempt to perform his gender based on the exemplars observable in his surroundings.²²

There is already a body of scholarship surrounding these texts (and/or their movie counterparts) which it will be useful here to outline. Of *American Psycho*, much of the scholarship discusses the role of violence and capitalism within the text. In “Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*,” Berthold Schoene outlines the ways in which stereotypical expressions of violent masculinity are actually antithetical to its traditional grounding, whereby “the masculine gender has been defined as incontestably rooted in the faculty of reason,” and the modern manifestations are moving backwards towards more archaic and possibly pathological expressions (378). Patrick’s *reason*, then, is entirely too malleable to function as a stable masculine performance. Though Ellis is typically considered analogous with the postmodern, Amy Bride describes Ellis’s novels, particularly *American Psycho*, as also decidedly gothic in nature, citing “pessimism,” “materiality,” and “hierarchy” as principal concerns for *American Psycho*, qualities which are shared with more traditional gothic texts (4).²³ This materiality is an important facet of this essay, but in such a way as to emphasize the importance of such materiality in terms of

²² Appearance of wealth, which will be discussed in more detail later, is central to the masculine gender politics and identity formation in *American Psycho*. Thomas Heise describes the majority of the novel as “devoted to the spoils of the wealthy, as well as tedious advice on how to be or look rich, which comes in the form of conversations between Bateman and his yuppie colleagues” (137).

²³ This brings in interesting ideas about genre, in that the crisis of identity motif becomes more prolific after the Reagan administration. In Katherine Biber’s article, “The Emperor’s New Clones: Indiana Jones and Masculinity in Reagan’s America,” she describes the borrowing of ideas of masculine self-reliance and virility and transplanting those values into a consumerist culture (67). As such, literature and film began to respond to this outmoded masculine identity matrix through the production of visible means of resistance.

identity genesis. These themes are reinforced by Thomas Heise, who describes the text in terms of being a “1980’s portrait of class hatred and power” (136). Class hatred is a common thread in both novels; however, the class hatred emerges in *American Psycho* as more of a frustration at the inability of Patrick to reconcile his hatred of the poor with his competition with and need to impress his homosocial peer group. Much of the criticism here seems concerned with neoliberalism and its consequences, indicative of the changes to American economics, labor, and politics from the mid to late 1980’s and 1990’s. This essay borrows from the more pervasive themes set by these scholars, but focusses on masculine identity politics as a more discreet symptom of the broader discourse.

Fight Club is set in the 1990’s expands upon and builds on many of the themes begun in *American Psycho*. The scholarship principally considers the isolation and bitterness endemic of the postmodern, the violence (physical and social) inherent to such isolation, and radicalized resistances that are the products of such violence. Alex Tuss, writing for *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, describes in his analysis of *Fight Club* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the idea of “camouflage”, which in the case of *Fight Club* manifests as Tyler Durden (96). Tyler’s protective camouflage, then, must be seen as a projection of “Joe” which acts a refusal of prescriptive masculinities. Kevin Alexander Boon, also writing for *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, describes the crisis of white American masculine performance in terms of the irreconcilable nature of such performance when “the rhetoric of anti-aggression... [which] radically [alters] the way men are perceived and the way men perceive themselves” (267). This perceptive value fuels “Joe” and his creation, Tyler Durden, as well as Ellis’s Bateman, and speeds each towards attempting

to resolve the conflict between perceptive personality and authentic personality, which is defined in this essay as a non-stable subject. Much of the criticism of each novel seems to be a “macro-criticism” of the political discourses of the novels’ respective temporality; however, this essay builds from previous criticism in order to consider one much more specific facet, identity politics, as it relates to the narrators as individuals and representatives of their socio-economic and political classes.

The traditional masculine identity politics found and violently protested against in *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* are rooted in the evolution of masculine performance after the Industrial Revolution just before and well into the 20th century. The most appropriate literary signpost for the origins of this hegemonic construction of identity is arguably F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.²⁴ The standards of manliness, and thus masculine identity performance, are described in terms of a rigidity of social norms in Fitzgerald’s work which evolve into the social norms presented and combatted in *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*.²⁵ The global masculine persona of America itself changed during this critical moment near the turn of the 20th century, and the socialized gender performance of individuals was altered in analogous ways. This performative methodology can find its genesis, in part, in Theodore Roosevelt, who characterized himself and his presidency in traits akin to those of Fitzgerald’s Tom and Jay Gatsby in

²⁴ See Susanne Del Gizzo’s *The American Dream Unhinged*, which describes an interview with Chuck Palahniuk in which he describes *Fight Club* as “rewriting *The Great Gatsby*, ‘updated a little’” (71).

²⁵ See also: *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway (1929), *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway (1951), *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1899), *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (1939), *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (1937), and *The American* by Henry James (1877).

Gatsby and in the re-emergence and re-imagining of such characters later in the century, as with Patrick Bateman.²⁶ Indeed, Roosevelt felt a compulsion toward this model of masculine performance, as Bruce Fehn citing Roosevelt's autobiography, describes Roosevelt's prescriptive transformation from a "sickly" young man to a robust boxer and rower, the picture of "rugged, physical manhood that he would represent for the rest of his life" (53). The "cowboy" model of American masculine politics, and the emergence of literary "cowboy" models, can be traced to Theodore Roosevelt's careful crafting of this persona. Indeed, Ava Baron, who writes on labor and its political implications, describes the shift between affected foppishness to "muscular masculinity," whereby "the economic and social transformations believed to have disrupted men's stable sense of manhood resulted in the valorization of a rough and tough masculinity", a tendency mirrored in *Fight Club* and resisted in *American Psycho* as well as *Gatsby* (146). R. W. Connell evokes Roosevelt as she describes a "self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism" where "wilderness, hunting and bushcraft were welded into a distinct ideology of manhood" (195). This mode of performativity held influence, and still does in certain groups, but ultimately found itself unsustainable, with resistance emerging in American masculine literature in the wake of the Reagan administration.^{27 28} In the

²⁶ Bruce Fehn, in his article "Theodore Roosevelt and American Masculinity", says of Roosevelt that he "defined himself as a man through robust participation in what he termed the 'strenuous life'" (53).

²⁷ Baron also describes the transition from a "property-owning farming and self-employed craftsmen gave way to deskilled manual laborers and salaried office workers" (146). This has implications on both the masculinity of "Joe" and Patrick Bateman, as each struggles in his own way to craft a more satisfactory masculine identity in the face of the obsolescence of Roosevelt-style masculinities and Reagan-era socio-economics.

²⁸ Indeed, the Reagan-era identity politics, according to Scott Duguid's article "The Addiction of Masculinity: Norman Mailer's "Tough Guys Don't Dance" and the Cultural Politics of Reaganism", gives rise to the re-emergence of hyper-masculine tropes such as Rambo and was "predicated on a nostalgic return of the 1950's" (29). This creates a discourse related to genre theory, as in addition to the "nostalgic"

literary and cinematic imagination, the 1980's attempted to reconcile the "cowboy" with the fops of the gilded era, with predictably confused masculinity identity politics and unstable masculine performance criteria.

The earlier descriptions of hegemonic masculinity give rise to certain "invisible" criteria for performing masculine gender identity, which in turn generates a discourse which problematizes the presumptive universality of such hegemonic criteria. The idea of "proving" one's masculinity is central establishing one's position in the socio-political gender hierarchy, as performativity is wholly dependent upon the peer group reaction to such performance, or the assumed or perceptive reaction when one is in more private settings. In this vein of performativity dynamics, the criteria for masculinity in this essay will be distilled into three sequentially progressive categories, beginning with (i) wealth and markers of wealth as masculine performance, moving to (ii) homosocial (in this essay, concerning men in the workplace/peer group) interactions with the requisite importance of appearing "masculine," and finally demonstrating (iii) the eventual function of the "othered" status for "Joe" and Patrick Bateman with regards to the creation of more individualistic masculine identity. With these categories in mind, this essay seeks to eschew with the traditional binary of masculine and "other" in favor of a fluid spectrum design of gender performativity and socio-political identity status.²⁹

masculinity there emerges a resistance to such discourses such as the later writings of Norman Mailer, and the beginning writings of Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk.

²⁹ Michael Kimmel describes this concept in *The Gendered Society* as he claims that "gender must be seen as an ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors" (*The Gendered Society* 10). This malleability is crucial to the refutation of the possibility of a stable subject for feminism and masculine theory, for Judith Butler and Kimmel, respectively and collectively.

Using these descriptors of performativity, I will demonstrate through *Fight Club's* "Joe" and *American Psycho's* Pat Bateman that in order for the authentic, non-socially dependent gendering of the white American male to occur, men must intentionally designate or "mark" themselves as "other".³⁰

III. CAPITALISM, SUCCESS, AND MASCULINE IDENTITY

Notions of financial stability, or more specifically demonstrations of materialistic success in modern America, are among the central considerations in the systemic social formulation of masculine identity. Furthermore, the capitalistic performance of "work" is decidedly gendered as well, as some jobs or careers are perceptively more or less masculine depending on the history of a particular profession within its host society (Kimmel 260-1).³¹ This dynamic, particularly in post-1900 America, is central to "Joe" and Patrick Bateman's earliest conceptions of masculine identity, and was decidedly "an invention of the 1950's – and part of a larger ideological effort to facilitate the reentry of American men back into the workplace and domestic life after World War II" (*The*

³⁰ Much like gender construction, race construction is emblematic of the overarching problem of identity binaries. Nell Irvin Painter describes the odd phenomenon of "whiteness" moving from specificity of "kinds of whiteness" (based upon European heritage) to a more generalized universal whiteness which occurs in the 1930's and 40's, for the implicit purpose of presenting a (racist) unified front to reinforce hegemonic racism during the Jim Crow Era (Painter 979). In this way, the present identity components of the subject of this essay, the heterosexual white American male, is even more obscured because the misnomer "white" ignores any European heritage or other cultural labels. Unfortunately, the label "white" will have to suffice within this essay, as the other cultural details of "Joe" and Patrick are never made clear, further typifying the capricious nature of socially constructed identity.

³¹ Bryant Keith Alexander brings together critical race theory with the gendered division of labor in his essay, "Gendered Labor: Entanglements of Culture, Community and Commerce," as he describes the "reductive notion of *women's work*" and the "historical class-based differentiation between the leisure of white women and the often-necessary labor of nonwhite women" in the context of the power dynamics which support hegemonic white patriarchal structures within the workplace (145-6). In this essay, Patrick would typify such gendered labor division, especially when considering his relationship to female subordinates within his workplace, while the descriptions of "Joe's" workplace are mostly concerned with "Joe's" male boss, and other men in positions of authority.

Gendered Society 261). Much of the American Dream ideology emerges during this time, such as the idea of “self-made” man who “pulls himself up by his bootstraps” to achieve wealth accumulation, a solidified and unassailable position as a master of society, and best establish his respective masculinity. The workplace is generative to such masculinity. Eva Baron describes the circumstance by which “the new economic order altered gender as well as class relations thereby precipitating a crisis in masculinity,” which creates the desire, or even *need*, of asserting masculine performance in the post-industrial workplace (145). The workplace, to the 20th century American man, then, can be said to form the site of “‘homosocial reproduction’ – a place where men created themselves as men” (*The Gendered Society* 265). It is important to note, however, a difference in the precise function of the workplace for each protagonist. For “Joe”, his jobs, particularly those “shared” with Tyler like banquet service, act to “stoke [Joe’s] class hatred,” a function necessary for his personal destruction and the subsequent establishment of a culturally iconoclastic masculine identity. Patrick Bateman, on the other hand, clings to his career as vice president of his father’s finance company, as it represents a repository of people, behaviors, and purchasable identity markers for Patrick to appropriate in an attempt to fill the empty spaces of his nebulous identity.³²

The workplace is the obvious location to begin the discussion of concepts of masculine success within a capitalist society. Kimmel asserts that, traditionally, “gender

³² Later in Ava Baron’s article, she describes the need of the “laboring man to reformulate meanings of manhood in response to social and economic changes” (145). This would ostensibly exclude Patrick Bateman and peers of his ilk; however, I would argue that the white collar workers depicted attempt similar reformulations as the “laboring man,” though through differing methodologies.

stereotypes would have us believe that women would be content to marry less attractive but financially stable men,” a model which moves conceptions of masculine performance away from the brawny but less financially viable manliness towards one centered on success in the gladiatorial arena of capitalism (*The Gendered Society* 266).³³ As a result, the somewhat debunked American Dream, as relates to men in the workplace, is nevertheless an effective subconscious rhetorical strategy. The relationship of “Joe” and Patrick Bateman to this dynamic is demonstrably different from each other, as one would expect. For “Joe,” then, his place at work is somewhat characterized by his dealings with (and occasionally threatening) his ineffectual, petty, and yet prominent boss, whom he grudgingly likes and respects, though one suspects this is out of habit produced by masculine ideas of hierarchy. Tyler Durden, on the other hand, regards all jobs as disposable and therefore removes the power of hierarchy over himself, asserting an “other” masculine persona as he states “Getting fired is the best thing that could happen to any of us. That way, we’d quit treading water and do something with our lives” (Palahniuk 83). “Joe” has daily interactions with his boss, which fulfill an unconscious desire for homosocial relations, and yet these interactions lack the substance of a

³³ Kimmel cites a study appearing in *Newsweek* conducted by Peg Tyre and Daniel McGinn, “She Works, He Doesn’t,” which actively refutes this model, stating that “50 percent of women now say that earning potential is ‘not at all important’ in their mate choice” (*The Gendered Society* 266).

meaningful exchange.^{34 35} Arguably, this lack of sincere exchange between these two men is part of what leads “Joe” down the path toward Tyler and destruction.

For Patrick Bateman, however, it is these sorts of daily interactions which help him to maintain his tenuous hold on any version of solvent identity, masculine or otherwise. It is important to note, however, that while “Joe” is not even middle management at his company, Pat Bateman is answerable only to one man, which happens to be his father. As such, his homosocial relations come in two distinct categories: his peers, which are Bateman’s friends he views to be on an even social plane with himself, and therefore can be emulated with impunity, and other males which Bateman deems to be beneath his station and are therefore only fodder for masculinity depends upon success as a masculine identity marker, while women are “unsexed by success” and used to “lubricate’ the male-male interactions” within the context of Bateman’s firm, Pierce and Pierce (*The Gendered Society* 266). Whereas in *Fight Club*, Marla is a principal character if not a “main” character, the women occupying the space of *American Psycho* are, for Patrick and his peer group, objects, in the most demeaning sense, and useful only for sexual conquest and status. The environment then must be said to reify the 1950’s model of gendered workplace dynamics that enjoyed something of a resurgence in the late

³⁴ In her essay “The American Dream Unhinged: Romance and Reality in “The Great Gatsby” and “Fight Club,” Suzanne Del Gizzo discusses the similarity in the relationship between Nick Caraway and his respective environment and “Joe” with his; both are described as “engaged in employment which is impersonal, and to varying degrees dehumanizing,” and both “live lives generally devoid of meaningful relationships and intimacy” (72).

³⁵ In an interesting mirroring, William F. Pinar, describing masculine workplace politics at the end of the 19th century, portrays a “government clerk as someone who ‘has no independence in the office, no manhood...he must openly avow his implicit faith in his superior, on pain of dismissal, and must cringe and fawn upon them’”(330). Moving forward in time 100 years, Patrick enjoys this relationship from his subordinates, namely Jean his secretary, while “Joe” languishes in such dynamics with his boss.

1980's and early 1990's. Bryant Keith Alexander describes, in the context of racialized, gendered work performed by Black women in the salon, an idea of labor exchange that is also a "cultural experience" that "exceeds the specific consumer exchange" (152).³⁶

Within the context of Bateman and his secretary, this same assumption occurs: he refers to her infatuation with him as a matter of course, further supporting the 1950's gender/power dynamic of the workplace to which he feels attached. His attachment stems from emulation of sexual power dynamics witnessed in his formative years as well as traits observed in his contemporary peers. Bateman's fragile identity is a hollow echo of arguably more self-assured peers, such as Timothy Price, who describes himself in terms of being "young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled" and as an "asset" that "society cannot afford to lose" (Ellis 3). Price, consequently, is also engaging in an affair with Bateman's erstwhile fiancé, yet because of Price's status in Bateman's estimation, Bateman is largely unconcerned.³⁷

Work, or earning compensation for one's labor, seems to be a central to the mythos of the American masculine identity. Men in America, it seems, *believed* "that there was a contract between themselves, and guys like them, and the government 'of the

³⁶Alexander's project involves exploring the attitudes and expectations of women of color in the workplace, in which he references Butler's idea of experiencing predictable patterns of cultural performance, and the pressures on identity and agency such expectations create within "othered" populations.

³⁷ Bateman becomes unhinged during the business card scene, where after demonstrating his masculine primacy through his new card which is the color of "bone" with "Silian Rail" lettering, he is unsettled as his card is dethroned by Price's then Montgomery's respective business cards (Ellis 44-5). It is precisely this instability that leads to Bateman's eventual rejection of the very defining social conventions he emulates to establish his masculine presence.

people' that is supposed to represent us" (*Angry White Men* 202).³⁸ The understanding between men seems to be necessary in order to support the power dynamics of the workplace and maintain the homosocial hierarchy necessary to sustain these normative interactions. This contract, according to Kimmel, began to show cracks after the advent of Reaganomics, which acted to cut funds for federal agencies, creating a sense of betrayal and discord in the average American man. (*Angry White Men* 201). The resultant post-Reagan American workplace then can be said to suffer the same "breach of contract," and this is evident in the work environments of Bateman, representing the late 1980's, and "Joe", who works during the middle to late 1990's. This sentiment is summarized by "Joe's" boss, who relays to "Joe" after seeing the bruised and stitched faces of "respectable" businessmen (and presumably members of "Joe's" Fight Club organization), that "there are fewer and fewer gentlemen in business and more thugs" (Palahniuk 54). "Joe's" boss's comment is ironic, because his position and relationship to his subordinates is contingent upon this breach of "contract" between men. Patrick Bateman, too, seems to enjoy the betrayal of the working man, as his position at *Pierce and Pierce*, the lynchpin of Bateman's feigned performative identity, is only viable because of nepotism (the company is his father's) and the company employs insurmountable blocks to upward mobility despite the work ethic within. As such, it is not only the interactions between presumptive peers that facilitate masculine identity

³⁸ This quotation is contextualized by Kimmel relating incidents of violence perpetrated by Joe Stack, who flew a plane into an IRS headquarters in Texas, and Patrick Sherrill, a postal worker who felt betrayed by these perceived breaches in these contracts and shot and killed 15 postal employees in Oklahoma (*Angry White Men* 199-202).

construction, even with rivals, but also the interactions between men and their presumptive lesser associates reinforce the traditional masculine primacy.

IV. HOMOSOCIAL INTERACTION AND “LOOKING THE PART”

The interactions between men, subordinate or equal, are still critical in the development of American masculine identity despite the dissolution of the any “moral” or social contract between the worker and the boss/governmental entity. There is still the gleam of hope that hard work, an opportunity, and a little luck will result in the American man realizing that nearly forgotten Dream. But such striving, often in unsuccessful earnest, can leave cracks, chinks, and breaks in the masculine identity matrix. It is in these spaces that doubt begins to enter the equation, and with those doubts rises the need to “prove” masculinity, under any number of masculine gender matrix performances.

While a man might internalize and manifest perceived shortcomings in workplace success as shortcomings in his status as a man, it is only relatively recently that the word depression could be attributed to these feelings.³⁹ Arguably, it is precisely these inexpressible feelings of alienation from such emasculating interactions that propel “Joe” and Patrick Bateman toward their more extreme expressions of masculine identity.

Before the conversation moves towards deviant homosocial interactions, however, let us

³⁹ Kimmel discusses the trend in past decades whereby “therapists understood depression as a ‘feminine’ psychological problem” (*Angry White Men* 216). “Feminine” here is meant to mean the antithesis to masculine, not the critical discourse surrounding feminist theory. Kimmel goes on to describe how depression is socially distributed, much like gender performance tendencies, in that “the newly divorced or the recently downsized or laid off are far more likely to experience depression than those who are married or employed or both” (*Angry White Men* 217).

fully consider the implications of more normative interactions, particularly with competitiveness and appearance.

Patrick Bateman's daytime persona, the successful, good looking, wealthy, and powerful, is still incredibly insecure when interacting with those he views to be his equal or better. As illustrated with the business card vignette early in this novel, it is a common tendency even among the ostensibly successful to strive to prove their masculinity, typically through comparison with such peers. Patrick Bateman waxes ecstatic throughout the first two-thirds of the novel on the markers wealth, in the form of expensive brands of clothing and accessories. Timothy Price, Bateman's romantic "rival" with whom he is friends and does not particularly begrudge for bedding Bateman's fiancé, is viewed as equal to Bateman because they share a look indicative of masculine primacy: "Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti" (Ellis 5). These details, which are peppered liberally throughout most of the novel, obviously are a push back against the increasingly materialistic vision of America, particularly regarding masculine identity post-Reagan.⁴⁰ Bateman and his friends, while the primary focus of the novel, are cast as hyper-masculine villains wearing \$3000 dollar suits.⁴¹ These "villains" are marked by such

⁴⁰ John Frow's article on genre theory, "Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need": Genre Theory Today" describes the perception of genre as a taxonomic tool for categorization and moves towards a model whereby genres are fluid (1626-7). As such, and more germane to this project, while novels such as *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* may appear more often after the 1980's, such novels of dissent and reinvention of masculinity have occurred across American literature, including notably *The Great Gatsby*.

⁴¹ Amy Bride describes the gothic aspects of Ellis's novel in "That these villains appear, as a result, to be part of our own society rather than archaic throwbacks subsequently makes them more relatable and therefore, more effective as gothic villains enacting the uncanny as both recognisable and alienating

clothes and affectations, which in the extreme context of *American Psycho* function as a method to differentiate the “in-group” of Bateman and his peers from everyone else. As such, dressing well becomes less of a strict demarcation of success; rather, it becomes a performance of in-group dynamics meant to exclude the lesser men (and women) from Bateman’s sphere. While these qualities operate in favor of Bateman’s feigned masculine identity, they also further highlight and draw into question his rationale for risking it all to pursue his nocturnal bloodlust. This is partially due to the concept of masculine crisis, which seems most to effect working class or lower echelon white-collar workers, and clearly neither descriptor fits Bateman. However, the all-consuming fear of loss of financial status acts most strongly on those who, like Bateman, have more to lose than lower ranking functionaries, and for Bateman and his cohort, losing money equates directly to losing masculinity, especially as performed in front of one another.

This sort of logical crisis does, however, fit “Joe”. His role within the company is such that he is a recall campaign coordinator for an automotive manufacturer, and his job is to decide, using the impartial formula, whether or not to initiate a recall on vehicles his company produces.⁴² However, due to the distance between “Joe” and his coworkers and boss, a result in no small part to his insomnia, “Joe” does not sense any real connection to those around him and must find emotion, in the form of fear and pain, elsewhere. Here,

entities” (4). This version of villainy pales in comparison to the depravity lurking in Patrick Bateman’s nighttime persona, which will be discussed later.

⁴² The formula is $a*b*c = x$, where “a” is the total vehicles in the field, “b” is the chance that these vehicles will fail, and “c” is the cost of settlement as a result of such failures (Palahniuk 30). This situates “Joe’s” company into the “evil corporation” motif, which is the stage for masculine suppression and identity loss for “Joe” as he must divorce his personal feelings from the equation.

“Joe” must rely upon support groups, especially “Remaining Men Together”.

“Remaining Men Together”, a testicular cancer support group attended by “Joe” to help him find some connection to humanity generally and men specifically, is filled with men who are desperately clinging to a fading model of masculinity. Their insecurity, propelled by the loss or non-function of the anatomical indicators of biological sex, pushes them into a state of “other”, at least with regards to their earnestly sought after masculine identity.⁴³ This group constitutes a highly specialized sort of homosocial interaction, one that “Joe” hopes to use to replace the non-satisfactory interactions he has with his company.⁴⁴ Marla’s presence problematizes the support group’s defining characteristics, as she is biologically female, and to the mind of narrator who is still struggling with a crisis of gender identity, does not belong. Marla within the context of this group does, however, function to show the instability of the masculine subject. The focus of such a group, ostensibly to comfort men at the tragedy that is testicular cancer, actually acts for “Joe” and other members, particularly Bob, to reify and highlight their perceived shortcomings, which is the familiar refrain regarding the conflation of biological anatomy and gendered performance.

⁴³ This support group is actively hoping to fulfill one function for its members but actually fulfills quite another. The men here hope to somehow regain the traditional definition of masculinity, lost for them with the loss of their testicles to cancer, yet the group acts to create an “other” of such traditional masculinities strictly within the context of the group. This is addressed as Michael Kimmel, speaking of the fantasy of financial and therefore masculine success and its fading possibility in modern America, says “what we lose in reality, we re-create in fantasy,” (*Angry White Men* 218).

⁴⁴ Michael Kimmel discusses the shortcomings of the corporate work environment specifically in terms of such beneficial homosocial interactions, as he describes the workplace as “a treadmill, a place to fit in, not to stand out” but where “men rarely, if ever, experience the ability to discuss their inner lives, their feelings, their needs” (*The Gendered Society* 266).

Given these support groups for “Joe,” and the boys’ club atmosphere, for Patrick, why do the protagonists of these novels still need to commit physical violence to claim an authentic (non-prescriptive) masculine identity? Here the essay must return to concepts elaborated upon by Judith Butler. She describes the mechanism of “appropriation and suppression of the Other [which] is one tactic among many, deployed centrally but not exclusively in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain” (Butler 19).⁴⁵ This mechanism acts on men, as well as women, especially those predisposed by identity crises towards being “othered”. As such, this helps to explain the divergence from the accepted masculine performance perpetrated by “Joe” and Patrick. Such groups or coalitions, like the early feminists described by Butler, assume a unity that will almost certainly not be present, given the spectrum shape of the gender continuum. As such, linking Butler with Kimmel, boys and men are so largely preoccupied with performing normative prescriptive masculinity, that is, masculinity that occurs by consistently “devaluing all things feminine”, that they (men) fail to realize that performative normativity is prohibiting personal growth and maturation, which is represented as “feminine” (*The Gendered Society* 98). And for those who have consciously or subconsciously realized this critical shortfall, the only logical outcome is to find ways in which one is “othered” to such an extent as to preclude returning to the familiar circles of homosocial masculine performance. They must distinguish themselves, not as “manly”

⁴⁵ Butler goes on to describe how the exclusionary subject of “woman” acts to facilitate hierarchy in terms of class and race (19). This exclusionary tactic is effective at the subconscious level for “Joe” and Patrick, as both acknowledge their position as one “on the outside looking in,” despite relative success in the workplace.

men, but as “other,” and this is becomes permanent when “Joe” and Patrick begin to “mark” themselves and their identities in shocking and irrevocable ways.

V. “MARKING AS OTHER” AND AUTHENTIC MASCULINE IDENTITY

Authentic (non-stable) gender identity and understanding of gender performative matrices are the logical outcome for such academic discourses. Validation, here, instead of being dependent upon social acceptability of gender, rather reflects the internal dialogue in which the masculine subject interrogates performance and finds it, for once, not clearly demarcated. An authentic gender identity must be formed individually yet be fluid, notwithstanding the cultural forces that surround and influence the politics of such an identity. So, what are the methods of resistance available to the subjects “male” and “female” to combat or at least nullify normative social identity constructions? To this end, Judith Butler asks:

“Is there a political shape to ‘women,’ as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? How is that identity shaped, and is it a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface, or site of cultural inscription? What circumscribes that site as ‘the female body’? Is ‘the body’ or ‘the sexed body’ the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is ‘the body’ itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex?” (175).

For the purposes of this essay, one would simply replace “women” and “female” with “men” and “male,” and the pertinence of the questions asked by Butler remains intact. Should the body labeled masculine have that signifier be contingent upon expected, or socially derived, markers? Should indicators of wealth and success be the only indication of masculinity and virility in postmodern America? “Joe” and Patrick Bateman certainly take pains to push back upon this tendency. For each narrator, the body, their own or the bodies of others, no longer “appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body” (Butler 175). Analysis of the gendered identity must now preclude simply “looking the part” and performing ostensibly normative gender signifiers, as this conflates the appearance of sex and political positioning of gender.⁴⁶ This dynamic of appearance and performance should, rather, be used to counter normative gender formations, with such modes of resistance manifesting as the intentional marking of the body/subject as “other”.

Marking oneself willingly does several things to one’s gender identity dynamics. However, in this context, the facet of gender identity most affected is performativity, which is often demonstrated as visibility. The most effective way, then, to garner increased visibility is to perform gender in such a way that such performativity must be held in stark contrast to one’s naturalized contexts.⁴⁷ And it is here that our previously

⁴⁶ Rosalind Morris discusses the move, under the influence of performance theory, away from such conflation. It is instead “concerned with the relationships and the dissonance between the exclusive categories of normative sex/gender systems and the actuality of ambiguity, multiplicity, abjection, and resistance within these same systems” (Morris 570).

⁴⁷ Morris goes on to describe how “the constructedness of bodies becomes most visible when it deviates from the expectations of the dominant ideology” (570). Here, marking as “other” refers to sexual ambiguity, which is a large part of the rationale for the need of gender/performative critical intervention, as the lack of a stable subject necessitates more careful consideration and fluid categorization.

paired narrators, “Joe” and Patrick Bateman, must, through their own actions and changing ideologies, diverge within the contexts of gender performativity and identity construction. First and foremost, the motivations of the narrators are diametrically opposed: “Joe” is more and more willing to present, to his boss and the world around him, an image anathema to his previous performance of masculine as worker, while Patrick suffers the conundrum of doublethink regarding his performed masculine identity. Patrick simultaneously seeks, at times in earnest, some foothold for a tenable masculine identity unique unto himself, while just as vigorously attempting to maintain the veneer of respectability and homosocially acceptable performance. There is, however, a tenuous but present thread connecting the methodologies of “Joe” and Patrick Bateman to achieve some version of authentic masculine performance: violence. It is also on this point that this essay must diverge and disagree with some previous assessments on the motivations for violence and the manifestations of masculine gender politics presented in such violence.

The eponymous organization of *Fight Club* functions as an extreme yet sincere version of the homosocial dynamics “Joe” has been seeking throughout his forays into the workplace and support groups. However, it is easy to be dismissive of such social gatherings as merely an excuse for violence, which might otherwise be perpetrated against others and which fight club merely redirects. Of the film *Fight Club* which largely stays true to the novel, Henry Giroux offers just such a criticism of the methodology of marking demonstrated both in the film and the novel. While Giroux does concede the homosocial catharsis made possible for “Joe” and his followers through

the mechanism of the fight club proper, he also characterizes a critical scene of “marking” in which Tyler Durden uses lye to burn a kiss into the back of the hand as “homoerotically charged sadism” instead of the willful marking of the body, the subject, the self as “other” (36). This characterization is problematic for two reasons: first, homoeroticism is only present on the surface analysis; “Joe” is Tyler, and as such, it would be autoerotic if anything, but this is problematized by the lack of sexual gratification; second, sadism only works if the violence is between two or more people, and as previously mention, “Joe” is Tyler. Further, Giroux describes the experience of fight club in terms of the “cathartic” and “cleansing properties” of “senseless brutality [as] a crucial form of male bonding” (36). Again, this analysis is guilty of oversimplification, as Giroux only engages the violent acts depicted in terms of violence for its own sake, which does not take into account the ways in which such violent acts might influence the development of a masculine identity which does not depend on the larger homosocial arena for validation.⁴⁸

While it may be conceded that for those in the basements during fights, there was a certain version of pleasure involved in participating in a fight, this pleasure cannot be construed only as a sexualized “action movie” glorification construction. Rather, these fights function to mark the participants with something “real,” defined here as a non-

⁴⁸ Of the film version of *Fight Club*, Giroux makes the claim that the violence of the film “reduces the body to a receptacle of pain parading as pleasure, and in doing so fails to understand how the very society it attempts to critique uses an affirmative notion of the body and its pleasures to create consuming subjects” (36). This explanation is still lacking, as it assumes a pleasure/pain conflation which does not address the “other” status of a body marked by violence.

constructed if temporary social masculine identification matrix.⁴⁹ Certainly, there is a link between this sort of masculine performativity and the glorification of violence from by-gone eras, and the easiest explanation for gratification caused by participation in *Fight Club* is a misguided attempt to reclaim older masculine identity performances.⁵⁰

However, this is again an oversimplification, as it ignores a concept highlighted within *Fight Club* itself: “A man on the street will do anything not to fight,” and so “what we have to do, people, is remind these guys what kind of power they still have” (Palahniuk 119-20). The power is not simply to destroy, to fight, to *be manly* in some archaic fantasy, but rather to mark oneself as “other”, and in doing so, to access an active countercultural mode of resistance which allows authentic masculine identity to flourish.

Bateman’s character attempts to “mark” himself as well, but in contradictory ways which preclude the notion of self-sustained masculine identity construction. Ostensibly, Bateman’s masculine performance is divided into two sometimes overlapping but still discreet categories: normative performance in the extreme and deviant performance of the highest magnitude. As previously described, the normative performance of Patrick Bateman borders on obsessive and even unhealthy. Notably, homosexuality seems to be an intolerable difference, as Bateman notes while at the

⁴⁹ Kimmel describes the testimony of “Matt” who is a young man in his late twenties with a PhD in software engineering, who describes real life fight club participation as being “real. The blood is real. The cracked ribs are real. The pain is real. The pain is fucking real. You actually *felt* something. I don’t know. That just matters” (*Angry White Men* 222).

⁵⁰ Kevin Alexander Boon describes the trend of modern and postmodern American men regarding violence as “a culturally ethic [which] emerged that dissociated men from aggression in an attempt to create a more congenial masculinity” (267). This assumes a conflation with older forms of masculinity and physical aggression, which is a popularized yet not a strict characterization of turn of the century and prior masculine identity performance.

fitness club “I should probably be stretching first but if I do that I’ll have to wait in line – already some faggot is behind me, probably checking out my back, ass, leg muscles” (Ellis 68). This example illustrates a profound distaste for non-normative masculinity, but there is something else at work here. The meticulous list of the items that the possible homosexual would be “checking out” communicates that while he disapproves of such men, Bateman still may appreciate the accolades. He wants his appearance, physical and fashion, to be observed, commented upon, and respected as clearly masculine. Normative masculine Bateman also feels the compulsion to measure himself by his relative level of notoriety and influence. For instance, Bateman’s inability to garner a reservation at “Dorsia,” an evidently chic restaurant, results ultimately in the slaying Paul Owen, a member of Bateman’s peer group against whom he unsuccessfully attempts to measure himself.⁵¹

The anonymity that Patrick Bateman experiences, demonstrated by the somewhat comic motif throughout the novel which involves Bateman being called a series of names which belong to other respected men, also seems to lead to his violent attempts at marking.⁵² Furthermore, Bateman’s inability to cope with his self-imposed impossible identity construction, whereby he simultaneously wants to completely fit in by doing, saying, wearing, and eating all the same things as his perceived peer group while

⁵¹ Patrick is even troubled by the detailed that “Paul Owen is exactly my age, twenty-seven,” indicative of Patrick’s internalized rivalry with the man.

⁵² Berthold Schoene describes the behaviors of Patrick Bateman in terms of similarity to, but not conflation with, autism spectrum disorders. Specifically he says “Patrick’s precarious selfhood is driven by both hysterical and autistic impulses, finding itself at the mercy of irreconcilable tensions that unleash themselves in hyperbolic acts of violence, both real and imagined” (Schoene 381). This is clearly demonstrated by the incident with Paul Owen.

conversely wishing to distinguish himself from them, lend a sense of hysteria to his actions, a quality traditionally attributed to femininity.⁵³ Patrick's violence towards the feminine, manifested through extreme violence as physical, verbal, and mental attacks on women, must be then viewed as Patrick attacking those things that remind him of the fragility of his own masculinity. Certainly, this does not justify any of his actions, fantasized or real, but it might help to explain why all women are regarded this way. His secretary, Jean, and Cheryl, "this dumpy chick" who works at Bateman's health club, are both described by Bateman as being "in love with me" (68). So despite Bateman's unsure standing with himself and his peer group as undeniably masculine, he feels he must demonstrate masculinity according to a hegemonic model, defined by Kimmel as a "particular variety of masculinity to which others – among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men – are subordinated" (119).⁵⁴ As such, Bateman must be said to fail at "marking" himself, and thus creating a self-supporting masculine identity, and he knows it. His existential melancholia prominent in his moments of introspection throughout the novel, coupled with the inconsistent and perhaps fictive acts of violence, demonstrate the lack of sincerity that characterizes Patrick Bateman's masculine persona. As such, "Joe" may be said to have succeeded where Patrick failed in the intentional

⁵³ Schoene describes the hysteria as the "feminine falling apart of the self" and Bateman's violence as a "manly self-assertion compensating for a perceived lack in masculine stature" (380-1). This is an interesting interpretation which simultaneously sets up feminine behavior as part of the whole within Patrick's persona if not personality.

⁵⁴ Kimmel describes the mechanisms by which a construction like this may work in America, as such that "We thus come to know what it means to be a man or a woman in American culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and so on" (119). This fits with Patrick's patterns of violence towards women, his distaste for people of non-white origin, and homosexuals.

creation and maintenance of an “othered” masculine identity. In so doing, “Joe” gains an interiority which does not depend upon external validation.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE “OTHER” MASCULINITY

So how can a man be said to possess, perform, or encompass an authentic masculinity? More germane to this essay, how can a man whose gender socialization encounters mandate conformity to traditional arcs of masculine performance establish any kind of marked, and thus unstable, masculinity?⁵⁵ Why would he even want to? The answer to the last two questions is complicated. A man will always internalize the expectations and appraisal of his fellow humans, and as such, the “masculinity in vacuum” model is nearly impossible in the pragmatic sense. But this does not mean that such a man is predestined to perform masculinity in predictable, hegemonic patterns. However, reaching this sort of indeterminacy of gender, defined here not as possessing an insubstantial identity like Patrick Bateman but rather a flexibility of gendered performance, is contingent upon a concept described by Judith Butler as *inscription*.⁵⁶ This requires one to view the body as, instead of a stable subject, “a medium, indeed a blank page; in order for inscription to signify, however, that medium must be destroyed – that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values” (Butler 177). This model of identity creation mirrors the sentiments expressed by Tyler Durden, and by

⁵⁵ Michael Kimmel describes gender socialization as a process which continues throughout life, not strictly during the formative years of youth and young adulthood, and that the gender identity of a given man or woman will undergo several changes as that person’s worldview evolves (*The Gendered Society* 123).

⁵⁶ Butler attributes the idea of inscription to concepts gleaned from both Nietzsche and Foucault (177).

proxy “Joe”, and acts to explain his success in contrast to Patrick Bateman’s failure in creating a stable yet non-hegemonic masculine identity.

Fight Club is full of pithy expressions of inscription which typify the model put forth by Butler, as when “Joe” contends that he “[doesn’t] want to die without a few scars”, and says that perhaps “maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer...[but] maybe self-destruction is the answer” (Palahniuk 48-9). Within the paradigm created by Butler, the “scars” represent inscription, “self-improvement” is the careful cultivation and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, and “self-destruction” is the process described by Butler by which “culture,” here representing masculine identity, can emerge (177). This sort of destruction, however, is not a viable option for most men not willing to sacrifice the perception of their identities as stable. In post-modern America, resistance to this sort of generative destruction is similar to resistance to physical altercation. In his confrontation involving the manager of the hotel where “Joe” maintains one of his side jobs, “Joe” inscribes himself as “other” through physically beating himself, which forces the manager to cringe away, not just because of the blood, but because this sort of self-harm represents a violent upheaval of traditional, and thus accepted, masculine values. “Joe’s” blood which he imprints onto the clothes of the manager temporarily marks him, and he screams right as the guards arrive to interrupt “our most excellent moment” (Palahniuk 117).⁵⁷ “Joe’s” behavior must be assumed to threaten the stability of masculine performance maintained by the manager, and is thus a source of instability and

⁵⁷ This mirrors the “prediscursive multiplicity of bodily forces that break through to the surface of the body to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed upon the body by a power regime” (Butler 178).

chaos anathema to the identity this manager has cultivated and wishes to keep intact. Contact with “Joe” must be a catalyst for the destruction of the bodily infused politics within the paradigm of normative performance. “Marking” then must be viewed as the deliberate “othering” of oneself, not to seem maladaptive or countercultural, but rather to demonstrate that if a so-called “other” can successfully perform masculine, then the definition of masculine must be altered to be infinitely more inclusive.

This essay does not seek to advocate the extreme measures of requisite destruction demonstrated by “Joe”, however. The symbolic character of such cataclysmic development is, however, the cathartic and preferable outcome of masculine identity in the 21st century. Michael Kimmel makes the argument “power is the property of a group, not an individual,” and “gender is as much a property of institutions as it is part of our individual identities,” (*The Gendered Society* 127). Therefore, it is not much of a leap to view “marking” or “inscription” as a methodology to be adopted by men in America in order to resist and problematize the simplistic binary of masculine/feminine, as each of the identity frameworks are the product of institutions, and such binary suppositions must be combatted in order for authentic performative gender dynamics to emerge in America. The alternative to this binary would be the adoption of a gender spectrum theory, but even this model must be qualified. A spectrum might indicate to some the presence of polar planes of existence, but this is not helpful or accurate. Rather, the gendered identity, fully realized and “marked”, is free then to adopt and perform behaviors from across the spectrum, simultaneously and in such a way that precludes gendered identity conflict. Kimmel describes a society constructed where “traits and behaviors heretofore

labeled as masculine and feminine – competence and compassion, ambition and affections – [are] to be labeled as distinctly human qualities, accessible to both women and men who are grown-up enough to claim them” (488). This advocacy does not call for the disintegration of biological sexes, nor the destruction of (non-sexist) homosocial and heterosocial interactions. Rather, men in America should strive for a new paradigm that does not depend upon power ties and physical might, does not disparage sympathy and understanding, or invalidate non-traditional lifestyles or behaviors. Rather, men should be excited by the opportunity to grow in unique, non-reified, and decidedly masculine ways which act to build upon the positive attributes of the entire spectrum of human performativity.

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