Men Cry:
Embodiments of Masculinity in Western Cinema circa 1999

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“Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark…”
- Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*
I. Men Don’t Cry… or Maybe They Do a Little… Sometimes

“The cognitive life of things is \textit{about things in motion}; it is about hybridity, fluidity and genuinely interactive relationships between brains, bodies and things” (Malafouris, Renfrew 9).

A. Let it Flow: Reevaluating Emotional Release

You do not often see men crying in movies. When crying may be appropriate, you instead see the man turn violent or present an extremely stoic exterior. One may immediately think of Michael Corleone played by Al Pacino in \textit{The Godfather} (Coppola 1972) or Han Solo played by Harrison Ford in \textit{Star Wars} (Lucas 1977) who both forego emotion in favor of intellect or logic or struggle to express emotion other than anger. This Stoic Man archetype can be witnessed throughout American Film History in classic roles played by Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, and Sylvester Stallone. They are characterized by their emotional impenetrability and solidification in their masculine identities.

Stoicism dates back to Athens, 3rd century BCE, with the Stoic school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium. The basic premise was to overcome destructive emotions through logic and reason. It was a potential ideological path to freedom from suffering that included meditation practices in attempt to understand the processes of nature, or logos (Bertrand 254). It did not mean to avoid emotions altogether through disconnection or indifference. Regardless, being “stoic” has become synonymous with being aloof, apathetic, detached, and impassive. over time this clearly masculine archetype has evolved and burgeoned as one who completely stifles emotion and must, always, refrain from crying.

In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988), Judith Butler says that everything about gender is constructed by a system of rewards and punishments (Butler, Lotterhos 1)
“Performative Acts,” 522). She suggests that the “various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (522). Men are rewarded, both in movies and also in life, for keeping an indomitable exterior. There is a system of punishment for men committing the act of crying. For example, a father may tell his son to stop crying after being hurt in a football game, to “man up,” to not be a ‘sissy,’ or to not be like a girl. Implying that crying is exclusive to femininity and to be feminine or female is undesirable. In patriarchal societies, women are devalued, more vulnerable (emotionally and physically), and do not hold power or agency. Crying is an expression of weakness, vulnerability, powerlessness, and thus feminine and not compatible with stoic, masculine behavior. If Butler’s assertions are correct, identification as a man is to assert a particular gender identity typically marked by a masculine gender expression. Man is a state of being, a state of existence governed by strict codes of conduct that constitute specific acts. Thus, gendered bodies and identities are heavily policed by systems of power and by individuals participating in the society to reinforce and reward gendered actions.

In Patriarchal Christian ideology, woman is “the weaker vessel” (King James Bible, 1 Peter 3:7). Consequently the image of a powerful man equates with the complete negation of anything effeminate. Within the bigender system, where man and woman are pitted as opposites, the realm of emotions (bodily acts), and bodily attributes are divided accordingly and applied in social conditioning in attempt to result in natal males who identify as male and perform a masculine gender role and natal females who identify as female and perform a feminine gender role. For example, whatever man isn’t, woman is assumed to be. Whatever man is, woman is assumed to not be. Man is the measuring stick against which woman is expected to be the mirror.
opposite. If man is physically strong, woman must be physically weak. Attributes of power, control, and action are traditionally attributed to men, and impotence, or the inability to effect the environment is attributed to women. In his book, *Gender Advertisements* (1979), the American Sociologist Erving Goffman’s analysis of advertisements that mimic real life, or, “commercial realism,” concludes that the male is almost-always active, the female almost-always passive (Goffman 84). In the American and Western patriarchal cultural systems crying is one of the emotions (bodily acts) ideologically attributed to women, “the weaker vessel,” and therefore crying for men is inappropriate and epicene.

Deeply embedded in contemporary western society’s notions of masculinity, is the problematic belief that a “strong man” must always demonstrate emotional fortitude and repress the instinct to cry. For example, a popular website, *askmen.com*, hosts a series called “Mann on Men,” authored by pseudonym “Dick Mann” who offers a 1950’s perspective for men in today’s society, circa 2010. In an article entitled “Crying,” Mann claims, “Men don’t need to cry… women need to cry because it isn’t exactly ladylike to punch a hole in a wall. It’s the only way a woman can show real emotion and still remain a woman… Men can break things.” He says that men from past generations “never cried under any circumstance.” He sums up the article by saying that men need to let out their emotions from “all the frustrations and anger building up over time,” and “that is why God invented hard alcohol” (Mann, “Mann on Men: Crying”). If men cannot cry “under any circumstance,” the only acceptable solution is to drink the pain away or to release emotions through anger and violence. According to this philosophy, man have no need for tear ducts, and a woman who punches a wall is no longer a woman. In bigender ideology, there is a constant threat of crossing the gender divide, flipping the coin so to speak.
because, if you don’t exhibit certain characteristics of “maleness,” then you must be a woman or vice versa. This dualistic thinking creates a myriad of social problems, injustices, and harmful behavioral tendencies.

In a popular online blog post entitled, “When Is It Okay for a Man to Cry?” on the website, artofmanliness.com, it notes that “men have always cried,” yet, says that “tears have always had a vulnerable and submissive quality to them… more befitting a woman than a man.” Then there is a list, a specific guidelines of when it is acceptable for men to cry and when it is not, as well as a list of movies that are acceptable to cry about while watching, such as Shawshank Redemption (Darabont 1994), Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg 1998), or Old Yeller (Stevenson 1957). The list of things acceptable to cry about is geared toward, what Adrienne Rich calls compulsive heterosexuality, and includes major events, such as: the death of a loved one, seeing your newborn child, at the altar marrying your wife, when your car gets totaled, and as an athlete after the last game you will ever play in (McKay). The list does not include things like when your partner breaks up with you, divorce, or if someone treats you in an abusive way. Both of these pop culture articles show that there are a plethora of rules and specific ways to perform masculinity and perform it in a way that does not threaten one’s perceived power within a social group. These cultural standards have fluctuated over the past sixty years.

In Sally Robinson’s essay “Men’s Liberation, Men’s Wounds” she unpacks the men’s movements of the 1970’s in an effort to rethink emotional release and power hierarchies among men. In response to Second Wave Feminism in the late 1960s, Men’s Liberation discourse focused on “the psychological and bodily harms suffered by men whose health was endangered by the blockage of emotional expression” (Robinson 206). This particular idea of blockage was
applicable to both emotional and sexual bodily functions. Men’s Liberation writers in the 70’s such as Herb Goldberg, Warren Farrell, and Feigen Fasteau, focused on how men are wounded by their power, their responsibilities, and patriarchy itself, rather than, by feminism (206). The main theme is blockage: men have been forced to repress, suppress, and even oppress their energy and their emotions (206). This can be dangerous. Robinson suggests that bodily liquid, such as tears or ejaculate, “must flow, be channeled, find an outlet” (210). Men’s Liberation in the 70’s was a movement to prevent blockage for men, whether it be emotional liberation, sexual liberation, or continued access to employment opportunities and paternal rights. In the late 1970’s the men’s movement split into two separate paths, pro-feminist and anti-feminist groups. Some sects of the movement saw the ways that patriarchy was negatively affecting men by forcing them into a strict gender role and blocking them from liberation in various forms, namely, emotional; while other sects blamed feminism and the “shifting social terrain of gender” (Robinson 210). Many of the anti-feminist men’s movement groups were associated with right wing conservatism and geared toward ensuring male control and dominance in political and social issues. Sociologist Michael Messner argues that the term “movement” is problematic, because of the therapeutic focus, as many of the men’s groups were geared toward emotional liberation and community building.

Men’s movement groups typically have a bad reputation among feminists and gender theorists such as Kate Bornstein, who notes, “lesbians had been drumming and chanting in the woods for well over a decade before Robert Bly and company got the bright idea to appropriate the practice and proclaim it “male” (Bornstein, “Gender Terror,” 239). Many men’s movement groups were labeled as misogynistic in their attempt to solidify patriarchal dominance, and, for
good reason. However, there are aspects and philosophies of specific men’s movement groups and writings that I think are valuable resources and tools for deciphering tropes and expressions of masculinity, as well as observing the ritualistic and initiative practices of being allowed admittance into “manhood.” Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1993) was a highly influential book that re-sparked the men’s movement in the 1990’s. By invoking mythological symbolism Bly emphasizes reclamation of a primal masculine identity through ritual and initiation practices. Concepts of transformation through ritual and initiation are key to deciphering scenes in *Fight Club* and *Boys Don’t Cry.*

Jamison Green, a transsexual man (FTM), leader in the transgender rights movement, and author of the autobiography, *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004), writes about his transformative experiences of acceptance and emotional liberation while drumming in a men’s group. It was gender affirming to him, to be accepted as a trans man among cisgendered men, and to experience forms of ritual that allowed him to grow as a person (Jamison 27-52). In the book, *Gender Outlaw: Men, Women, and the Rest of Us,* Kate Bornstein acknowledges the difficulties of having a fluid gender or sexual identity because “the need for a recognizable identity, and the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity… are driving forces in our culture, and nowhere is this more evident in the areas of gender and sexuality” (Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 4-5). Being part of a men’s group or a women’s group, similar to being part of a LGBTQ group, enables one to solidify and validate one’s gender and/or sexual identity. In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), Judith Butler contends, “no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent” (Butler, *Psychic Life*, 7). As social beings seeking community and togetherness, we
are fundamentally dependent on other people to validate our identities in order to develop as a subject with agency in the world. Identity can become stagnate and solid, because once we go through the process of identity formation and validation by others, we feel like we must stay in that identity for the rest of our lives, or at least, for an acceptable period of time, before we can “change.” In reality, we are always changing in response to our constantly fluctuating environment. As social creatures, we seek others to reinforce the ideas we have about ourselves. This reinforcement is most often expressed in a complex system of rewards and punishments for what society deems to be acceptable and unacceptable bigendered behaviors. ¹ To achieve a sense of fluidity in identity, we need others to be open to changing with us.

Men’s groups allowed men to join together to transpire, share thoughts, cry, and drum. While not seemingly different from women’s groups, men’s groups were inextricably problematic because they consisted exclusively of members of what Messner argues to be a privileged group (Messner 255-276). In the “Introduction” of a book of essays entitled, *Boys Don’t Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.*, Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis suggest that “male power comes at the price of emotional isolation” (Shamir, Travis 5). Must men relinquish power in order to participate in emotional release? Does liberation from the Stoic Man archetype lead to loss of political, social, and sexual power? After centuries of stomping on others’ backs to form a ladder to the top of the pyramid, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgendered men might rather die of spontaneous combustion than be seen crying and forfeit their dominant position of power, even for a minute.

¹ We are socialized from our earliest development and certain behaviors are reinforced and continue to be throughout life. Public shaming is one form of punishment that others use that forces us to evaluate and, at times, change our behaviors.
B. Hegemonic Masculinity and Hollywood’s “Perfect Masculine Ideal”

In 2007, C.J. Pascoe performed a case study at a High School in north central California, and published a book detailing her findings, entitled, *Dude You’re a Fag*. Through her research consisting of extensive fieldwork and interviews, she discovers that “masculinity is not a homogenous category that any boy possesses by virtue of being male,” rather it is “a configuration of practices and discourses that different youths (boys and girls) may embody in different ways” (Pascoe 5). She witnesses that within peer groups, “boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another” (5). That is to say, that they attempt to assert their masculinity and articulate their power by calling another boy in their peer group a “fag,” suggesting he is sexually submissive or weaker than the other boys. However, this works only for a moment, then the power fades as the homophobic remark makes its way back around the peer group in a cyclical way. Pascoe finds that, “for boys, achieving a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity” (5).

The failure of masculinity and the subject of that failure is put on display and criticized or shamed in order for the dominant group or person to gain control or power. This type of “specter of failed masculinity” is re-articulated and re-appropriated in cinema over and over again. For example, in *Back to The Future* (Zemeckis 1985) the male protagonist, Marty, is sent back in time to 1955 and must repair his parents relationship by re-masculinizing his father, George. George is a “specter of failed masculinity” on the screen as he allows himself to be continuously bullied and emasculated by a more dominant male, Biff. Another infamous movie, *Deliverance* (Boorman 1972), is about four Atlanta businessmen who go on a canoe trip in the remote northern Georgia wilderness. Bobby, the novice, and the one who is overweight, the least
physically fit or capable, and the most “feminine” in the group becomes a spectacle of failure as he is raped and told to “squeal like a pig” by a local man who lives on the river. This spectacle of failure and the threat of failure can be witnessed in *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) and *Boys Don’t Cry* (Pierce 1999). Failure seems to equate with any action on screen that renders a subject impotent, passive, or effete, such as being castrated, raped, giving up, and sometimes, but not always, crying.

In 1995, Sociologist R.W. Connell published a book called, *Masculinities*, where she defines masculinity not as a singular type of expression, but as four major types that lie in a hierarchal structure. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity and primarily reflects white, heterosexual, middle class, able bodied, cisgendered, natal males (Connell 77). This dominant group sets ideals and codes of conduct. Most men don’t meet the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity (76-81). Kate Bornstein, in her own words, calls hegemonic masculinity the “perfect gender” that everyone is striving to be, because it is the group given the most power and privilege, and 99.9% of us fail at embodying it (Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook*, 35-73). Next on the hierarchy suggested by Connell is complicit masculinity which is men who do not quite fit the perfect mold of hegemonic masculinity, but are in compliance with and benefit from patriarchal power and privilege granted to the hegemonic group (Connell, *Masculinities*, 79-80). Subordinate and marginalized masculinities fall below these two groups on the power hierarchy. Connell applies subordinate masculinity to homosexual men and

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2 Connell wrote an addendum to *Masculinities* in 2005 entitled “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” In this “rethinking” she suggests reformulation and expansion of the four types of masculinity, which have received criticism for being “rigid typologies” (Connell, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 829). In this essay she expands upon her categorizations in *Masculinities* to create more facility.
marginalized masculinity to men who live in poverty or are of a low economic class (78-81).
Subordinate and marginalized masculinities could also apply to men who identify as homosexual, transsexual, genderqueer, exhibit effeminate characteristics, and/or, men of color, men with disabilities, men who live in poverty, or a combination of these factors / identities.

A number of academic studies have postulated, “masculinity as by definition is in perpetual crisis” (Wiegman 32). It is not a solid thing that can be obtained, nor can it be attributed to the male biological sex. We cannot identify what masculinity is nor why it is so important that masculinity continually be realigned with the culture and repositioned as the dominant gender expression in terms of social and sexual power. In her essay, “Unmaking: Men And Masculinity In Feminist Theory,” Robyn Wiegman discusses a poststructuralist trajectory of analysis toward the study of men and masculinity. It severs masculinity and men altogether “in order to generate attention to female masculinity, transsexuality, and the politically activist theorizing on intersexuality” (33). Wiegman suggests, “these critical domains raise issues about

3 In her extensive fieldwork, Pascoe also discovered the intersection of masculinity and race, as African American boys who exhibited the same masculinizing practices as the white boys were more likely to be punished by school authorities (Pascoe 5).

4 Though I will not extensively address race, ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation in this paper, there is an overlap between “marked” bodies, identities, and perceptions when it comes to “passing” or not “passing” and being invited to be apart of hegemonic masculine practices and privileges.

5 In Chapter 2 of Masculinities entitled “Men’s Bodies,” Connell dissect[s] the idea of true masculinity that is shared across an “impressive spectrum” including the mythopoetic men’s movement, Jungian psychology, Christian fundamentalists, sociobiologists, and the essentialist school of feminism. The concepts of true masculinity, ‘real man,’ ‘natural man,’ or ‘deep masculine’ all rely on a biological essentialist view on sex/gender, that masculine identity is inherent in a natal male body. Connell claims this to be “entirely fictional” (Connell, Masculinities, 46).
the structure and performance of gender identifications irreducible to the body as determinant sex” (33).6

Through her fieldwork, Pascoe finds that gendering practices are “institutional, interactional, and individual” and that “masculinity is an identity formation constituted by inequality” (Pascoe 5-6). If women’s liberation and third wave feminist movements gained more momentum in the 1990’s, fighting for gender equality in the domestic, political, and economic spheres, and if/when women obtain equality, how will masculinity be defined? This perhaps, is a reason why masculinity is “perpetually in crisis.” Masculinity needs femininity in order to define itself as in any dualistic ideology. Thus if femininity is questioned, a challenge toward masculinity follows suit. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists equate contemporary masculinity with a quest for autonomy and separation from anything remotely feminine (Pascoe 6). A character’s attempt to separate from the feminine in order to define himself as a masculine subject is a main theme in *Fight Club* and *Boys Don’t Cry*.

This quest for separation from effeminate characteristics renders certain rigidness in the masculine subject who is more or less attempting to be the Stoic Man archetype. Hollywood has maintained this archetype throughout time, and has dished it out heavily at specific moments in film history that link up with historical and social events that have in some way threatened or weakened the superiority of white, heterosexual masculinity. For example, after World War II there was a resurgence of films about and for white heterosexual men returning from the war who were attempting to recover psychologically and restore their place in the economic and

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6 Poststructuralist theorists began cropping up in the 1960’s and include academic writers such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This theory runs counter to essentialist sex/gender theory, which asserts that biological sex determines gender identity.
domestic sphere, and thus renew their sense of purpose. Hollywood produced movies such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler 1946), *It’s A Wonderful Life* (Capra 1946), and *The Bishop’s Wife* (Koster 1947) that told of heroic and stoic white, heteronormative, hegemonic masculine characters getting a renewed sense of manhood and purpose. At the same time, Hollywood was projecting notions of femaleness and femininity as a threat to this newfound masculinity through repeated displays of the classic dark feminine archetype, the *femme fatale*. Film noir was extremely popular at this time, and movies like *The Killers* (Siodmak 1946), *Force of Evil* (Polonsky 1948), and *Beyond the Forest* (Vidor 1949) all ideologically equated femininity with darkness, betrayal, manipulation, treachery, and otherness. These archetypes return in Hollywood movies and trend in and out at different social and historical moments. This happened again after the Vietnam War ended in 1975 and throughout the politically and socially conservative Reagan Era. Hyper-masculine characters and the actors who embodied these characters became a cultural norm in the 1980’s. Films such as *Rocky* (Avildsen 1976) starring Sylvester Stallone, *Raging Bull* (Scorsese 1980) starring Robert De Niro, *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) starring Harrison Ford, *First Blood* (Kotcheff 1982) starring Sylvester Stallone, and *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger all portrayed a hyper-masculine stereotype. Hollywood makes sure that each generation has their version of the white, heterosexual, perfectly sculpted, heroic, stoic, hyper-masculine character who faces conflict, doesn’t give up, saves the day, gets the girl, and “seals the deal” through procreation or

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7 This otherness was not only a shadow cast solely onto femininity in this period (post WWII), but also toward men who were not white, heterosexual, or middle-upper class. Many times there was an overlap of homosexual undertones or effeminate characteristics in a non-white male character that rendered the character “evil” or manipulative in the film. Examples: *Strangers on a Train* (Hitchcock 1951) has an antagonist, Bruno, who displays effeminate characteristics. *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941) has an antagonist, Joel Cairo, who is non-white and displays effeminate characteristics.
marriage. These films also happen to be created by typically white, heterosexual directors, receive the most Oscar awards and nominations, and are deemed to be “the best films” by popular film sites.

Being an intrinsically voyeuristic act, narrative cinema in particular has a lot to do with identification and spectacle. In his essay, “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema” (1983), Steve Neale discusses positions held by John Ellis in Visible Fictions (1982) and Laura Mulvey in her fundamental feminist text on cinema entitled, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975). John Ellis proposes that cinema engages the viewer in many forms of desire. He says that “desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles,” therefore, “identifications are multiple, fluid, and at points even contradictory” (Ellis 43). Neale agrees with Ellis, that a viewer’s identification with a character or multiple characters on screen is complex, but adds that, equally, there is constant work being done by major film industries to channel and regulate identification in relation to sexual division, gender, sexuality, social identity, and authority in order to maintain a patriarchal society (Neale 253). Typically, narrative films are constructed so that male viewers identify with the male protagonist, and female viewers identify with the female character that is often times secondary in importance to the male character. However, as Ellis suggests, this is not always the case. Sometimes viewers can identify with a whole range of characters on screen from differing genders, ages, ethnicities, and classes (Neale 255).

Cinema has the potential to open up viewers in a variety of ways and connect them to characters and points of view that they may have never empathized or identified with before. To maintain cisgendered, heteronormative standardization of gender and sexuality in society, the
screen must be monitored. Strict regulation of identification in mainstream cinema has been attempting to block this natural fluidity of multiple identifications. If men can only identify with a hyper masculine, stoic male protagonist on screen, and that idealized form is unobtainable in reality, then, what does this mean for men in our society and in their personal lives and relationships? Neale says that “while the ideal ego” i.e. the narcissistic male image “may be a ‘model’ with which the subject identifies, it may also be a source of feelings of castration, inasmuch as that ideal is something to which the subject is never adequate” (Neale 257). If male identified people desperately seek to embody the kind of ideal man they see on screen, with a hard, strong, solid, rigid, and impenetrable exterior, what, then, happens to their interior? Life isn’t a heroic action movie, and many times, life calls for softness and receptiveness. Masculinity should be reinterpreted to allow for vulnerability, empathy, and fluidity.

There are significant cinematic moments where masculine identified characters break down and cry. It doesn’t happen very often, but when it does, there must be a very good reason, or else their manhood is at stake. Sylvester Stallone as Rambo crying at the end of *First Blood* is a good example of a hyper-masculine character who cries, but follows all the rules that require him to maintain his status and honor. He only cries at the end of the film, when he, to use a phrase coined by the character Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, “hits bottom.” To hit bottom means to have lost everything, and then, as Tyler says, “you are free to do anything,” even cry. At the end of *First Blood*, Rambo has been severely traumatized and has been stoic and repressed his tears for the entirety of the film until the Sheriff gives him a hard time about being in his town and refuses him food service. Though, some could say, this doesn’t give him “the right” to cry, others could sympathize and say that this actually humanizes him, gives him more character, and
after all he’s been through it is justified. He doesn’t become the “specter of failed masculinity,” rather his crying makes him stronger.

This scene could be considered an anomaly in the sense that it investigates Rambo and his image of maleness as a source of emotional anxiety, that, Neale suggests is the way that mainstream cinema only looks upon women and the female image (Neale 263). He notes that in mainstream cinema, “women are a problem… a source… of obsessive enquiry; men are not” (263-264). At the time Neale wrote this essay, 1983, he suggests, “masculinity as an ideal, at least, is implicitly known. Femininity is, by contrast, a mystery” (264). Since 1983, especially in the mid-late 90’s, a lot of academic and non-academic writing, films, and various avenues of art have investigated and deconstructed the implicitness of masculinity. In addition, poststructuralist gender theories have since become more publicly known. LGBTQI civil rights movements, and increased visibility of trans*, genderqueer, two-spirit, and intersex people has also aided in the much needed inquiry of masculinity as “natural.”

C. Problematizing the Binary: Visibility of Trans*, Genderqueer, Two-Spirit, and Intersex People Challenges “The Sex/Gender Manufacturing System”

Judith Butler’s book, *Gender Trouble*, extrapolates the idea of gender as performance of strict socialization, rather than an attribute of biological sex. *Gender Trouble* was introduced in 1990, and following its release, Judith Butler became a prominent academic and writer in the field of gender studies throughout the 1990’s and into the 2000’s. Butler’s idea of gender as purely performative is outlined in her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988). She asserts that gender is an unstable identity, an illusion, established through a “stylized repetition of acts” and through idiosyncrasies enacted through the body
In the opening remarks of her essay she quotes Simone de Beauvoir who famously said, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 75). The saying can be reversed. One becomes a man. If gender relies completely on “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments,” then, masculinity can be defined as very specific acts executed by a body in space and time. Who, then, defines and enforces what those acts are and how they are to be implemented?

R.W. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, though a potentially rigid typology, can give us some clues. She outlines that hegemonic masculine acts are those that are advantageous and thus concerned with displays of dominance and superiority over others in all avenues of existence: physically, mentally, emotionally, and perhaps even spiritually (Connell 76-86). Even if they don’t feel like they are on top, they have to act and appear like they are on top, or else risk exposing their gender for what it is: a well scripted role. Gender identity formation, binary gender socialization, and performative expressions of gender are imbued with power dynamics under patriarchal social systems and institutions. If performed correctly and within a privileged body (white, natal male, heterosexual, middle-upper class), masculinity is a veil woven with golden thread, i.e., an illusion with payoffs. Both Connell and Bornstein outline how our society stratifies masculinities and these hierarchies are embedded into our socialization as soon as we come out of the womb. As introduced earlier, Butler explains that those that successfully simulate the gender that corresponds to the sex that they were assigned at birth, are rewarded. Those that fail, are punished (Butler, “Performative Acts,” 522). The punishment is often isolation, public ridicule or shaming, violence, even rape, castration, and death. This
system of rewards and punishment for how well a character performs or creates an illusion of

gender can be observed in *Fight Club* and *Boys Don’t Cry*.

Though I am obliged to agree with Judith Butler, that gender is all performance, all a
product and figment of strict socialization practices, my own experiences have lead me to think
that this might not be completely true. I am an FTM transsexual. Over the past year I have been
on hormone replacement therapy (HRT). I have had direct experience of how androgens affect
brain and body chemistry, and the physical ways in which emotional states and moods are
modified by these chemical changes. Over the past year, my body and my brain have been a site
of experimentation, creation, and transformation. In many ways I am the same person, and yet, I
am completely altered in appearance, treated by others around me and seen by society in a
different, and at times, discordant way. I was socialized as female, treated as female, though I
identified as male when I was a child, and some part of my brain was and is, perhaps, always
male, as a neurological scientific study suggests. I’ve experienced some amount of gender
fluidity, because at times in my life, I expressed my gender as female, at least, partially, and
experienced what it is like to have natal female hormones, estrogen and progesterone as the
primary androgens influencing and shaping my brain and body.

Since transitioning, I have found that biological and chemical factors affect actions,
mannerisms, and gendered displays. Before I medically transitioned, I was convinced that natal

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8 A neurological study was conducted in 2008 by The Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience, Amsterdam,
and is entitled “Sexual difference of the human brain in relation to gender identity” (Swaab, Garcia-
Falgueras). Sex differentiations in specific structures of the human brain were studied extensively. One
thing observed is that specific areas of the brain of natal males and natal females are varying in volume.
Brains of (XY) women with transsexualism correspond to volumes observed in natal females and brains
of (XX) men with transsexualism correspond to volumes observed in natal males. This is regardless of
whether or not they have undergone HRT therapy.
males and natal females were not innately different from each other. I was passionate about this, because difference to define otherness is a device used to perpetuate and justify inequalities. I still stand by the idea that natal males and natal females are more alike than they are different, but, I now know that biological factors create miscommunication and misunderstanding between natal sexes. Hormonal variances do create sexual dimorphism, but it is socialization practices that further enhance and uphold these differences, forming rifts between natal sexes rather than focusing on similarities and creating solidarity between them.

While gender is largely a performance based on socialization, it is also true that, “both biology and social influence combine to produce gender differences in behavior” (Connell, Masculinities, 46). My behavior has changed since starting on Testosterone. The actions I take have changed. The way I express my emotions has changed. And it is true, I don’t cry as much as I used to before starting my transition, nor do I cry under the same circumstances or in the same way as I used to. Through my research I have discovered accounts of other transsexual men, transgender men (FTM), and (AFAB) non-binary or third gender identified people who have taken testosterone and describe a similar experience.

In January 2015, I posted on an FTM forum, asking people who have been on testosterone for any given period if they had noticed a difference in how much, how often, and when they cried since starting HRT. Twenty-six people commented. Out of those twenty-six, eighteen reported noticing that they cry less after being on testosterone, four saying that it is almost impossible for them to cry, six reported having no changes in the amount that they cry, 

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9 Sexual dimorphism is simply the biological differences between natal males and natal females of the same species. These differences occur physically, emotionally, mentally, and chemically and can be observed in many animal species.
and two reported that they are more comfortable with their emotions now, and actually cry more now then they did before starting testosterone. Colin Close, a person in the group, provided me with a survey that he conducted in 2012 of mostly AFAB trans people, but also, AMAB trans people who have undergone HRT. In the survey, there is a specific section with questions about crying and emotional changes. He asked to specify if they have noticed an increase or a decrease in their ability to cry since transitioning. 67% of the trans men experienced a decrease whereas 79% of trans women experienced an increase (Close 24). Though there is no conclusive evidence that this is solely due to chemical hormonal changes, it is safe to suspect a relationship between androgens and emotional states; namely, testosterone decreases a person’s frequency of crying while estrogen increases it.

One person in the group wrote that before transitioning he would cry when faced with a negative emotional event, such as sadness or frustration, whereas after transitioning he cries when faced with a positive emotional event, such as joy or beauty. Others noted similar anecdotes saying that they cry about different things and under different circumstances now then they did before transitioning. Another person said that he believed that it had more to do with societal pressures for men not to show emotion, and that’s why some experienced not being able to cry as often. The thing that leads me to believe that our brain and body chemistry truly affects our emotional center and our ability to cry is the number of people who commented that they did not cry as much or at all after starting testosterone, but that they wish they could. This shows that they are accepting of their emotions, that they want to cry, but feel less physically capable because of testosterone’s affect on their emotional states.
In *Masculinities*, in the chapter titled, “Men’s Bodies,” Connell quotes a position argued in the 1980’s by a feminist pioneer in sociology, Alice Rossi; “gender differentiation is not simply a function of socialization, capitalist production, or patriarchy. It is grounded in a sex dimorphism that serves fundamental purpose of reproducing the species” (Connell 51). Connell suggests the same thing in her book, that gender is not solely performance, as proposed by Butler, but neither can gender be reduced to biological reductionism; it is a synthesis of the two (51). Chemicals affect our moods, our emotions, the way we feel about others, and ourselves the way we react to situations, our sex drive, our sexual attractions to others, our instincts, and sometimes, our interests. Socialization can affect these things too, however, it does not rule out, or erase biological and chemical factors occurring within our bodies at any given time. Actions therefore can be imbued with both elements of brain/body chemistry and socialization. You cannot separate nature and nurture and define a specific action taken by a human being to be solely one or the other. They are heavily intertwined and influence one another. You can, however, observe the ways in which actions are labeled by our culture as being gender based and the way language is utilized to assign power relationships to any given action. It is important to discern how actions are categorized in our culture, and where and when shame is used to conduct social behaviors that connote gender and sexual power dynamics.

Recognizing biological and chemical factors that create sexual dimorphism in humans can help us understand where the tendencies for hierarchical placement of individuals root from: our ancient and evolutionary past, that because of our limbic system, may not be so distant. The danger of pointing out biological and chemical differences in the human species, whether it be sex, gender, race, or sexual orientation, is that this is generally the root of arguments that
attempt to legitimize and perpetuate inequality. It’s not the differences themselves that create inequality, i.e., women are not actually “the weaker sex,” but the emphasis placed on the differences that give way to feelings of otherness, fear, and competition for dominance.

Emphasizing differences and creating gaps between “groups” allows for the dominant group (hegemonic masculinity) to maintain control. Yes, there are chemical and biological differences between natal males and natal females, however, I reject the notion that men are from Mars and women are from Venus; I reject the notion that men and women are more different than they are the same, or should be positioned in opposition to one another. People can have varying amounts of estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone in their bodies, causing them to have variations in primary and secondary sex characteristics. Our brain chemistry is not binary, it is a melting pot all different kinds and levels of hormones. This suggests that not just gender identity and expression is on a spectrum, but natal sex as well.

Jamison Green, in his book, *Becoming a Visible Man*, outlines the ways in which natal sex does not neatly fit into the binary system of male and female. Green speaks in various college classrooms around the United States, and likes to open his talks by asking them a seemingly straightforward question: “you all know what sex you are, right” (Green 1)? A student suggests that it is by our sex chromosomes. Green goes on to explain how variations in chromosomes are not only possible, they are more common than we are lead to believe. If male equals XY and female equals XX, then why do 1 in 20,000 men have two X chromosomes? Are they still men? Either karyotype can produce a male or female result depending on which genes

\[10\] Varying levels of hormones produced while in utero affect the ways in which our brains develop gender identification. Formation of the genitalia occurs prior and separately from feelings of gender identity within the brain (Swaab, Garcia-Falgueras).
are firing (Green 1). Another student suggests that it is through physical characteristics of a person’s genitalia. Green offers a statistic from the Intersex Society of North America, that 1 in 100 people have bodies that differ from standard male or female and that 1 in 1000 involve what is called ‘ambiguous genitalia’ (Green 3). It is then that the doctor decides what genital reconstructive procedure would be easier to perform on the infant in order to facilitate them into the category of male or female. Green asks an important question, “do you think they get it right all of the time” (Green 3)? Another student suggests that they know what sex they are by how they feel. Green agrees, and then quickly specifies that biological sex is a system of classification of body types, while gender is a system of classification that describes characteristics and behaviors ascribed to bodies. How we feel is perhaps more accurate than how western medicine classifies us.

This brings me to the notion that there is more to gender identity than performance of behaviors and actions based on socialization. The existence of trans*, transsexual, and intersex people who were strictly socialized within the binary as male or female proves that if Butler’s tabla rasa theory is infallible, then whatever they were socialized as, they would remain in that gender category without issue or conflicting feelings that they do not belong in the gender category that they were raised to identify with. A study in neuroscience, “Sexual difference of the human brain in relation to gender identity,” theorizes that fetal development affects gender identification and specifically hormonal events in the body of the pregnant parent that could

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11 One example given in Unseen Genders: Beyond the Binaries is an Australian man, David. He was assigned male at birth, but at 18 months of age was taken in for “investigative surgery” of his genitalia. Doctors decided to cut his penis off because it was deemed to be non-binary or non-normative in appearance and/or function. He was then raised and socialized as a female. He never identified as female and later in life masculinized his body to fit the way he identified in his brain (McFarlane, Unseen Genders, 21).
result in transsexualism or gender variances in the child (Swaab, Garcia-Falgueras). It is biological / chemical mechanisms that creates varying embodiments and emotions (bodily acts), but it is socialization that labels those acts as “gender displays” and assigns power relations to them (Goffman 8). These important distinctions in gender and sex were being brought into public, private, and academic spheres throughout the 1990’s.

Increased visibility of transgender, genderqueer, and LGBT people at large, as well as civil rights issues, especially the founding of LGBT organizations and anti-discrimination laws put into effect in the 1990’s was another influential component in acclimatizing the cultural landscape. Homosexuality was no longer considered an illness by The World Health Organization in 1990 and by the American Medical Association in 1994. Civil Unions and Registered Partnerships for same sex couples were beginning to be recognized in major European nations throughout the 90’s, and in California and Vermont by 1999 and 2000 respectively. Like Robyn Wiegman suggests, the 90’s was a time of shifting gender terrain and the authoritative norms of conventional masculinity were indeed changing as a result (Wiegman 31). LGBTQI people (transgender, transsexual, and gender variant people) specifically endanger bigender ideology and traditional gender roles. There is at least a fair amount of gender fluidity that trans* people experience and express, whether they identify with being a man or a woman, somewhere in-between, or something else altogether.

Transgender, transsexual, and genderqueer people show the failure of the binary because they experience different aspects of gender, different variables of gender at different moments in their life. Trans-masculinity could be theorized as an alternative masculinity because trans-men

12 They also complicate the distinction between same sex couples and opposite sex couples.
are able to see different embodiments of themselves across time and space, and their experience can transcend the binary thinking (even as some trans-people identify within the binary and some do not). A trans* person who undergoes hormone replacement therapy (HRT) does not appear one gender one day and suddenly shift to another. Rather, over time they change and they see themselves in the mirror changing, and there are moments of androgyny and being between genders or outside of gender completely. They experience moving along spectrums of gender within the one life, one body.

D. Alternatives: 90’s Subcultures and Identifying the Gender Spectrum

Alternative masculinities are embodiments of a more fluid gender expression that deviate from the hegemonic masculine ideal, recognize the failures of bigenderism, and seek to somehow disrupt power hierarchies created and perpetuated by patriarchal systems and institutions. I argue that alternative masculinities can be embodied by anyone within any of the four categories of masculinity that Connell outlines in her book, *Masculinities*. This may, however, lead that subject to being stripped of, or, choosing to disavow whatever privilege and power they may hold in the eyes of those in the dominant group. Subordinate masculinities, which Connell identifies as namely homosexual or queer men, are perhaps the most likely to embody an alternative masculinity, but not necessarily. The reason that I believe that forms of alternative masculinities can crop up at any level of the power hierarchy is because renouncing patriarchy, working to end gender inequality, and gaining a sense of emotional and psychological fluidity in relation to gender identity and expression can be an action taken by anyone.

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13 Hegemonic, Complicit, Subordinate, and Marginalized
Alternative masculinities are anything outside of the “normative” experience of “maleness” whereas conscious alternative masculinities are identities that are specifically designed to combat notions of “true masculinity.” The widespread public use of the internet in the mid-late 1990’s had a radical impact on culture and the emergence of sub-cultures. Sub-cultures are often times ways to view or envision embodiments of conscious alternative masculinities. Many sub-cultures contain niches of subordinate and marginalized identities, some who choose not to be a part of the hegemonic group and some who are dejected from it. Bodies that diverge from the mainstream, “normative” expressions and are visually marked by difference are not able to participate in power and privilege that is reserved for the hegemonic dominant group. Examples of this are non-binary, intersexed, or, queer bodies, people who display non-heterosexual orientation, androgynous gender expressions, natal male bodies that express femininity and natal female bodies that express masculinity; bodies that are marked with an ethnicity other than white; bodies marked visibly by poverty or being apart of a lower economic class; bodies marked with a disability or mental illness; and also, bodies that are marked by choice.

The mid-late 90’s sub-cultures such as “goth” and “emo” can provide us with an example of a body that can be marked by choice. The term “goth” arose in the 1980’s UK underground music scene and gained visibility as a sub-culture in the mid-late 90’s. Marilyn Manson was a poster child, a specific embodiment of this 90’s gothic sub-culture. He displayed a particular type of alternative masculinity. There are many aspects of both “goth” and “emo” sub-cultures that render the idea and portrayal of masculinity as having more fluidity and flexibility in gender expression and emotional expression. Many bodies that participate in these sub-cultures are
marked (sometimes radically) by difference in appearance: tattoos, piercings, body modifications, hairstyles, and clothing. Why would someone who could participate in the dominant hegemonic group: white, cisgendered, able-bodied, middle-upper class, and heterosexual; choose to reject participation and the potential rewards gained? Perhaps these are people that recognize that there is something faulty about middle class white American protestant Christian values, that they, perhaps, were brought up to believe in and expected to embody.

There was a lot of backlash against “goth” and “emo” culture from the media, conservative Christian groups, and mainstream culture. One of the main aspects that faced harassment was male identified people expressing feminine or androgynous attributes. Marilyn Manson was labeled by many as a “faggot” because of his expressions of androgynous elements in his music videos, photographs, concerts, and public appearances. He appeared at the 1998 MTV Music Video Awards with fake breasts after releasing the album, Mechanical Animals in 1998 in which the cover shows him with breasts and a smooth area where his penis “should be.” These kind of embodiments of androgyny and male identified people expressing femininity were not just visible in stars like Manson, but, also fundamental in the style of clothing and appearance of “goth” and “emo,” such as male identified people wearing eyeliner and makeup, pronounced jewelry, and in “emo” culture, tight jeans and styled hair cuts. Though they might have had relationships with women and romantic interests that can be labeled as heterosexual, many masculine subjects participating in these sub-cultures where labeled as homosexual because of their expressions of femininity.

14 Often these “markings” contain sacrilegious illustrations, messages, or undertones in direct rebellion against Protestant Christian values and morals.
FTM author and activist, Matt Kailey, in his book *Just Add Hormones: An Insider’s Guide to the Transsexual Experience*, in the chapter, “You Say GLB, I Say GLBT,” talks about how and why lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans*, queer, and intersex people should unite together in the fight for human and civil rights. He argues that LGBTQI people are all oppressed because of the way in which they express gender, not necessarily, because of their sexual orientation (Kailey 94-95). If a boy expresses femininity in his attire, appearance, mannerisms, speech, or actions, he is many times publicly pronounced as homosexual, even though he may not be interested in having a homosexual relationship or interaction. With girls who exhibit masculine characteristics they are often times called a “tom-boy,” and later in life, perhaps labeled as lesbian. Kailey theorizes that it’s not actually about sexual orientation or gender identity that dictates oppression, but the non-normative ways in which people perform or express gender that predisposes them as a target of abuse, violence, harassment, and/or marginalization. Because of how hegemonic masculinity is configured in relation to patriarchy that warrants “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women,” Connell asserts that “oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men” (Connell 78). If Kailey is correct, then it is not the exactitude of sexual orientation but perceived sexual orientation through exhibiting socially defined effeminate behaviors, characteristics, or emotions (bodily acts).

Being part of a sub-culture such as “goth” or “emo” sub-culture, does not automatically render a masculine subject alternative, though it does show a leaning toward rejecting the hegemonic group and wanting to discover, uncover, or create a form of subversive masculine identity. Acceptance of gender and emotional fluidity come from a place of recognizing flaws in
what Jean Bobby Noble calls, “the gender/sex manufacturing system” (Noble, Sons, 83). In his book, Sons of the Movement: FTMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-queer Cultural Landscape, Noble, a self-identified trans man (FTM) explains how his gender looks different, but his body is, “paradoxically, almost still the same.” He says, “my “new” body is grafted out of, onto, through my “old,” and that this trope of grafting is “a way of rethinking trans-gendered bodies as effects of the sex/gender system in crisis and transition” (83). Rather than transcending this system, he thinks that trans folk are “an important site where its inabilities, as Judith Butler argues, to live up to its own imperatives (that gender be the artifact of sex) are rendered obvious” (83). If one can “pass” as a male and fit into a hegemonic masculine position, then they can employ power and privilege that comes with that, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth. Power and privilege that is socially given, then, is not “natural,” but arbitrary and based on perception.

Those that are deemed a “specter of failed masculinity,” are the ones most likely to exhibit forms of alternative masculinity. A subject can accept being a so called “failure” in the eyes of others if they realize that they are not themselves failing at masculinity, but that it is the sex/gender system that is failing at its own imperative. It is the bigender ideology that pins male and female as oppositions to one another that is flawed, not the people who decline to sustain and maintain its strict rules and regulations. As with any major paradigm breakdown, as written by Thomas Kuhn in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970), it begins when people encounter anomalies, and as they discover more and more anomalies, a crisis is created in which the entire paradigm is called into question (Kuhn 10). This is happening within the dualistic sex/
gender paradigm and the anomalies are people who biologically, neurologically, or through choice do not neatly fit into the bigender system.

Around 2012, the “Genderbread Person” was introduced as a simple graphic explaining the variances in gender and sexual orientation in order to explain the complexity of gender. It identifies four different elements: gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation. Each element is set up on a spectrum that goes from woman to genderqueer to man, feminine to androgynous to masculine, female to intersex to male, and heterosexual to bisexual to homosexual. Each element is independent of one another, though they may affect one another or be interrelated. This is a helpful tool to identify each element and exposing people to the idea of the gender spectrum. There is at least one problem with it though: it is still binary in its design. Dualistic thinking has plagued us into considering two categories in opposition to one another. This “Genderbread Person” model shows a middle ground between those two opposing categories, but it still sets up a continuum with two extremes, which problematizes the way in which we think about our own selves in relation to gender. What if, instead of a line we represented the gender spectrum as a circle? This would provide a space where the two “extremes,” most feminine and most masculine meet.

The concept of the yin/yang in Eastern traditions is almost binary in its design, but there is something essentially non-binary or extraordinary about it. Within the deepest yin is the seed of yang and within the deepest yang is the seed of yin. Interesting that if you go to the extreme of one you get the seed, or the root of the other, and vice versa. This suggests that the two meet, or are in union and harmony with each other in a fundamental way. This idea in terms of gender integration rather than opposition can be seen in the practices of Native Americans and their

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acceptance of two-spirit peoples. Two-spirit peoples were allowed and encouraged to identify and express whichever gender they wished. Societally, they took either the role of a man in their tribe or the role of woman in their tribe, and could change their mind on any given day. Though this is still binary in a lot of ways, the idea here is that they weren’t pinned down or forced to decide on one or the other, there was freedom and fluidity between them. Two spirit people weren’t labeled as psychologically disturbed, going through “a phase,” having an identity crisis, or put on display as some sort of abnormality. Instead, they were respected members of the tribe and often the shamans or medicine people.

Jean Bobby Noble’s first book entitled, *Masculinities Without Men?: Female Masculinities in Twentieth-Century Fictions* (2004), examines the emanation of masculine identities and expressions of people who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) at turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much like Halberstam’s fundamental work, *Female Masculinity* (1998), Noble’s book explores Halberstam’s notion that masculinity “must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1). Halberstam’s extensive study of historical figures that were AFAB and performed masculine gender roles was the first of its kind in existence. In the introduction he claims that, “this book, I hope, will eventually form just one part of a cultural onslaught on the privileged reservation of masculinity for men” (xii). This statement made and the subjects explored in *Female Masculinity* are further evidence that the turn of the millennium was a critical time where anomalies were being made more visible.
Many works of gender and sex theory were published in the mid-late 90’s and at the turn of the millennium. In addition, many notable films were produced that pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable, challenging audiences to question the normalization of masculinity and femininity, gender roles, and recognize the failures of the bigender system. Films of this time period were becoming more conscious of how masculinity and femininity are constructed and represented on screen, sometimes making it the main theme of the film, such as in *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999) and *Girl Interrupted* (Mangold 1999). Films of this time period were also allowing audience’s identification with characters to be more fluid and complex such as in *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999) and *Magnolia* (Anderson 1999). The breaking of linear temporality and continuity is another characteristic technically and aesthetically that serves to fracture the perfect masculine subject, such as in *Memento* (Nolan 2000) and *Fight Club*. Sex, gender, and body politics are center frame in *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Mitchel 2000), and *Eyes Wide Shut* (Kubrick 1999); and misogyny in hegemonic masculinity is being cut and cornered in *American Psycho* (Harron 2000).

Unlike typical “specters of failed masculinity” in which a character performing masculinity “poorly” is set up to be ridiculed or laughed at by audiences, all of these films mentioned above complicate expectations by positioning the masculine subject who is “failing” as the protagonist, or at least, as a major character with whom the audience identifies or sympathizes with. This situates masculinity itself in the gauntlet of scrutiny, rather then the character. For example, in *Back to The Future*, George McFly’s failure at masculinity is

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constructed specifically as George’s own downfall and is made for audiences to find comical and amusing. Contrastingly, in *Magnolia*, the hyper masculine and misogynistic character, Frank T.J. Mackey, played by Tom Cruise, is struggling in his relationships, in his life, and is failing at performing a hegemonic masculinity, though he attempts to act as if he is the flawless and perfect ideal in front of other characters. These written texts and films show that there was definitely something going on at the turn of the millennia that was unique and is worth examining further.

The first film that I will focus on in close analysis is one of the most theorized and dissected films about masculinity to date. An adaptation from Chuck Palahniuk’s novel with the same title, *Fight Club* is a movie that had great cultural impact and influenced many discussions about masculine identity in response to, what Fredric Jameson calls, multinational late capitalism.\(^{16}\) *Fight Club* attempts to answer the question, what does it mean to be a man, and, what is masculinity in this moment in history (the turn of the millennia)? The film is centered around one character’s desperate attempt to uncover his core masculine identity. Many essays have been written and compiled about this film’s motivation and how it deals psychologically and philosophically with this subject matter. *Fight Club* introduces a form of alternative masculinity that utilizes Nietzschean philosophies of nihilism spawning from an inability to cope with late American modernist values and a lifestyle that isolates people, especially men from intimacy and community with one another. *Fight Club* is in conversation with Robert Bly’s *Iron John*, and seeks to explore concepts in this book, create its own mythological lexicon, as well as

\(^{16}\) In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) by Frederic Jameson.
posits an alternative to hegemonic masculinity through the destruction of white American patriarchal values, structures, and economies.

II. Fight Club: The Movie for “A Generation of Men Raised By Women”

A. Crying into Bob’s “Bitch Tits”

“Bob loved me because he thought my testicles were removed too. Being there, pressed against his tits, ready to cry. This was my vacation” (Fincher 11:30).

*Fight Club* wastes no time establishing major themes, characters, and revealing its non-linear, quick paced editing style. If you miss the three minutes, you have already missed part of the ending. Within the first ten minutes you get the entire run down of the main characters and the film is off to a dark, gritty, and nihilistic path. At 03:10 the film cuts from the present (the conclusion of the story) to the past (the beginning of the story) by way of a brilliant match cut. The nameless Narrator, played by Edward Norton, falls quickly to the right edge of the screen, pushed by an unforeseen force and it cuts to a close up of Bob’s chest, where Bob forcefully pulls the Narrator’s face into it with a loud smacking sound. The Narrator says, “Bob… Bob had bitch tits.” The Narrator’s eyes are wide, his mouth open, and his face is balmy, pre-sweat. The skin displaying a deep circle under his right eye twitches. It cuts to a medium shot of a sign that says, “Remaining Men Together,” while the Narrator sets the scene for the audience. He states, that, “this is a support group for men with Testicular Cancer.” Then it cuts to a close up of a man vigorously crying with his face wet with tears and mucus. The camera pans over to create a wide establishing shot of the men’s support group where men of various ages, ethnicities, and body types are paired up, holding each other and crying.
The “men’s space” is a dimly lit church gymnasium, the basketball court where men would generally “bond” through competitive sport is now a sterile and drab space for men with or recovering from testicular cancer stand embracing and supporting one another. The next shot is a close up of Bob’s face crying. Bob says, “we’re still men.” The camera tilts down to the Narrator’s face snug into Bob’s chest as he reassures Bob in a monotone voice, “Yes, we’re still men. Men is what we are.” The next two shots are of different pairs of men hugging each other and crying while the camera moves in a slight circular motion around them. Then it cuts to a medium shot of Bob and the Narrator embracing while the camera circles fully around them, encapsulating them in the space of strange and uncomfortable intimacy. In less than a minute this sequence establishes an editing lexicon and some main thematic threads in the film such as loss of and attempts to regain a masculine identity, issues with intimacy, communities of men, and castration.

After the Narrator describes how he “fits” between “those two sweating tits that hung enormous,” Bob tells the Narrator, who has written the name ‘Cornelius’ on his name tag, “Okay,
you cry now.” This is our introduction to the scene, though the first time, we don’t see the Narrator cry, and he stops the voice over and says, “No wait, backup, let me start earlier.” We return to this scene at 06:30, after the Narrator tells us more background information of how he heard about the support group, and came to be snugly fit between Bob’s “bitch tits.” We learn that the Narrator hasn’t slept in six months due to extreme insomnia, works a desk job in which he travels, is a “slave” to buying Ikea products for his flat apartment, has condiments in his fridge but no food, and lives alone. From this montage we see the emptiness in his life that he is trying to fill with excess of luxury furniture and dinnerware, i.e. consumer products. We also learn that he used to read pornography, but now it’s the “Horchow Collection.” This shows that he used to have at least some sexual drive and/or release, but no longer has interest (at least in pornography). In the concluding scene he goes to a doctor to get drugs to help him sleep, saying pathetically, “I’m in pain.” The doctor replies, “You want to see pain? Swing by First Methodist Tuesday nights and see the guys with testicular cancer, now that’s pain.” Right when the doctor says “pain” the second time, there is a flash of Tyler Durden on the right hand side of the screen. The next scene is an exterior shot at night, the Narrator walking through the dark city street and into a dimly lit building to what the audience assumes to be First Methodist.

This is when the scene from 03:10 develops in more detail. The Narrator enters the room and looks nervous and alien. He takes a seat and listens in to the men talking about their lives and their struggles. The anecdote we hear is from a divorced man named Thomas talking about his ex-wife having her first child with her new husband, and he breaks down and cries while he “shares” with the group. This is an anecdote and a spectacle of “failed masculinity” as Thomas has lost his wife, his chance to raise children with her, his testicles, and thus, his ability to be a
father. A collection of medium shots reveal some of the men in the group giving Thomas sympathetic looks, and a long shot shows the Narrator screen left, sitting slouched over with wide eyes and a blank expression. From this shot and from his demeanor and body language we get the feeling that he is not comfortable with crying or with the men around him crying. He is void of emotion, of sexual interest, of intimacy and connection with other humans. As Charles Guignon suggests in his essay, “Becoming a Man: Fight Club and the Problem of Masculine Identity in the Modern World” (2012), “the narrator is nameless, placeless, and without genuine meaning or purpose in life” (Guignon 38).

The scene continues with the group’s facilitator asking everyone to find a partner and then says, “let’s follow Thomas’ good example and really open ourselves up.” Right after he says this, there is another frame of Tyler spliced into the film, with his arm around the facilitator’s shoulder. This happens three times in the beginning of the film. Each time, and where it is placed, I believe, is significant to Tyler’s formation as an antithesis to the Narrator’s self-realizations and breakthroughs. The first time we see a spliced in frame of Tyler is at 04:09 when the Narrator is making copies at his office and says that “nothing is real, everything is a copy of a copy of a copy.” This suggests that Tyler is not real, only a copy of the Narrator himself. We see it again in the doctor’s office after the doctor says the word, “pain.” This suggests that pain is critical to the Narrator’s “salvation.” The third time is in the men’s support group after the facilitator tells them to “really open up,” which again is another important aspect to the Narrator’s journey into himself and reconnecting with his body and his emotions (Fincher 07:34).
Because the film sets up the scene of the Narrator crying into Bob’s “bitch tits” as the catalyst to all the events that follow, one can conclude that connecting with and releasing pent up emotions is the first step in the Narrator’s journey to unearth his core masculine identity. As they embrace, Bob tells him all the things about his life that are difficult and admits to his own failures. Bob was a professional body builder and abused anabolic steroids, which caused him to get testicular cancer and have to have his testicles removed. He therefore had to start hormone treatment and his testosterone levels spiked and this made his body produce excess estrogen causing him to grow breast tissue. It is interesting to note that Bob’s extreme desire to have a hyper-masculine body is what eventually caused him to have excess estrogen and grow breast tissue. Bob is physically feminized through his own attempts to be more physically masculinized. Bob tells the Narrator of his failed marriage and his two adult children that will not return his phone calls. The Narrator tells the audience that, “strangers with this kind of honesty make me grow a big rubbery one.” This suggests that emotional connection, intimacy, and catharsis are linked to the Narrator’s sexuality, whether or not he physically “grows a big
rubbery one,” he designates correlation between them. This could also explain why he is not interested in pornography, because it is not real intimacy or the real emotional connection that he is unconsciously seeking. Bob tells the Narrator that it is his turn to cry. At first he is hesitant, but he has reassurance from another man telling him that it is okay to cry and release emotions. Bob pulls him into his chest and then the Narrator says, “Something happened. I let go. Lost in oblivion. Dark and silent and complete. I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom.”

Crying in this scene shows that the Narrator admits that he is a failure, that he is not perfect, the life he is living is not the life he wants, and that he is not the person he wants to be. This idea that “losing all hope is freedom” is something that Tyler echoes back when he says that “it’s only when we’ve lost everything that we are free to do anything.” The seed of nihilism is already present in the Narrator and it is in this scene that the seed is planted and watered with tears of giving up and admitting failure. This is supported by the fact that both the men (Bob and Thomas) that cry first admit that they are failures verbally. There is a quality of realness here, as the doctor says, “real pain” that the Narrator experiences, which starts the initial, break through his solid and stagnant disposition. We do not know what emotions he is expressing through his tears, we just know that he finally feels something and we get the impression that it has been a long time since he’s felt anything at all. It is Bob that initiates his first step into rediscovering his core masculine identity: he has got to “really open up,” become vulnerable and allow himself to cry and find freedom in expressing emotion. This breaks the Narrator’s bout of insomnia, at least, for awhile. From the opening of the film, Bob is positioned as an instrumental character in the film’s exploration of masculinity and men.
Though the film’s Narrator emasculates and humilates Bob to the audience by referring to his excess breast tissue as “bitch tits,” Robert ‘Bob’ Pulsen is not like George McFly in *Back to the Future* or like Bobby in *Deliverance* in the sense that the film does not treat Bob as a “specter of failed masculinity” in the same way. Bob is a complex character throughout the film and the source of the Narrator’s sympathy, and thus, the audience’s sympathy. Referring to Bob as having “bitch tits” is offensive, but, also, it implies that Bob is the Narrator’s pseudo mother figure. It is buried within Bob’s embrace that the Narrator finds comfort and acceptance like he would in the arms of his mother. Though Bob is “still a man,” he has been ‘feminized’ by consumer culture and attempting to have an idealized and unobtainable hyper-masculine body. The film also suggests that he is ‘feminized’ because he no longer has his testicles, which we come to understand is a vital aspect in keeping one’s maleness and, therefore, masculinity intact.\(^{17}\) Because Bob is divorced and doesn’t speak to his kids, is bankrupt, has been castrated, and has excess breast tissue; he is a symbol and a “specter of failed masculinity,” but the Narrator does not reject him. Instead, the Narrator cares about Bob, accepts Bob into Project Mayhem, and sees him as part of the community of men.

What we can learn about the film’s ideology from Bob’s character is that attempting to be a bodybuilder and have a perfectly cut masculine physique like in the magazines does not make you more masculine, but actually ‘feminizes’ you. This notion is later confirmed by the Narrator on the bus when Tyler points to a Calvin Klein advertisement that shows the faceless body of a male model and the Narrator says, “is this what a man looks like” (Fincher 45:08)? We also learn

\(^{17}\) In the language and ideology of the film, testicles equate with male agency and a “complete” male identity and being. The theme of castration and threat of castration is a major thread throughout the film.
that “specters of failed masculinity” are not immediately cast out, but rather, accepted into the men only space of Fight Club and Project Mayhem.\textsuperscript{18} We also learn that feminine attributes and identifications complicate, but also humanize the masculine identity. The presence of the feminine is also the impetus for a creation of a masculine identity in the first place. For it is Bob, the matriarchal, castrated man that opens the Narrator up to begin his journey to find his masculine identity, and Marla who agitates Tyler to surface out of the Narrator’s unconscious.

Though \textit{Fight Club} proposes certain notions of alternative masculinity, it still proposes both a binary system in which men and women are pitted as opposites and a stance of biological essentialism; that men and women are categorized by their genitalia and are by essence one or the other. Bob being allowed into the men-only space of Fight Club (even though he is ‘feminized’) where Marla is not allowed, tells us how the film demarcates who is a man and who is not based on biological sex. Marla entering into the testicular cancer support group without second thought, claiming that she has more of a right to be there than the Narrator because he “still has his balls,” is symbolic of the feminine and female identified entering into formerly defined men-only spaces. She challenges the Narrator’s biological essentialist ideology and complicates the imperative of differentiation in the sex / gender manufacturing system: (intact and fully functional) genitalia. Bob complicates masculinity with his “feminized” male body while Marla complicates masculinity with her entrance into the genital-defined male-only support group. It is after these two events that the Narrator seeks to find and define a masculine identity and self-hood in a radical and destructive fashion.

\textsuperscript{18} Bob and ‘Angel Face’ are initially accepted into Project Mayhem, but are “punished” for their feminization / effeminate characteristics. This is elaborated on in Part E.
In his essay Charles Guignon writes that the question, “what is it to be a man?” has become pressing and troubling in our world today (Guignon 36). What is about the world today that makes this question so imperative and unruly? Robert Bly attributes it to both feminism and consumer capitalist culture. *Fight Club*’s answer to this question is similar, but a bit more elaborate. *Fight Club* actually encourages male identified people to open up and become more gender fluid, but the Narrator only gets to that realization by first distancing himself from anything feminine (including consumerism), reconnecting with primal, ‘natural’ and ‘male’ instincts and becoming intransigent. This is similar to Bly’s suggested mythological path to regaining masculine autonomy. Though Bly sees some value in men connecting with emotions and feminine aspects, he also notes that the “soft men” of the 1970’s were missing something essential and were neither happy nor complete men (Bly 3).

Bly’s retelling and repurposing of the Iron John mythology has placed the Wild Man Archetype as a central concern for men in order to truly find themselves and be the answer to the troubling question of, what is it to be a man? In *Iron John*, the first step to the boy prince unlocking the cage of the “wild man,” is to find the key hidden under the Queen’s pillow (Bly 10). Metaphorically, this means coming to face the issues he has with his mother and to let go of the attachments he has to her. Bly notes that at the initial phase of a boy’s initiation “a mentor” or “male mother,” “enters the landscape.” Behind the “male mother,” “a being of impersonal intensity stands, which in our story is the wild man, or Iron John” (Bly 36). Tyler Durden is the Narrator’s “wild man” and in order to release him from his cage, he has to come to face his mother, and Bob is his stand-in, or, “male mother.”
Bly specifically states that he is not anti-feminist, but he places strong importance on the idea that men have grown “soft” because women have grown stronger in character, economically, and in socio-political spheres (Bly 3). He says that a man’s journey into softness or receptivity is “immensely valuable,” but that this is not the “final stop” (Bly 4). *Iron John* encourages men to distance themselves from maternal attachments and consumerism that has created “soft” men, and seek out their inner “wild man.” I believe that *Fight Club* follows this logic and *Iron John*’s postulation that patriarchy can be positive if reformatted and reframed. But, rather than fully agreeing with Bly’s trajectory, *Fight Club* is in critical conversation with it. *Fight Club* remolds Bly’s mythos for its own dark and nihilistic undertaking in the “pressing and troubling” question, what is it to be a man in our world today?

In the Narrator following a similar trajectory to Bly’s prince character, we see how the film functions as both supporter of and critical counter point to *Iron John*. *Iron John* was published in 1990 and became a nationally recognized best seller. It sparked the Men’s Movement at the beginning of the 90’s and was highly influential in creating an ideological framework for how men should find themselves in this new decade. *Fight Club*, the novel, was published in 1996 and the film premiered three years later as a retelling and reframing of masculinity for the new decade, for a new generation of young men; the Millennials, also known as Generation Y. Tyler calls this the “generation of men raised by women” in his response to marriage, saying “I don’t know if another woman is what we need” (Fincher 53:05). *Iron John* and *Fight Club* are both problematic in relationship to feminism, but I don’t think they should be completely written off as misogynistic and thus invaluable. I think that they both get at something important: there is nothing intrinsically wrong and shameful about identifying as a
man and having a masculine gender identity. That being said, having a masculine identity is problematic because of what Pascoe proposes, that, “masculinity is an identity formation constituted by inequality” (Pascoe 6).

This means that it is not stand-alone masculinity that is necessarily problematic, but the way it is societally situated hierarchically above other forms of gendered expression, namely, femininity. In Julia Serano’s manifesto, *The Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, she rejects feminists and queer theorists (such as Judith Butler) who “dismiss femininity by characterizing it as ‘artificial’ or ‘performance.’” She believes that “femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and both precede socialization and supersede biological sex.” She thinks, “no form of gender equity can ever truly be achieved until we first work to empower all forms of femininity” (Serano 6).19 In this regard, embodiments of alternative masculinities are defined because of their relationship and interaction with embodiments of alternative femininities, or, third, or, other gendered embodiments and expressions that don’t necessarily fall within the binary. This is why *Fight Club* is not just about men in defiance of hegemonic masculinity, but about how women and female identified people challenging traditional femininity have planted the seed within men to question and transform masculinity. That is why the Narrator says at the beginning of the film (which is also the end), that, “all of this: the guns, the bomb, the revolution, has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer” (Fincher 3:01).

**B. Marla Singer and the Dark Feminine**

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19 This is particularly interesting when applied to this study of culturally attributed feminine traits being displayed by masculine identified people.
“If I did have a tumor, I’d name it Marla” (Fincher 26:05)

Continuing with the sentiment that *Fight Club* is in conversation with Bly’s *Iron John*, we can identify that Marla is a direct representation of “the black side of the Great Mother” and Tyler is a representation of the initiator, the wild man (Bly 78). Marla and Tyler are placed as inverses of each other, nihilistic, anarchistic, anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist; Marla representing a dark and mysterious feminine, Tyler representing the unruly and violent masculine. Marla may or may not be ‘real’ the way that Tyler is not ‘real,’ regardless; within the world of the film they are both subsections of the Narrator’s psyche, his alter egos, and also his guides into the underworld. Marla’s parturition is what causes the Narrator to need to create Tyler Durden as a rebuttal and as a barricade against Marla’s distinct destructive prowess and also to displace his desire for her. Bly says that the uninitiated man wishes to “kill” Baba Yaga upon meeting her, but that “the only solution to the power of the witch is for the young man to develop energy as great as hers, as harsh, as wild, as shred, as clear in its desire” (Bly 78).

Initially Marla’s presence nauseates the Narrator, she “ruins everything” by showing up at the testicular cancer and the other support groups that the Narrator is obsessively attending to keep his insomnia at bay (Fincher 11:41). For most of the film Marla is seen in all black, perpetually smoking cigarettes, and purposefully placing herself in the throes of death. Here is the visual ligature symbolically with Kali, Baba Yaga, Hecate, and Lilith. The first image we see of Marla she is in all black with a black shawl. Costuming and color is important in this film, as it directly references *Iron John*’s “masculine sequence” of the symbolic colors of red, white, and black (Bly 202-206). These are the colors that the Narrator must move through: red first, white second, and black being the final destination. Marla already exists in the realm of black, which
stands for “suffering, having diseases, lack of purity” and refers “to the concept of mystical or ritual death” (Bly 201). It’s no coincidence that the Narrator meets Marla at support groups for people with terminal illness and that she constantly smokes cigarettes. If *Fight Club* is read as a postmodern rendition of film noir, Marla is the 90s post-grunge “goth” femme fatale: the Narrator’s entryway into the dark underbelly of a late consumer capitalist society.

In Cynthia A. Stark’s Essay entitled, “There’s Something About Marla: Fight Club and the Engendering of Self Respect” (2012), she dissect the character of Marla with a feminist viewpoint and through philosophies of self-respect. She notes, “Marla is the impetus for the Narrator’s mission of self-repudiation, self-reclamation, and social change informing the fight clubs and Project Mayhem” (Stark 53). This is in-line with Bly’s idea of the boy needing to be initiated in order to “develop energy as great as hers” (Bly 78). Stark then says that, “at the same time, Marla, as a woman, is excluded from the mission of self-renewal” (Stark 53). Stark’s argument is that Marla is not the one who performs the actions of social change, so, her self-
worth is instead defined by her relationship with the male protagonist who does. This, she argues, is the reason that *Fight Club* reinforces a “familiar patriarchal story” (53).

Marla’s exclusion and inactiveness in fight club and Project Mayhem are problematic and reinforce a certain patriarchal ideal, like Erving suggested, that women are almost-always passive. However, Marla doesn’t need a “mission of self-renewal” the way the Narrator does. Marla is already free ideologically from being a consumer slave. It is also Marla’s direct actions that orchestrate the Narrator’s descent into self-destruction, her presence that dictates the unfolding of the story, and her relationship with the Narrator that eventually make him realize that he is Tyler Durden. The initial action that starts it all is that she enters into the men-only space of the Testicular Cancer support group. This dismantles the inner peace that the Narrator has found in the support groups, but by doing so, she begins his path toward his creation of Tyler as his initiator into the “masculine sequence” and together they establish an anarchist revolution. It’s true that Marla is not posed as the protagonist in the film, it is both about her and not at all about her, and though *Fight Club* is essentially a patriarchal story because its main focus is men and masculinity, it is not a “familiar patriarchal story” because of the way that the film reiterates Marla’s importance, and how she complicates hegemonic masculine identity rather than, by being a polar opposite, compliments and reinforces it.

Interestingly, Charles Guignon’s essay about masculine identity concludes with an analysis of Marla. He argues that she exhibits the “most positive image” of “a stable identity” in the sense that she, unlike the Narrator, does not need to try to “complete” herself the way that the men in the film do (Guignon 48-49). Marla does not back down when the Narrator first confronts her about being a “faker” in the support group (Fincher 15:11). She is free from consumerist
ideology that is made clear when she steals clothes from the Laundromat and wears a bridesmaid’s dress she bought from Goodwill for one dollar. During her first encounter and conversation with the Narrator after he confronts her at the support group, we learn that she has fully accepted her own death. She stands unflinchingly in the middle of the road with cars flying by her. At this moment, 18:58, the Narrator tells us Marla’s philosophy of life; “she might die at any moment, but the tragedy, she said, is that she didn’t.” Accepting death is something that the Narrator works toward throughout the film and doesn’t fully do until 01:41:00, when he let’s go of the wheel of the car and allows it to crash into a parked car and flip into a ravine.

This reinforces the idea that Tyler suggests to the Narrator, that “at least” Marla is “trying to hit bottom” (1:00:01). The Narrator, irritated, responds with, “and what, I’m not?” Tyler says, “Sticking feathers up your butt does not make you a chicken.” Basically, Tyler is saying that what you do does not necessarily equate with who you are. This tells us that Marla is ahead of the Narrator in the quest to “hit bottom” and that she already is the kind of person that knows who she is and what she wants. I believe that her representation of an alternative femininity can tell us about the film’s ideology in terms of gendered relations and how the Narrator’s masculinity is constructed and situated in response to Marla’s more mature identity, rather than the other way around. Marla is the reason the Narrator unearths Tyler Durden out of his unconscious. He is attempting to obtain the kind of masculine identity that he would need in order to be in union with Marla. Like the prince in Bly’s telling of the Iron John story, the Narrator must become initiated in order to develop the nihilistic, harsh, and wild energy to match Marla’s. “Familiar patriarchal” films show dynamics in which this is switched: the male
identified protagonist has a strong sense of identity and the female identified character must shape her identity around his and/or compromise herself in some way to be his suitable match.

Marla displays an alternative femininity. That being said, ‘alternative’ is not synonymous with unproblematic. She is a troubled character in many ways, and shows moments of being passive and dependent upon the male protagonist, like when she takes too much Xanax in a “cry for help” suicide attempt and Tyler comes to get her from her apartment. Marla also shows moments of directness and fearlessness. She does not cower upon confrontation with men in the film. She is sure of herself and actively seeking forms of intimacy. The Narrator on the other hand dissociates from and avoids intimacy altogether. It is clear that she is, like Guignon suggests, “the source of her own actions” and she is not as heavily influenced by external circumstances or consumerist capitalist culture (Guignon 49). Marla does not buy into the ideology that wearing expensive designer clothing makes you more attractive to men and therefore more valuable as a woman. Marla is not soft spoken or a ‘proper lady’ in any sense of the word. She embodies a complex feminine identity, and thus decentralizes the Narrator’s sense of his own masculine identity. She is, in Tyler’s words, “a predator posing as a house pet,” linked to both destruction and desire, pain and pleasure.

The chapter in *Iron John* entitled, “The Road of Ashes, Descent, and Grief” directly relates to the Narrator’s initiative journey lead by his alter ego, the “wild man,” Tyler Durden.

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20 This moment in the film, 51:30, we are given a clue that Marla may not be completely real, as both her and Tyler’s reflections are not cast in the mirror as they walk down the hallway of her apartment building.

21 This follows suit with Robert Bly’s disposition in *Iron John*, that feminine identified people can be both a threat and also hold the key to men letting out their ‘wild man’ and reconnecting with their primal masculine identity. He says that men need to connect with the harsh Dionysus energy, also called Kala, and can do so either through accumulated grief or by “meeting that same energy in women” (Bly 27). Marla displays this Kala energy and implants destruction and desire simultaneously into the Narrator.
Bly talks about various initiation practices by ancient cultures and finds a common thread between them. He says that they all begin with two events: “the first is a clean break with the parents, after which the novice goes to the forest, desert, or wilderness; the second is a wound that the older men give the boy, which could be a scarring of skin, a cut with a knife, a brushing of nettles, a tooth knocked out” (Bly 28). The Narrator’s destruction of his own apartment and breaking away from his lifestyle can be interpreted as a final breaking away from his parent’s expectations that he have a career and succeed financially. After finding out his apartment has been destroyed, he calls Marla. She answers with a brusk and harsh tone and the Narrator hangs up, knowing he is not ready to match her energy. He then calls Tyler and ends up living with Tyler in a condemned house in an urban wilderness, the dilapidated warehouse district of Paper Street. After a montage where we see the Narrator living in squalor without electricity, running water, or any commodities, and after a month the Narrator begins to “not miss tv” (Fincher 37:52) He is no longer a slave to his possessions or numbing himself out with chimeras of consumerist culture. It is in this wilderness that he indirectly gives himself a name, Jack. A name is the first requirement for an identity.

The second part of his initiation is when he enters into the red color of blood, anger, war, and sacrifice (Bly 203). The community of men that make up fight club, the pain induced by their expressions of aggression (he gets a tooth knocked out at 47:07), and the intense pain that marks him when he receives a chemical burn from Tyler is his expression of “the red stage” (Bly 203). The scene with the ritual initiation of the lye burn directly ties Marla to being the catalyst.

22 This is confirmed with the conversation with Tyler at 50:30, where the Narrator talks about his parent’s wishes for him to finish college, get a job, get married, and live the American dream.
of Jack’s desire to find his masculine identity and the subsequent descent, or katabasis\textsuperscript{23} that must take place for him to find it. At this point in the film, 1:00:00, Jack and Tyler are doing “ashes work,” which Bly describes as a stage before katabasis where the boy has to deal with the “corpse” that is his past shame, a failed relationship, or a failed career (Bly 84). After Marla and Tyler’s first sexual encounter\textsuperscript{24} and Jack is cold to her and she leaves, his expression turns from anger to sadness as she walks away. This tells us that he does desire her to be there, but is still not able to admit that to himself and allow himself to be vulnerable with her. At 59:53 Tyler enters and after the conversation about Marla “hitting bottom,” Jack asks what they are doing that night and Tyler says that they will make soap (1:00:12).

We learn that making soap means breaking into a plastic surgery clinic to get bags of human fat in order to render it. This is a physical representation of the “ashes work,” the “corpse” work that Jack must do as part of his initiation. The next step is being marked through enduring intense physical pain given to him in a ritualistic fashion so that it “reverberates out from a rich center of meaning” (Bly 28). This happens at 1:02:21. Tyler kisses Jack’s hand and then shakes lye onto it. Tyler urges Jack to look at his hand while the lye seeps into his pores and begins searing a deep chemical burn into his flesh. Jack attempts to go into a guided meditation that he learned in a support group of people with terminal disease. Tyler tells him to “stay with

\textsuperscript{23} Bly uses this ancient Greek word to elaborate on the concept of descent, saying that katabasis is “the whirlpool, the sinking through the floor, the drop” (Bly 70) of a man’s ego and when this happens, the man no longer feels special, he becomes, “the all singing, all dancing crap of the world” (Fincher 1:30:42) Essentially, katabasis is synonymous with “hitting bottom.”

\textsuperscript{24} Jack dissociates and is Tyler when he has sex with Marla in order to shield himself from intimacy with her because he is not ready for it. Tyler says that “it isn’t love, it is a “sport fuck” in order to render the connection as purely physical and diminish the emotional and spiritual aspect of sexuality (Fincher 52:02).
the pain, don't shut this out” (Fincher 1:02:35). Jack struggles and cries out while Tyler says, “without pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing” (1:02:46). Jack still trying to distract himself says, “I’m going into my cave and I’m going to find my power animal” (1:02:53). The shot cuts from an image of Jack’s face in pain to his ‘cave.’ Marla is lying in the frozen cave, smoking, and has replaced the penguin as his ‘power animal.’

This cut suggests a simple metaphorical association between Marla and pain. It also reinforces that Jack unconsciously desires her, though he tries to act like he doesn’t. Tyler slaps his hand down on the table, bringing him back to the pain, and says, “What you are feeling is premature enlightenment” (1:03:02). Again Jack tries to go into his cave and now he sees himself leaning over Marla to kiss her. She blows smoke into his face and he coughs, then it cuts sharply to an abstract image of orange diagonal lines, then Tyler slaps him across the face and says, “this is the greatest moment of your life and you’re off somewhere missing it” (1:03:09). This reinforces the importance of this moment in terms of Jack initiation.
In the allegory of Plato’s cave, the prisoner who is freed from the reality of shadows and attempts to return can no longer be fooled into believing the former reality. The veil has lifted. Jack going into his ‘cave’ once worked to ease his mind, but now that he has begun to see the true nature of reality within himself, it no longer works. Jack attempts to return there, creating this fantasy of Marla in his mind in order to escape. He is soft and vulnerable and approaching her to kiss her in an intimate way. She doesn’t move or change her expression and rather than accepting his expression of desire, she pushes him out with a mouthful of smoke that chokes him. Jack is afraid of rejection, of getting hurt, or of her overpowering him if he shows his true desire, which is to be intimate and loving with her. Through this scene we can determine that Marla is both the cause of his pain and also a source of pleasure, both the reason for initiation and a possible distraction from it. Ancient teachings of enlightenment, such as Taoism suggest that when there is no desire, all things are at peace.\textsuperscript{25} Jack’s desire for Marla to be able to match her energy has spiraled him into chaos.

Tyler is trying to pull Jack into the present moment of initiation, to accept pain and death. He is trying to get him to face the reality that once desire arrives, life becomes complicated, terrifying, and chaotic. Jack tries to pull away, distract himself, numb himself to the pain, go into a fantasy world rather than being present with and feeling the flesh of his hand burning. Like the elder men in ancient cultures that lead the boys through painful initiations, Tyler guides him through the experience. Pain gets Jack back into his body of flesh and blood, back into the reality of his existence passing before him. This is a crucial turning point for Jack’s identity formation.

\textsuperscript{25} As talked about in the ancient Taoist text the \textit{Tao Te Ching}, written by Laozi.
After his painful chemical burn, he is starting to see “descent as a holy thing” (Bly 91). Soon after this moment, Jack / Tyler gives his famous speech to the men at fight club gathered in a circle, stands up to Lou the bar owner, and then blackmails his boss into giving him his paycheck without coming into the office by punching himself repeatedly in the face. It is through his own self-destruction that he usurps patriarchal systems and powers.

C. Tyler Durden’s Prescription: Violence and Nihilism as a Path to Freedom

“What Fight Club suggests is that a liberated masculine identity is only achieved through initiation into the darker realms of life such as destruction, violence, pain, suffering, and facing the fact that death is imminent. Iron John follows this same logic, that it is only through pain and suffering that one finds a core sense of self. Jean Bobby Noble says that “self” is the hottest and most insidious capitalist commodity (Noble, Sons, 77). Thus Fight Club is essentially about reclamation of the primal self from its more recent locus as such commodity. Tyler’s ideological stance of stripping away modern luxury and consumerist products in order to return to basic instinctual survival methods situates the case that Fight Club glorifies specific types of violence as a path to physical, emotional, and spiritual liberation of the self.

The first time that we see Tyler is in glitches as he is beginning to evolve out of Jack’s subconscious and come into the light. Tyler is fully actualized as a passenger in a commercial airliner seated next to Jack. At 21:05 we see Jack talking to a black woman on the plane telling her about his job as a recall analyst for a major automotive company. She is traveling alone and in business attire, suggesting that she is a professional on a business trip. Then he visualizes a mid-air collision and the plane plummeting and being ripped apart. It cuts to Jack’s eyes opening,
in the same seat he was sitting, as if it were a continuous edit, but this time Tyler is sitting in the
seat next to Jack rather than the black woman. This edit situates Tyler as connected to the image
of the black woman just as he is later arranged visually to the image of Marla.26

On the plane Tyler is wearing his bright red leather jacket and a white shirt that has a
black and red patterning. Tyler’s costuming directly relates to which stage Jack is in the
“masculine sequence.” Tyler is seen wearing his red leather jacket in the preliminary glitches,
when they first meet on the airplane, at the bar when they initiate their first fight with each other,
and at the first fight club meetings where they bleed red. Bly says that “when a young man is red,
he shows his anger, he shouts at people, he flares up like a match with a surfer tip, he flushes red
with anger, he fights for what is his, stops being passive, is a red hawk, is fierce” (Bly 203). He
notes that in contemporary western society, we try to move young men from childhood straight
into the “White Knight” and attempt to skip the stage of the “Red Knight” (203). Bly says that
the red stage is vital to transformation and to skip this stage is dangerous because the subject is
often “insufferable” (204). As we see in Fight Club, the red stage is necessary for Jack to become
present with himself, responsive to the world around him, and to assert his agency.

It is in the scenes of Jack’s red stage that Fight Club is criticized for glorification of
violence. I will argue that Fight Club does glorify violence, but in a particular fashion. Jack does
not stay in the red stage, but moves through to the white and ultimately to the black and
eventually renounces expressions of violence by destroying Tyler. I agree with Bly, that modern
society attempts to avoid and repress the red stage of the masculine sequence that is pain, anger,

26 This further suggests that it is the presence of the black woman who is at economic standing with Jack
and the presence of the dark, “goth” Marla entering into the men-only space that forces Tyler to emerge.
The image of an economically independent African American woman being a catalyst for a crisis in white
masculine identity can also be witnessed in Magnolia and in Le Samouraï (Melville 1967).
aggression, and violence. Violence is inherent in life. Consumption is violent. Birth is violent.

Sex is violent. Human evolution and the continuation of the species rely on certain types of
violence and displays of dominance. When we as humans repress violence and aggression and do
not find a healthy outlet for it that things become subtly imbued with it and/or emotions and
instincts become stagnant and blocked. In the beginning of Jack’s story, we witness that he has
suppressed all emotion and instinct, he is numb. He fits the description of the third path that Bly
talks about, the path of paralysis, of “robot behavior,” and deliberate “pursued numbness- a
hollow at the center, no affection, no emotion upward or downward, automaton life” (Bly 34).
Jack needs to cry, but the film, along with Bly, suggests that Jack also needs to express other
emotions that he can only do through fighting.

_Fight Club_ suggests that our society does not allow for healthy aggressive energy, as
everything is contained, pre-packaged, and sterilized like the single serving chicken cordon bleu
“hobby kit” that Jack is given on the airplane (Fincher 19:50). There is no outlet for violence,
dominance, and aggression, and thus, it is bottled and hidden away under the surface, that is, until something gives. Over the years _Fight Club_ has been criticized for encouraging violence
and also attributing it solely to males. Violence is not a “male thing,” it is a human instinct of
fight or flight, though, males seem to be more motivated toward expressing violence, aggression,
and dominance. This perhaps is because they are less likely to deal with the root emotions of
their anger, which are generally fear, insecurity, and feelings of lack. Because Jack has repressed
these underlying emotions for so long, he needs some action to release them. I don’t condone
fighting, but for Jack, this is what gets him out of his state of numbness. It is vital that humans in
modern society find fluidity in the ‘darker’ emotions, and *Fight Club* is trying to provide an answer to this.

*Fight club* involves two men with their shirts off, physically battering one another, and though it is glorifying violence on the screen, there is mutual consent involved between the two men fighting. The agreements of consent are in the basic rulebook that Tyler gives them before the beginning of every club meeting. One of their “homework assignments” involve attempting to start fights with strangers, and though I do not condone this behavior, it is important to note that none of the fights with strangers actually get to an elevated state of violence the way that scenes during fight club meetings do. Project Mayhem is not out to kill anyone, their mission is to vandalize corporate art, buildings, and destroy hierarchical infrastructures. The scene where Bob is shot in the head and killed on a Project Mayhem mission tells us that the men are empathically affected by the death. Bodily violence and aggression is for the most part contained within the arena of fight club meetings, a men-only space limited to biological male bodies. They have their shirts off when they fight, all of them except for Bob, and though Jack and Tyler feel
“sorry for the guys packed in gyms, trying to look like how Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein say they should,” (45:08) they commend and proudly display bodies that become “carved out of wood” (44:46) after a few fight club meetings. Tyler distinguishes this as the difference between self-improvement and self-destruction. Tyler is a prophet of Nietzschean nihilism, claiming to Jack that because their Father’s bailed, then God, in all probability hates them (1:03:28). Tyler is not only advocating for self-destruction, but destruction of patriarchal systems, protestant Christian values, and elitist hegemonic masculinity.

If Tyler is trying to abolish patriarchal and capitalist systems, then why the gender distinction and exclusion in fight club and Project Mayhem? None of the rules of fight club state that it is male-only, but by the nature of its grit and brutality, it seems to be an unspoken rule. When Marla asks Jack why he hasn’t been going to his support group meetings, he says that he found a new one and Marla excitedly says, “really?” Jack replies sternly, “it’s for men only” (Fincher 47:52). She replies, “like the testicle thing?” It is clear that Jack is trying to keep his distance from Marla and separate her from fight club and from his “wilderness” that is the Paper Street house. Her reference to the testicular cancer support group and to testicles here in relation to fight club suggests biological essentialism, that cisgendered male bodies with testosterone are given this “gift” of initiation and like Stark suggests, a “mission of self-renewal” that anyone other than cisgendered biological males, such as female born and/or female identified people are denied (Stark 53). Marla belittles this distinction, but is still not invited to the male-only space of fight club. Bly’s opinion is that the male being is “set apart” (Bly 120).
This enlists the idea that it is a biological need for natal males to express violent and aggressive behaviors.

If we return to the idea proposed by Connell and Serano, that gendered identity is formed based on both biological difference and socialization, then what is it about male beings that make them more prone to expressions of anger, violence, and aggression? In doing some research about the link of testosterone and aggression I found that the studies are complicated and inconclusive. Scientists cannot isolate testosterone and the effects it has on mood, aggression, and sexual behavior. What has been noted is that testosterone seems to encourage behavior that is intended to dominate, whether aggressively or non aggressively. It is only when testosterone levels are higher than normal range that aggression is correlative (Mazur, Allan, Booth). It is a complex issue because of the effects of other androgens such as cortisol, the stress hormone, can have on the brain and body.

One of the first things I noticed when I began testosterone is that I have become less emotionally driven and more instinctually driven. My basic instincts are much more of a central concern in my mind and in my life. Another thing I notice is that because of my decreased interest in my emotions, it is easier to ignore them, let them go untended, and then later experience an outburst of anger in order to find release from frustration and irritation, even if the emotions started out as fear, sadness, or insecurity. Getting consistent exercise such as weight lifting, boxing, or hiking has become a necessity to release the excess energy. It has become clear to me through my own experiences that there is a correlation between testosterone and the need to find a healthy outlet for aggressive energy. That being said, there is also a lot of societal pressure and rewards put on men and boys to compete, display dominant behavior, and to
physically fight or be able to defend themselves or their friends or partners. This possible biological / hormonal difference is therefore enhanced by socialization, peer pressure, and other learned and rewarded behaviors.

Hormonal differences in emotional, mental, and physical states cause for a lot of misunderstandings and resentments between people who have testosterone and estrogen levels at normal range to an average biological male and people who have testosterone and estrogen levels at normal range to an average biological female. Many times a person with higher testosterone levels exhibiting behaviors of dominance or aggression is labeled as “out of control,” a miscreant, or a threat to society. Sometimes, this can be true, though, not always, and the more and more direct outlets for these instincts are stripped away, the more they get bottled up, repressed, and then are expressed in more pathological ways. Violence when enacted through torture, rape, murder, serial killings, genocide, and war is harmful and atrocious, but is there an outlet for ‘darker’ emotions that is not harmful, even beneficial? Tyler believes that “the middle children of history” can become liberated through reclamation of their agency as male bodies by expressing violence and receiving intense physical pain (Fincher 1:10:43). Guignon affirms this by claiming “the sensation of pain defines the boundaries of the self, forming an individual into an embodied subject” (Guignon 44). Is it only through pain that masculine people can find themselves and reclaim their agency?

Testicles as biological agent of creating and administering testosterone to the body are treated as crucial to men in *Fight Club* who are in the process of reclaiming and asserting their

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27 In pre-agricultural and pre-industrial societies, hunter-gatherers in order to ensure survival had to express aggression, violence, and dominance through various means such as hunting and fishing. These tasks were typically, but not always, given to men or male identified individuals.
identities as male beings with agency. The theme of castration and threat of castration is both latent throughout the film and directly spoken about in a handful of scenes. Interestingly, there is a relationship between castration and authority figures, particularly police. Threatening to castrate the police commissioner is how the members of Project Mayhem display their dominance over him and get him to submit to their wishes to call off the investigation. This scene begins at 1:33:00 as the police commissioner enters the men’s restroom, another male-only space. When he opens the door, Tyler is waiting and grabs him by the collar of his dress shirt. The police commissioner symbolizes white elite patriarchal hegemonic masculinity, social order, and the authority of the state, as he makes the major decisions on how the police should respond to illegal and criminal behaviors. Tyler drags him by the throat across the floor of the men’s restroom and the members of Project Mayhem circle him and strip off his pants and put a rubber band around his testicles. This scene suggests that in order to establish an alternative to hegemonic masculinity, one must assert physical and mental dominance over the authority figures and threaten their power and virility by threatening their source of testosterone. The shot

![Tyler and members of Project Mayhem verbally and physically threatens to castrate the police commissioner (Fincher 1:34:25).](image)
switches to a POV of the police commissioner, suggesting that we, the audience are too, being threatened by Tyler and Project Mayhem members.

Eugene Monick, Jungian analyst and author of *Castration and Male Rage: The Phallic Wound*, studies masculine psychology through archetypes, specifically through studying the phallos as the “governing symbol of masculinity” (Monick 9). He suggests that patriarchy is not synonymous with masculinity and that “it is not necessary to subordinate masculinity as one draws away from patriarchy” (9). He says that psychological castration is “to remove, damage, or insult phallos” and that is “to remove, damage or insult a man’s deepest sense of himself as a male person” (10). For Monick, the archetype of the phallos goes far beyond the physical representation. He believes that as feminine energy is emerging in the conscious as women become more powerful economically and politically, that masculine energy must investigate the unconscious, darker realms of phallic energy. Members of fight club and Project Mayhem are indeed delving into the underworld, dark, material, chthonic phallos energy and meanwhile attacking the patriarchal system that they no longer deem dependable.

*Fight Club* specifically deals with young to middle-aged white heterosexual cisgendered masculine identity, the “middle children,” or lower-middle class workers who feel like patriarchal and capitalist systems are now oppressing, enslaving, and feminizing them. Though there a few non-white members of fight club, none are seen in Project Mayhem, nor are any of them central or secondary characters in the film. Its ideological statement is constructed to hit a specific audience and a specific type of marginalization: white men of a low-middle economic class; nearly erasing all other kinds of subordinate masculinities such as non-white, gay, bisexual, queer, transsexual, butch, female masculinity, and men with disabilities. Are they, too,
denied self-renewal the way that Cynthia Stark suggests Marla and feminine identities are? This seems to be the case, though, perhaps the film is assuming that other types of subordinate masculinities along with feminine identified people would already be pitted against patriarchal structures, and thus, do not need this ideological call to arms.

The men of Project Mayhem were brought up to believe that capitalist and patriarchal systems were there to serve them, and upon being told by Tyler that they are not, are now using the power that they have as the working class to assert dominance and trump the hegemonic elite. This kind of male rage that they exhibit, Monick suggests is “directly related to the ominous import of castration as male terror” (11). Their fear of further feminization and ending up a specter of failure, like Bob, propels them into “rudiments of male rage” that “begin to form when male weakness can no longer be hidden” (14). Tyler exposes their weaknesses to them in his famous speech at 1:09:55, and stokes the flames of male rage even further through his cult-like indoctrination of Project Mayhem that turns them into anonymous, “all singing, all dancing crap of the world” (Fincher 1:30:47). He identifies that the worst thing that can happen is that “a woman could cut off your dick,” and tells Project Mayhem members how feminizing capitalist systems are in the process of castrating them. This is how Tyler successfully “builds an army” in order to take down the hierarchical system of economic class by setting up bombs in all the major financial centers in New York City.

Guignon suggests that Fight Club’s nihilistic ideology of masculine identity is that “manliness is affirmed by indiscriminate acts of resistance against the moral order with no

28 Tyler is wearing a white t-shirt in this scene which symbolizes Jack going into the white stage of the masculine sequence, suggesting this speech is morally good and valorizes the “middle men” and their struggle for power.
pretense of higher aim” (Guignon 43). I would agree, but with a revision. I think that there is a higher aim of the resistance and I think that it is self-liberation from late consumer capitalism and the corporate stranglehold over middle class wages. Nietzschean nihilistic ideology can go in two directions. The first direction being that if God is dead then we are doomed and nothing matters. The second being that if God is dead then we can take control of our own lives and our own existence. In the case of *Fight Club*, Jack ultimately chooses the second path, though he has severe self-doubt and second-guesses himself along the way. It is only through his creation of Tyler that he overcomes his self-loathing tendencies, fear, and paralyzing doubt. After his “male mother,” Bob, is shot in the head and dies instantly, and Tyler has disappeared, Jack’s fear and also his conscious to be the “White Knight” begins to take over and he tries to take down the neo-anarchist revolution that he and Tyler set into motion. Jack’s mission to stop it starts at 1:48:00. At this point, though, Project Mayhem is autonomous and too powerful to stop.

In Jack’s white stage he revisits his past life aboard countless airplanes in the sterilized environment, yet this time in a maniacal search of Tyler. He discovers that Tyler has been setting up fight clubs in all major cities in the U.S. While talking to a bartender in a neck brace, whose injuries we can assume to be from fighting, Jack learns that he is “Mr. Durden” (Fincher 1:51:06). In the next scene he rushes into a hotel room and calls Marla and asks her if they’ve ever “had sex” (1:51:32). She tells him the nature of their relationship and calls him Tyler Durden. Then Tyler appears in the hotel room. His head is shaved; he is wearing black circular glass, a red shirt, red pants, red boots, and a black furry jacket that is almost identical with the black shawl that Marla wears throughout the film. This symbolizes Jack beginning to move into
the black stage of the masculine sequence. Tyler accuses Jack of breaking their argument not to talk to Marla about him.

Jack then begins to have flashbacks of being Tyler and scenes in the film that show Brad Pitt’s character as Tyler now show Edward Norton’s character in his place. Jack realizes that they are the same person, that he created Tyler as his initiator, that Tyler is his mythological, psychological “wild man.” He realizes that “little by little” he has been “letting himself become Tyler Durden” (1:54:06). Jack falls asleep, and then the next morning discovers that he made phone calls all night, then returns to the Paper Street house to find that no one is there and there are empty bathtubs with residue of nitro glycerin. He then goes out to find Marla and they go into a restaurant and talk. He attempts to reconcile with her and tells her that he really likes her and that he cares about her (1:58:25). This is the first time that we see Jack be vulnerable with Marla and express his feelings and emotions. She tells him that he has “severe emotional problems” and that she is “gone” (1:59:19). She leaves and he runs after her and tells her to get on the bus, he says that Project Mayhem thinks that she “is some kind of a threat” (2:00:00). This strengthens the interpretation that the feminine, like capitalist systems threaten them with symbolic castration by blocking them from their “mission.”

Jack in a deranged and frenzied state goes to the police station and turns himself in as the leader of the terrorist organization. He tells the detective about the plan to blow up the major credit card company headquarters in order to “erase the debt” and put everyone “back to zero” which will create “total chaos” (2:01:31). When the detective leaves the interrogation room we learn that the other police officers are part of Project Mayhem and they tell Jack that they “got to get his balls” because he is trying to interfere with the plan (2:02:20). They wrestle him onto a
table, take off his pants, and attempt to tie him up.29 When the detective distracts one of the officers, Jack grabs one of their guns and escapes. This shows that he avoids castration and usurps the police authority by taking and yielding a gun, a phallic symbol of virility. He quickly leaves the police station and runs through the streets in only his white boxers and a gray t-shirt. He runs to one of the buildings that is set to be demolished. Tyler appears in his black furry jacket and a tank top that is white and red with a pocket that contains the partial words “Black Sugar.” Jack breaks in the building by shooting at Tyler who is laughing at him behind one of the glass doors.

Jack attempts to stop the demolitions by disabling one of the bombs. Tyler says that they are not hurting anyone, they are “setting them free” (2:06:17). Tyler is more powerful than ever and teleports from one space to another. When Jack disables one of the bombs, Tyler punches him out of the van, puts the wire back into the bomb, and shuts the van doors. Jack holds the gun up at Tyler and it cuts to a security camera feed where we see that Tyler is not actually there. Jack fires at Tyler and realizes that it does nothing. Tyler kicks the gun away, abolishing Jack’s virility and begins beating up Jack and even throwing him down a flight of stairs. This visually shows Tyler above Jack, in the dominant position. Jack knows that Tyler is not real, but cannot yet get rid of him. In this scene he is wrestling with himself and his own conscious. Jack the “White Knight” fights Tyler the “Black Knight” and Tyler wins. Jack receives the greatest

29 The theme of police authority and castration in *Fight Club* is symbolically linked to being made submissive by police dominance. This can also be witnessed in *Boys Don’t Cry* as Brandon’s male identity is further stripped away by Sheriff Laux. Bly relates castration or the “wounding of the genitals” to the element iron and “the imprisonment of men,” like the iron bars that cage the “wild man” (Bly 208).
beating and the greatest pain yet. It is the ultimate self-destruction in order to enter into the final stage of his initiation: the black stage.

D. Self-Reflexivity, Non-Linear Editing, and Multiple Temporalities in *Fight Club*:

**What This Says About ‘Masculine Time’**

Time’s attributes of structured linearity, universality, and commodity are ideologies given to us, and we are expected to conform to these standards or else not have privileges in society. We are socialized to believe that linear temporality measured with clocks and calendars is ‘fact’ without question in the same way that we are assigned at birth as male or female and taught to socially conform to one of those two categories. It is exactly the things that are “common sense” that need to be interrogated. In her “Introduction” to *Queer Temporalities*, a volume featured in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Elizabeth Freeman suggests, “temporality is a mode of implantation through which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (Freeman 160). *Fight Club*’s non-linearity and blurring of past, present, and future events goes against the singular temporality of the linear, irreversible, mechanical film projection apparatus itself and thus further seeks to go against patriarchal, “institutional forces” (160).

In the book *Temporalities*, West-Pavlov argues that since antiquity, time and space have been gendered respectively and that “masculine action occurs within a temporalized framework of historical cause and effect” (West-Pavlov 101). He states that “third generation feminists are often averse to accepting the linear temporalities of the competitive male-dominated world of productive work,” because it relies on “the temporal projection of competitive individual intentionality rather than communal solidarity” (102). *Fight Club*’s self-reflexive nature, revealing its materiality, its discontinuous and chaotic editing style, and its blurring of past,
present, and future events informs us that it seeks to disrupt the linear temporality of its own nature as a film. In technical form (as well as in content), *Fight Club*, like third wave feminism, rejects the “competitive male-dominated world of productive work” and promotes “communal solidarity” over an individualist ‘dog-eat-dog’ credo (102).

Jack/Tyler’s split identity and experience of multiple temporalities opens up the dialogue of *Fight Club* as practice in Bergsonian Duration. In the opening scene of *Fight Club*, which is the ending of the story, we see Jack with a gun in his mouth. Tyler is holding the gun, he has the phallic power. Tyler takes the gun out of Jack’s mouth and walks toward the window. The room is dark with low-key lighting that renders the figures as almost completely in shadow. As Jack explains the controlled demolition, Tyler’s “theater of mass destruction,” the camera moves from the outside of the window then quickly down the building and into the basement. It then moves through the bullet hole in the rear view window of the van revealing the containers of nitro glycerin and a detonator (Fincher 2:36). It cuts back to the room and Tyler looks at his watch and says, “Two and half. Think of everything we’ve accomplished” (02:50). Then, Jack goes into the entire story of how they got there. His telling of the story essentially takes place as time is suspended, and we return to this moment at 2:09:10. This tells us that the entirety of the film’s diegetic temporality: its varying temporal rhythms, camera movements, and editing patterns occur within Jack, the Narrator’s mind. The two hours of the film’s duration takes place within a ritual space where Jack crosses a “ceremonial threshold” and enters a liminality where “both

30 A theory of time posited by the French philosopher Henri Bergson that proposes that the inner life of a human is a kind of duration that is never linear and unified, showing that time is mobile and incomplete and that free will exists within this duration. This goes along with Tyler’s philosophy of “never be complete” (Fincher 30:33).
time and space become changed” and it is only here, Bly says, that “transformation can happen” (Bly 194). It is in this duration of the film that Jack’s initiation and reclamation of his masculine identity takes place.

At 02:50 we cross the threshold and enter and at 2:09:10 we exit the threshold and return back to a “profane place” (Bly 194). This time the scene is slightly altered. When Tyler says “would you like to say a few words to mark the occasion?” Jack replies, “I still can’t think of anything.” Tyler takes the gun out of Jack’s mouth, walks away and says “flashback humor” (2:09:48). This moment of self-reflexivity shows us that Jack and Tyler are aware of the duration in which the story just took place. This is just one self-reflexive instance among many in which Jack and Tyler point out to the audience that the film is constructed. The first moment of blatant self-reflexivity is at 32:20 when Jack addresses the audience directly and tells us how Tyler is a projectionist. We see Tyler sitting at the editing table splicing in single frames of pornography into family films. He points to the right side of the screen where a “cigarette burn” appears with a sound sync indicating a “change-over.” The frame that Tyler chooses is an erect penis, the symbol of male virility and also the erotic image in cinema that is almost never seen. This scene describes how film is a material medium and how it passes through various hands before it reaches the eyes of the audience. Explaining to the audience how film is engineered alludes to the actuality that Fight Club’s ideologies are also manufactured. Linear temporality is a construction. Masculinity is a construction. Bigenderism is a construction. Economic and hierarchical systems of power are a construction. Anything that is manufactured can also be destroyed, dissembled, or reworked.

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Another important moment of self-reflexivity is at (1:24:37). The camera slowly dollies into Tyler’s face covered in sweat as he says, “You are not your job. You are not how much money you have in the bank. You’re not the car you drive. You’re not the contents of your wallet. You’re not your fucking khakis.” At this moment the film begins to glitch and slide back and forth as if coming off of the projector. The fourth wall is broken as Tyler addresses the audience directly saying, “You are the all singing, all dancing crap of the world” (1:24:50). *Fight Club* is direct in its philosophy: the message is not underlying or latent, but spoken succinctly to the audience. Its message is catered toward the white lower-middle class working cisgendered male, the group of people who have historically been most concerned with the contents of their wallet as a defining factor of their self-worth and their masculinity. As money equates with power, the working class and lower class male as breadwinner is a slave to minimum wage service industry jobs and psychologically castrated by their inability to get out of debt, climb the economic ladder, or find meaning and purpose in their profession. Though this message is directed at American men with masculine identities specifically, it does not exclude people of other groups,
identities, or cultures. Many people can relate to feeling like money dictates who they are, what they do, and what kind of identity they can create.

There is a famous saying by Benjamin Franklin, that, “time is money,” and while Tyler is telling the audience that they are not defined by how much money they have in the bank, the linear temporality of the film as a mechanism is breaking down. Tyler’s recipe for liberation is destruction, echoing the theme present in Graham Green’s famous short story, *The Destructors*, and other films at the turn of the millennia such as *Memento* (2000) and *Donnie Darko* (2001) which both tackle similar questions of problematic masculine identities in late consumer capitalist western society. It is only through deconstruction of an old identity that one has space for a different identity. Clinical and developmental Psychologist James Marcia calls this identity moratorium, where one identity has died, but the person has not yet adopted a new identity (Marcia 552). It is within this liminal, “ritual” space that one has the opportunity to reassess who they are and what kind of person they want to become. Jack must destroy everything in his life, his comforts, and his old identity in order to have the freedom to create something else for himself.

Bly says, “ritual space carries the young man out of machismo, out of battle, out of dominator fantasies” (Bly 196). After the “ritual” initiation has occurred Jack is able to rid himself of the alter ego of Tyler Durden and let go of the machismo. He does this at 2:12:13 when he usurps the phallic power from Tyler by realizing that he is actually the one holding the gun. He then uses Tyler’s own ideology against him by shooting himself through the cheek on the left side of his face and symbolically killing Tyler. Tyler says, “what’s that smell?” as smoke rises from his mouth and the back of his head (Fincher 2:13:40). He falls down dead, and
disappears. The blood that runs down Jack’s face appears black whereas the blood in the scenes of fight club meetings appears bright red. Jack is in the throes of the black stage, “the black of the *prima materia*” (Bly 202). Now that Jack has faced pain and overcome his fear of death, he is now ready to grow and has the Kala energy to match the dark crone, Marla. Members of Project Mayhem drag Marla into the dark room and she approaches Jack angrily until she sees his face bleeding badly. He reassures her that he is okay, with a half smile on his face he says “trust me, everything is going to be fine” (Fincher 2:15:37). Immediately after he says this, the first building explodes. Jack grabs her hand as they watch the buildings outside the window collapse in a fiery ruble.

Project Mayhem attempts to solve the problem of capitalist consumerism ‘feminizing’ them by destroying of all of the major financial buildings and thus eradicating the economical hierarchy. *Fight Club* shows how capitalist systems through advocacy of the hegemonic masculine ideal only benefit a specific elite group. Capitalism is no longer helping the working class “middle men.” When money and the debt margin is nullified and chaos ensues, then all people are given back some forms of agency and power regardless of gender, race, and affiliation. Though we don’t know what happens after the financial collapse, the film suggests a union of Marla and Jack and a movement away from individualism and toward “communal solidarity,” which West-Pavlov suggests is one mission of third wave feminism (West-Pavlov 102). Jack has taken the path of wounds and growth, and has found his connection with others. He rids himself of the hyper-masculine, pseudo-misogynistic Tyler Durden and unites with Marla, showing his openness to intimacy with her and reconnecting with his own feminine
aspects. He adopts Tyler’s confidence, but releases the machismo and accepts himself for who he is.

At the ending of *Iron John*, Bly says that “we all know that there are in reality besides these two states, “feminine” and “masculine,” all sorts of degrees, intermediate states, unions, combinations, special cases, genius exceptions, and so on” (Bly 236). I believe this is Bly’s attempt at recognizing a world beyond gender dualism and opposition even though throughout *Iron John* he relies heavily on gendered distinctions and symbols of what Connell calls “true masculinity,” for defining a unique path that male identified people must take to achieve wholeness. Though *Fight Club* and *Iron John* are extremely problematic in their varying ideologies and impacts, I believe the intention of these texts is to create space for an alternative masculine identity and expression that is founded on the process of ritual self realization through reconnecting with primal forces and instincts in order to release the entity of self from its defined worth as commodity by capitalist consumerist society. *Fight Club* and *Iron John* urge us to reanalyze the systems and structures that are given to us as ‘fact,’ such as singular linear temporality, bigenderism, hierarchical economic and power structures, and class distinctions. Alternative masculinities, and other gender identities and expressions, perhaps, can arise once one undergoes some form of meaningful process and unbinds the self from hierarchical systems of thought and practice.

E. One True Path: Problems with *Fight Club’s* and *Iron John’s* Alternative

Though the ending of *Fight Club* is hopeful in the sense that we assume economic equilibrium is achieved, it also suggests the return to a primal, chaotic, and animalistic world where natal males are the dominant physical force and presence. Though capitalist consumerism
has done its part to hold feminine spectrum identities back\(^{31}\), it is the modern infrastructure that has allowed and enabled women to be more liberated from male dominated power structures by gaining economic, social, and political agency. This return to chaos also implies returning to the way things used to be, i.e. primal, violent, brutal, and natal male dominated. With economic collapse also comes social collapse and the work that oppressed peoples have done to ensure their basic human civil rights in the eyes of the historical oppressor: physically able-bodied, cisgendered, white, heterosexual males. Tyler’s mission for “economic equilibrium” is in a way a just cause, but his vision for this ‘new’ world is one that gives the power back to whom he deems to be the rightful heirs: members of Project Mayhem. His vision of the primal world, women doing unpaid labor, grinding the corn, though said in a comforting and calm way, churns the stomachs of feminists everywhere. *Fight Club* and *Iron John* only focus on white middle class men’s liberation and do not recognize how modern societal infrastructures have aided in the establishment of civil rights for other gendered, non-white, and marginalized identities.\(^{32}\)

Biological essentialism and bigenderism is at the root of *Fight Club* and *Iron John*’s ideological framework. Each text is vying for an alternative masculine identity. However, foundations in conventional western lexicon: patriarchy, bigenderism, dualism, biological essentialism, compulsory heterosexuality, and glorification of violent fighting and violent non-

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\(^{31}\) *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf (1991) thoroughly analyzes ways in which capitalist consumerist ideologies uses methods of social control, specifically creating an obsession with physical perfection to trap women economically and emotionally in an unending cycle of self-hatred and therefore spending money to live up to an impossible standard of beauty.

\(^{32}\) *Fight Club* refuses to recognize the ways in which women have been oppressed by capitalist consumerist systems. This is made evident in the scene where Jack and Tyler sell soap to a department store, claiming that they are “selling rich women their fat asses back to them” (Fincher 1:04:42). This places women as compliant with, rather than, fellow victims of capitalism.
emotionally centered sexuality renders this alternative extremely problematic and even misogynistic at times in expression. *Fight Club’s* exclusion and erasure of myriads of masculine identities and the different paths that one can take suggests that there is only one authentic alternative masculinity and only one path to get there: physical violence, pain, suffering, and separation from all things effeminate (at least, until the identity is stabilized). Not all men succeed in this quest to find the ‘true’ masculinity. For instance, Bob is not like the others, and neither is Jared Leto’s character ‘Angel Face.’ Bob is not “cut out of wood,” he is viewed as overly emotional, sensitive, and effete. Bob is welcomed into Project Mayhem even though he fails the test of staying on the doorstep for three days. This tells us that even though he has been feminized, he is still allowed to be a part of Project Mayhem. However, he becomes the ‘weak link,’ so to speak, and is shot in the head. ‘Angel Face’ is too beautiful, and perhaps getting too close to Jack/Tyler, suggesting latent homosexuality. Jack punches ‘Angel Face’ again and again even though he has “tapped out” and “gone limp” because Jack feels like “destroying something beautiful.” Both ‘Angel Face’ and Bob become “specters of failed masculinity” rather than specters of the ideal warrior.

*Fight Club and Iron John* also exclude growth that men can experience in relationships with women and children, limiting their scope of solidarity to the community of men. Victor Seidler’s book, *Man Enough: Embodying Masculinities* (1997) takes a critical approach to *Iron John*. He suggests that as men “learn to to give and receive within our relationships, we are not pretending to be women, but learning to be men” (Seidler 113). Jack refuses to connect with Marla in an emotional way, suggesting that this would make him weak or distract him from his mission of reclaiming his identity. It is only until the end of the film, when he has ‘found
himself’ that he allows vulnerability with Marla that suggests personal growth. Victor Seidler also advocates for restoring a sense of integrity of men’s emotional needs and suggests that a condition of industrialization and modernity is men’s exclusion from the home and subsequently their “emotions were estranged as having no part within the reformulation of masculinity” (119). In *Fight Club*, Jack connecting with his emotions was the beginning of searching deeper, but after his initial cry with Bob, the film quickly changes focus to violence as the more appropriate and more powerful outlet for men to connect with each other. This echoes Bly’s notion that a man getting in touch with his emotions is important, but not the most vital aspect of growth and reclamation of self. Seidler advocates instead that “emotions and feelings can be a source of meaning and direction” in men’s lives (119).

It is clear that Jack needs to experience something in order to reconnect with himself and the world around him. He needs to cross the threshold and enter into a space of transformation. First it is releasing emotion through crying, but it is releasing emotion through fighting that, in Bob’s words, “is so much better.” As fighting being the major aspect of Jack’s ritual of initiation, *Fight Club*’s glorification of violence is complex in its function. Pain and expressions of violence are how Jack is shaken up from his numbness. Despite that this is arguably crucial for Jack’s revival into reality, the film suggests that this is the only way and that all men need to experience this brutality in order to find an “enlightened” masculine identity. Seidler says that men try to avoid expressing emotions because “emotions so often reflect a lack of control” (133). Fighting, on the other hand is a way to feel powerful and take control of a situation through action even if it seems irrational or unnecessary. *Fight Club* elicits this illusion of a masculine identified person in complete control, able to defend and attack, physically sculpted through fighting (self-
destruction) rather than weight lifting (self-improvement). Its prescription for emotional turmoil is violence: when a man has a chance to fight, he doesn’t need to cry. This is not only a narrow viewpoint, but a dangerous one. Seidler says that men can become lost in a search for male initiation and ritual, unless the purpose is kept intact. It is important that this initiation or ritual isn’t conjured up to escape emotional work, but it should rather lead men to reconnecting with their intimate relationships (149). Jack reconnects with Marla and it is implied that he is ready for intimacy, but, if he has done the “emotional work” necessary to sustain a relationship with her it is unclear, and/or rendered invisible.

A “generation of men raised by women” who don’t know how to connect with their emotions and fight in basements of bars are perhaps regaining a sense of presence through pain, but are not doing anything to help the next generation of children have better fathers or parental figures.\(^{33}\) It is not through being “set apart” from culturally attributed feminine elements, guarding oneself from intimacy, and enduring pain that makes a masculine identity more complete or authentic. What is important to take away from *Fight Club* and *Iron John* is the idea that one must experience a departure from parental and societal expectations and beliefs in order to obtain space for something different.\(^{34}\) Ritual is a powerful way to tap into something higher, beyond the boundaries of the self and jump start transformations, but the initiation exalted in *Fight Club* is not going to be the ideal path for every masculine identified person. Each person needs to walk their own ritualistic or spiritual path to formulating and reformulating their unique

\(^{33}\) This is confirmed when Jack says that “when the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered” (Fincher 46:11).

\(^{34}\) James Marcia calls this the movement from a foreclosure subject (where the individual does not question their parents’ beliefs and values and takes them as their own) to identity moratorium (where the individual is actively in a “crisis” period) (Marcia 522).
identities, whatever that may be. *Fight Club*’s singular prescription for men to find a one ‘true’ masculine identity rather than create an individually defined gendered identity means that *Fight Club* fails to recognize diversity, multiplicity, and fluidity in identification.

III. Boys Don’t Cry: ‘Pass’ or Die

A. Mirrors, Fantasy, and Brandon’s ‘Fractured’ Self

“Identity is like an image of yourself that you want to move toward” (Noble, *Without Men*, 147)

The film opens with a time-lapse of a Nebraska highway at night. As cars speed by, we get a physical representation of temporality altered and condensed. It cuts to an out-of-focus image of red, blue, and white twinkling lights with the title *Boys Don’t Cry* in red appearing on the screen. The next shot is bright white headlights of two cars on the dark highway. One car swerves and then attempts to pass the other car. For a brief moment it cuts to black, then to a shot of Brandon’s eyes as he peers into the rear view mirror. We then see the car speed up and pass the other car. It cuts back to the image of Brandon’s eyes in the rear view mirror as he smiles. It then cuts to a shot of the road passing beneath the front bumper of the car. At 1:18 it cuts back to Brandon’s eyes as he looks out, then he catches his own reflection in the mirror and looks at himself. He victoriously smiles at his display of masculinity and looks upon his reflection with admiration.

This sequence of events exists in an altered time and space. We are unsure of where it fits in terms of the rest of the story. Is this Brandon stealing a car before the rest of the narrative takes place? Is this Brandon in an ethereal time and space of his dreams of being on the highway and traveling to Memphis? The opening title sequence of the film sets up important visual motifs: time-lapse photography as an altered and transcendent time/space, the image of the

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highway at night, white light as judgment and also heaven, Brandon’s gaze, and the mirror reflection as a fractured self. This sequence also sets up implications of masculinity as a display of dominant behaviors, such as passing another car on the highway as if in a race.

As mentioned previously, the search for and construction of a masculine identity is the thematic centerpiece for a variety of films that were released in 1999. *Boys Don’t Cry (BDC)* was both controversial and unique in the depiction of real life Brandon Teena, an AFAB, male identified person who was brutally raped and then murdered shortly after reporting the rape to Police authorities. Brandon’s murder in December of 1993 and Matthew Shepard’s torture and murder in October of 1998 sparked increased lobbying for laws to punish hate crimes committed against LGBTQI people. *BDC* depicts the events leading up to Brandon’s rape and murder, which entails his quest to be treated as one of the guys and form an intimate relationship with a young woman that he meets in Falls City, Lana Tisdel. In these various events, Brandon undergoes ritual initiations. He begins to establish himself as a male being with agency, but his efforts are cut short when his birth name is printed in the paper, and the men he has tried so hard
to be accepted by, Tom Nissen and John Lotter, find out that he was assigned female at birth and enact violence against him. Countless critical essays and articles have been written debating how the film depicts the events in relation to the real life events and also how the film locates and categorizes Brandon’s identity.

Brandon’s identity in the film and in real life is a point of contestation and debate, one that will never be quite solved because Brandon is not here in person to speak for and identify himself. That being said, in the world and language of the film, specific visual motifs and dialogue imply that Brandon cannot seamlessly be placed in the category of lesbian, but rather he complicates this identity through creating an elaborate fantasy for himself and others that he is a boy. The first piece of dialogue in the film is Brandon saying “short hair, shorter” and Lonny irritantly replies, “Shorter? That is short enough” (Pierce 1:40). Brandon then gets up and looks at himself in the mirror, fixing his hair. As a visual motif, Brandon’s hair represents his male or “boy” identity throughout the film. When walks up to meet Nicole at the Rollerskating Rink we hear her say that “a guy has to be sweet and have good hair” (3:46). Mirrors are used in conjunction with a character seeing themselves in terms of gender, gender conformity, and identification. The mirror shows both what Brandon is and is not (the reality of his body), but also, what he would like to be. Lana acts as Brandon’s double, or mirror, echoing him visually in various scenes. These two visual motifs (Brandon’s hair and mirrors) tells us that the film

35 This position is confirmed by remarks from the director. In an interview Pierce says that she is drawn to this story because she “fell in love with a girl who was living in a trailer park, who didn’t have much money, who didn’t have any role models, and yet who successfully transformed herself into a fantasy of a boy” (Pierce, “Brandon Goes to Hollywood” 45).

36 This idea is further examined in Jean Bobby Noble’s, *Masculinities Without Men?*, page 146: “Hairstyles in BDC, especially Brandon’s function to demarcate the space of boy relative to other masculinities.”
proposes that ‘authentic’ identity is inevitably rooted in the reality of the physical body and that sight is the revealer of this reality, and thus, who has the sight has the power to demarcate bodies and police identities in relationship to those bodies.

As Brandon looks at himself in the mirror, Lonny says, “That’s the scariest thing I’ve ever seen” implying the sock that Brandon has stuffed down his pants in order to create a visual and tactile “bulge” (2:01). This in addition to Brandon’s black cowboy hat and flannel shirt reveals to us how Brandon sees himself and also how he wants other people to see him. Lonny doesn’t see him the way he wants to be seen because Lonny knows that Brandon was assigned female at birth. This inaugurates the idea that the characters in the film will not truly see Brandon the way he wants to be seen if they know this about him. This sort of cowboy caricature and persona he tries on is an exploration of gender expression. He is trying to discover what sort of gendered expression/s makes him comfortable and feel like himself. From this introductory scene we can gather that the film visually implies that masculinity is performance based: Brandon has to look, act, and talk in a specific way in order to conform to what society thinks a male person should look, act, and talk like. However, the film emphasizes that it is certain ways in which Brandon is not the conventional hegemonic masculine ideal that is appealing to the women that Brandon dates, especially Lana. The film, I believe, attributes this to him being assigned female at birth and being socialized as female.

In terms of locating and categorizing Brandon’s identity, this is difficult, if not impossible to do. Many filmmakers who appropriate narratives or historical figures from real life or adapt them from literary sources tend to reinvent them in order to push a certain reading of the character or the story. What can be analyzed is only what is present in the text and intentions of
the filmmaker can be tentatively assessed. Brandon can first be read as a transsexual man attempting to pass as a cisgendered man. We can ascertain this reading through specific moments of dialogue. Brandon tells Lonny that he is “not a dyke” (Pierce 6:13). There is also talk between them about Brandon’s desire to physically transition, to get a sex change operation and/or undergo hormone therapy. Brandon expresses his desire to, but says that he will “be an old man by the time I get that kind of money” (Pierce 12:20). Because he rejects the categorization of lesbian, one could claim that he perhaps identifies as transgender, transsexual, or simply, a heterosexual man. We get the sense that if he had the resources, he might consider physically transitioning through hormone treatments and/or surgical procedures.

A transsexual man isn’t trying to be a man he already is man. The faulty logic of the concept of ‘passing’ is that one is that it means one still believes that the ‘truth’ is the physical body underneath the clothing and that the person is allowed admittance into a certain gender categorization only through forms of deception. If we read Brandon as transsexual, he isn’t trying to deceive anyone by expressing his male gender identity. He does deceive them by telling them other things about himself that are not true, like his age, that he has a child, that his sister is a model, and that he has travelled, to name a few. The deception that he tells about other aspects of his identity makes it seem as if his gender, too, is a deception. Perhaps rather than being a deception itself, it is a catalyst for the string of other lies. Brandon is attempting to stabilize a story of his past in order for his male identity to appear congruent to others, and also for his own identity formation. We view the image of him in “crisis” only when his male identity is questioned or forcibly stripped away. When he is able to express his male identity, his true nature emerges: he smiles, laughs, is caring and considerate, positive, and hopeful about the future.
Just like Jack in *Fight Club*, Brandon’s search for identity begins with claiming his name. This isn’t simple because his birth name that represents his past identity will not seem to go away. Within the first eight minutes of the film we get three names: Billy, Teena, and Brandon. At 7:30, after getting kicked out of his cousin Lonny’s apartment, we see Brandon sitting at a bar alone taking a shot and lighting up a cigarette. Candace is sitting to his right and she asks him if he has had a bad night. When he asks her name she says, “Candace… I hate it though, I’m thinking of changing it.” Brandon replies, “sometimes that helps.” He then states his name, “I’m Brandon” (7:40). To some viewers it might appear that he is a con artist as he has already revealed multiple conflicting, contradictory positions represented by his various names. Others might read him the way I read him: he is not putting on a disguise, he is not slipping in and out of “costume,” he is attempting to authentically express himself to others the way he sees himself.

Throughout the film Brandon is seen looking at himself in mirrors. The mirror fractures the image of him in two. The mirror as symbolic both represents the way things appear on the physical plane, that which is physical reality, but it also represents a process of self-evaluation of what we aspire to be and the actions we have taken or will take to achieve that desire. Lana is also seen looking at herself in mirrors. None of the other characters in the film are seen looking at themselves in mirrors and do not have this self-evaluative nature about them. Brandon and Lana are also the only ones in the film seen actively crying and expressing vulnerability. They are also the ones who see beyond what is physical and feel a transcendent, or fantastical, figurative principle. This is made apparent in the scenes where Brandon or Lana gaze outward and the sequential shot, a POV, is a time-lapse. This happens in an important scene near the end of the film.
After everyone finds out Brandon’s birth name is Teena, John enters Lana’s room and goes through Brandon’s belongings and finds his disembodied penis/dildo and a book entitled, “Cross Dressers and Transsexuals, The Uninvited Dilemma.” John immediately flips to a page where there are illustrations and details of female-to-male genital reconstruction surgeries. He says a slew of transphobic comments such as, “get this sick shit away from me” (1:16:21). This scene is intercut with Lana and Brandon bathed in white heavenly light, kissing in the back seat of a white 1950’s style Cadillac. When Lana and Brandon return, Lana goes inside first and finds her room disheveled and is cornered by her mother with questions about Brandon. Brandon enters the house and John greets him kindly but then turns and locks the door. John and Tom eventually demand that Brandon show his genitals to prove that he is a man. They grab him violently and Lana asks John if Brandon can show her and then she will tell them.

Lana then takes Brandon into her bedroom. Brandon unbuckles his pants and she stops him and says, “don’t show me anything, I know you’re a guy” (1:20:30). Halberstam, in his essay, “A Transgender Gaze in Boys Don’t Cry” (2001), notes that this scene “establishes the female gaze, Lana's gaze, as a willingness to see what is not there (a condition of all fantasy) but also as a refusal to privilege the literal over the figurative (Brandon's genitalia over Brandon's gender presentation)” (Halberstam, *Transgender Gaze*, 295). Halberstam believes that Lana’s gaze in this scene “makes possible an alternative vision of time, space and embodiment” (295). This scene establishes a stark difference between Lana’s female gaze and the male gaze of John and Tom. Lana wishes to transcend the literal, the physical as she says, “look how beautiful it is
out there” (Pierce 1:20:51). They both look and see the rural skyline that is shot in a time-lapse.

The camera tilts up and into the clouds as if their collective vision floats away from reality and into an eternal, infinite time and space. Visually, time is moving faster, but the audio is at normal speed. Time within the story is not moving; it is frozen, for a moment. Lana and Brandon’s gaze and their ability to peer into the mirror is a process of looking at what is physical, looking within, and also seeing beyond.37

It is right after this scene that the violent physical encounter continues to escalate. Lana and Brandon emerge from the bedroom where Lana pronounces to everyone that she has “seen him in full flesh” and that he is man (1:21:30). Her Mother, John, and Tom do not believe her. John and Tom brutally force Brandon into the bathroom where they strip off his pants and underwear. John drags Lana into the bathroom and tries to get her to “look” at her “little boyfriend,” but she refuses (1:23:09). Brandon dissociates and is fractured in two as he sees

37 This is an instance of Bergsonian Duration and an indication of ritual space where change and transformation are happening before our eyes, and as suggested in the film, the character’s eyes.
himself standing in the other room, bathed in the white light, staring back. The camera cuts to a 
POV of the ‘other’ Brandon and we see the ‘real’ Brandon in the bathroom held up by John and 
Tom, stripped of his pants. This echoes the fracturing of Brandon we see in the mirror, but taken 
to a more surrealistic and symbolic plane. This scene is reminiscent of the splitting of psyche and 
doubling that occurs in *Fight Club*. The Brandon that has been violently stripped, humiliated, 
and broken looks out and sees a Brandon who is clothed, safe, with masculine agency intact— 
everything he is not. This fracturing of self and doubling that occurs in this scene can be 
dissected further through a post-modernist lens.

Stuart Hall’s “The Question of Cultural Identity” (1992) speaks to the de-centered, 
postmodern subject using Lacan’s theories of identity formation to delineate this evolution. He 
proposes that since “identity is formed through unconscious processes over time,” that, “there is 
always something ‘imaginary’ or fantasized about its unity.” He says that this “lack of 
wholeness” is filled “from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by others.” 
This is why we continue to search for identity throughout lives, attempting to “knit together” our 
“divided selves” in order to “recapture this fantasized pleasure of fullness” (Hall 606). Brandon’s 
fantasy in this moment is his attempt to recapture a sense of fullness and his empowered 
masculine gaze that has now been forcibly taken from him. Following Hall’s logic, this split 
occurs when the others no longer see him or ‘imagine’ him with a natal male body and thus a 
male person (in their worldview). After this fracturing occurs, the characters and the film view 
Brandon differently. He then views himself differently. His subjectivity has now been de- 
centered and his identification divided between fantasy “boy” Brandon and reality “girl”

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Brandon. Noble suggests that “the dialogic split in Brandon between the imposed and (en)forced reality of his body competes and wins over the fantasy of his identity as a boy.” Noble then claims that “from this moment on, his lack of penis and his rape over determine him as female, allowing the viewer, like the other characters in the film to read him this way” (Noble, Without Men, 156-157).

The temporal structure of the film also changes after this scene and events are non-sequential. At 1:23:55, the film jumps from a close up of Lana beginning to cry in the bathroom to Lana as she sits in the Police department after reporting Brandon’s rape. It then cuts to Brandon sitting with Police officers as they ask him questions about the events of that night. It cuts back to the past and we see Brandon leaving Lana’s house after his visual and symbolic castration has just occurred in the bathroom. John and Tom jump him, wrestle him to the ground and force him into the car. This is intercut with insensitive questions by the misogynistic Police officer, Sheriff Laux. John and Tom proceed to take him out to a deserted industrial district, beat him up, and then rape him. The detailing of the violence and sexually explicit questions by Sheriff Laux force Brandon to relive the events that happened to him. Brandon remains stoic and doesn’t cry throughout the entire scene where he is being raped and immediately afterward when he is in the car with John and Tom. The first time in the film we see Brandon cry is when the officer asks, “where’d they try to pop it in first?” and Brandon mumbles “my vagina” as his body

Halberstam further analyzes this scene in terms of the transgender gaze. She dissects how Brandon’s gaze changes from an empowered transgender gaze to a disempowered female gaze (Halberstam, Transgender Gaze, 297).

Example: “Wouldn’t it catch your attention somehow that he wouldn’t put his hand in your pants and play with you a little bit” (Pierce 1:25:46)?

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begins to tremble and shake and tears well up in his eyes (Pierce 1:27:59). We see the first tear fall as he remembers his rape examination by a nurse.

This scene shows how it is not just the events of the rape that bring tears to Brandon’s eyes, but the retelling of the rape and the words that Brandon has to use to answer the specific questions that Sheriff Laux is asking him. Various times in the film he doesn't answer to his birth name. He tells Lana that he is a “hermaphrodite” rather than telling her he was assigned female at birth. He avoids using any language to describe his body. Now he is forced to use language to describe his body and the assault. He has to try to explain himself to Sheriff Laux by saying he has a “sexual identity crisis.” Similar to Fight Club, the institution of the police in BDC symbolizes white hegemonic masculinity and power gone wrong. It is in this scene where Brandon is further divided from his male subjectivity and read as a female rape victim by the 

Pierce used transcripts of the actual, real-life questions to construct the dialogue in the interrogation scene with Brandon and Sheriff Laux. Brandon has to use psychological terminology to try to legitimize his gender identity to the authorities, i.e. white hegemonic masculine Police officers.
authorities. His crying parallels the continued feminization that he faces as he descends the hierarchical ladder of white male power and privilege and becomes the “undesirable”: female. He is figuratively and literally being stripped down for the audience’s spectatorship. Brandon is vulnerable in this scene. He is also strengthened and humanized in his vulnerability.

Parallel editing in this scene shows Brandon crying in the interrogation room while remembering John and Tom enact violence upon him. This sets Brandon’s masculine identity in parallel to John and Tom’s in order to highlight specific differences. Brandon allows himself to be vulnerable, to express intense emotions through crying. John and Tom do not allow themselves to be vulnerable, but instead, express their intense emotions through violence, aggression, dominance, self-inflicted pain, and animalistic behaviors such as jumping up and down and screaming. At 1:36:45 we get the sense of John and Tom’s cowardice and fear as they try to lie and deny assaulting Brandon to Lana’s mom. This shows us one way in which Brandon’s masculine identity could be viewed as an alternative in relation to the other masculine identified characters, specifically John and Tom. Brandon is capable of connecting with emotions in a way that John and Tom are not. Ultimately though, this scene tells us that despite Brandon’s strength through vulnerability, crying is not the path to reclaiming his manhood like in Fight Club, but rather, it is the opposite: another wrung in the ladder of his descent and loss of his “boy” identity.

B. John Lotter’s Prescription: Violence to Set Things Straight

“Men cloak the lack with violence” (West, “Radicalia Feminista” 81).

Violence in BDC is a very different representation of violence than in Fight Club, and the pain and suffering that Brandon endures is not glorified or exalted as a descending path to the
awakening of a true masculinity, but rather as a descending path to the annihilation of it. Jean
Bobby Noble in *Masculinities Without Men?*, suggests that both Brandon as a subject and
Pierce’s film are “situated discursively within No Man’s Land, where “authentic” masculinity is
under dispute and where the supposedly self-evident relation between male subjectivity,
physicality, and power is contested” (Noble, *Without Men*, 145). For this reason, the “specter of
failed masculinity” becomes infinitely more complex. Brandon is the protagonist whom
audiences identify and/or empathize with, and though he becomes, through being raped, the
“specter of failed masculinity,” and re-situated as female, the film also positions the two
perpetrators, Tom Nissen and John Lotter, and the masculine identity they represent as the more
extensive and problematic tableau of failure.

John Lotter’s character is enacted as such that we can see the proverbial lava shifting
underneath the surface before the violent eruption. Pierce gives John a motive and a clear causal
path, not to condone John’s behavior or actions, but to show that the root of his violence is a
combination of ignorance, fear, and jealously mixed with his hyper-masculine attributes of
possessiveness, aggression, and displays of dominance. The audience can see John’s void, his
lack, and his inability to be vulnerable, caring, or to empathize with others. We learn that John
has been abandoned by his biological family, is an ex-convict, and has relocated his familial ties
to Lana and Lana’s mom. John is also marginalized through his low-class economic standing. He
is never seen at work or talking about having a job. Despite his lack of contributing financially,
he sees himself as the man of the house and is possessive over Lana, her mom, their affections,
and familial affiliation. At Brandon’s birthday party John says “I can’t think of a better guy to
give Lana to than you,” as if he possesses her, and then he says, “you got to remember little man

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that this is my house” (Pierce 1:05:03). He has laid claim to both Lana and the family’s house and feels threatened and jealous by Brandon’s presence.

The next scene is of John watching Lana at the factory where she works. This mirrors the scene in which Brandon watches her and takes a picture of her with the Polaroid camera. Unlike Brandon’s smiling face of innocent admiration, John’s face is void of emotion as he drags deeply on a cigarette. Ominous music fades in. John’s gaze is different than Brandon’s. John’s gaze is lacking potency in the sense that John and Lana do not connect or make eye contact, they do not see each other literally or on a deeper emotional level. John is watching Lana but then he closes his eyes. Lana then sees John outside the window, but John does not see her looking at him. This is one of their many missed connections. John wants so badly for Lana to see him the way that she sees Brandon, but he does not see her the way that Brandon sees her. This is perhaps why it is John who attempts to force Lana to see Brandon’s genitalia, because John is trying to regain his own power by exposing and demarcating Brandon’s body as impotent, castrated, a site of
lack. It is really John that is lacking in a deep emotional sense and feels his masculinity is threatened. He is attempting to mask this with violence and pointing out Brandon’s lack of conventional male genitalia. This is how John attempts to strip away Brandon’s potent male gaze and subjectivity by rendering him an object. Unfortunately, in BDC, he succeeds.

In the chapter “The Body, Or The Mass Grave of Signs,” in the book Symbolic Exchange and Death, Jean Baudrillard says that “the entire contemporary history of the body is the history of its demarcation, the network of marks and signs that have… annihilated its difference … in order to organize it into a structural material for sign-exchange, equal to the sphere of objects” (Baudrillard 101). This echoes Noble’s stance that “self” is the hottest and most insidious capitalist commodity (Noble, Sons, 77) and that the body is demarcated in order to give it a set value as if it were a marketable product. Brandon’s body marks him in a specific way, a site of castration and of lack. Monick argues that the loss of physical and/or symbolic masculinity through castration is “the loss of what is essential for manhood” and that it is “impossible to know maleness apart from the phallos” (Monick 17). Similarly Baudrillard states that the natal male body, unlike the natal female body “can never really become a smooth, closed, and perfect object since it is stamped with the ‘true’ mark (the one the general system valorizes) and in consequence is less susceptible to demarcation” (Baudrillard 104). He then proposes that natal female bodies, “when annexed to a phallic order, which when expressed in political terms, condemns that subject to non-existence” (104).

Once Brandon is outed and his body and genitals are seen by John and Tom, he is linguistically and symbolically stripped of agency and reduced to an object, called “it,” and is no
longer valued or respected as a human being by them.\(^{41}\) The phallos as symbol of maleness is all-pervasive and Monick takes it so far as to say that for a natal male person, it is “the means of the soul, soul-bearing, soul-ownership” (Monick 18). If this logic is taken, Brandon, not stamped with the ‘true’ mark is more easily made into an object by John and Tom who see him as not having a “soul” and they assert their dominance, rape him, and then take away his existence entirely. The system of symbolically and physically marking bodies happens on all levels of society, from the moment a child emerges from the womb to the moment that they die.\(^{42}\) Physical primary and secondary sex characteristics are viewed as the determinate of ‘truth’ in relation to the body that possesses them. Thus the violent acts committed against Brandon’s body are “justified” because of his fantastical “lie.” John refuses responsibility by saying, “you know you brought this on yourself Teena” (Pierce 1:26:57).

In Green’s memoir, *Becoming a Visible Man*, he asks a group of students what they would think if they saw a very beautiful conventionally feminine woman pick up a park bench and intimidate them with a deep growling voice. One student responds, “She’s really a man.” Green thinks it is interesting that the first conclusion is that there is some form of deception going on. He says that “we make assumptions based on what we observe” in accordance to what we deem real or possible and when we discover that our observations were incorrect according to a subjective system of gender categorization, “we react with shock, horror, shame, anger, [and] embarrassment” rather than modifying our categories (Green 5). This idea of deception and

\(^{41}\) Lana’s mom after finding out Brandon was AFAB, says “I don’t want it in my house” (Pierce 1:31:43).

\(^{42}\) Bodies are also marked by race and ethnicity, physical disabilities, deformities, and/or physical differences.
passing is central to *BDC* and understanding Brandon’s character in relationship to his masculine identity and to the other characters. Green notes that when some people don’t know how to classify someone in terms of gender they become uncomfortable, irritated, and even hostile. He suggests that this could be because it threatens the observers’ sense of confidence in their own gender (6). I believe that AFAB trans masculine identified people threaten the biological essentialist worldview that having a stereotypical conventional-looking penis makes you man and *not* having a stereotypical conventional-looking penis makes you a woman. Brandon’s presence as a self-identified man, lacking a physical phallos, creates a threat to the marked distinction of maleness as a subject who is supposed to have the “‘true’ mark.”

Green teaches the students in his seminar that “like sex, gender is also more than one thing… It’s one’s deeply felt sense of self” (Green 7). He proposes, “gender identity- the sense of self- is stronger than the body, and will find a way to manifest itself” (8). Brandon’s internal need to identify and express himself outwardly as male, despite facing turmoil and violence is a testament to this. Gender variant people are at a high risk for hate crime violence, specifically transgender women of color who make up 45% of LGBTQI hate crime murders\(^43\) (Dixon, Jindasurat). This tells us that an intersection of race and LGBTQI identity, specifically a transgender or a gender non-conforming identity or expression exposes a person to a higher level of violence. This, however does not stop trans* and gender non-conforming people from outwardly manifesting their internal sense of self. This alone shows the power of a person’s need to move toward integration, to attempt to reconcile the fracture they feel between the person they see themselves to be and the person that others see them to be. By categorizing physical genitalia

\(^{43}\) This statistic is data from the 2011 NCAVP Hate Violence Report.
and claiming it as absolute truth in terms of gender/sex, we further expose trans* people to violence by asserting that their gender/sex is a fallacy or a fantasy.

John is scared to reveal Brandon’s genitalia and screams, “what the fuck are you” (Pierce 1:22:34)? When Tom inspects Brandon’s genitals he says, “it don’t look like no sexual identity crisis to me” (1:22:46). John and Tom are only interested in empirical knowledge, what things look like, as if Brandon having some form of genital reconstruction surgery would make his “crisis” valid and tangible. Again, BDC is about sight and the way things appear as the ultimate dictation of reality. If Brandon had started hormone treatments and/or gotten some form of surgical procedure/s that marked his body I wonder how this scene would have changed. HRT or surgery does not and should not make a trans* person more valid in their identity, but I believe this film and the characters within it take that stance. Because Brandon’s body is seen and demarcated as female, his identity as male and his assertion that he has a “sexual identity crisis” is deemed invalid. Despite this, Brandon still rouses what “male” appears to signify through this forced exposure of his body and also through his ability to see, understand, and respect female subjectivity through connecting with Lana’s gaze.

When John and Tom storm into Candace’s house they seize Brandon and Candace. John grabs Brandon by the collar and pushes him up against the wall and gets up close to his face. It cuts to an extreme close up of their faces. In this image, it almost looks like John is about to kiss Brandon. This could be an instance of latent sexuality (which may or may not be perceived as homoerotic) between Brandon and John. Brandon tries to reason with John and John, trembling, yells “shut up!” (1:48:38). John has the phallic power of a loaded gun and he points it at Brandon. Lana comes through the front door and John, startled, quickly turns and points it at her.
Then he observes the way that Brandon and Lana look at one another. Lana says to Brandon, “Why didn’t you leave? We can still do it” (1:49:14). This line invokes Lana and Brandon’s dream/fantasy of going on the highway to Memphis, of leaving Falls City, and of transcending the literal and the physical to a time and space beyond the boundaries of bodies and of the self.

In this scene both Brandon and Lana are again bathed in the white light as they look at one another. John looks at Brandon and then to Lana and sees their intimacy. His inability to break their gaze with one another even as he is pointing his gun (his latent desire) infuriates him and he turns and shoots Brandon in the head. This suggests that John’s fear (transphobia and homophobia) as well as his sexual/romantic desire for Lana (and perhaps for Brandon) can only be expressed through violence and annihilation of that which frightens him: Brandon’s gender/sexual identity/difference. He lets that which he sees as his heteronormative desire: Lana, live. The trans* and/or homoerotic threat is contained via death at the hands of the authority that
represents order and stability: John and the police who refuse to arrest him. Unlike the Narrator, Jack, in *Fight Club*, the gunshot to Brandon’s face is lethal and he falls down dead. The hyper-masculine initiator, John, doesn’t disappear the way that Tyler does. In *BDC* physical violence is the stark reality to set things *straight*, whereas Brandon’s male identity is placed in and remains within the realm of dream/fantasy and not fully actualized, articulated, or allowed continued agency. The only way that Brandon can transcend the reality of his perceived female body is through death.

C. An Empowered Trans* Subject? Dream On: Problems with *Boys Don’t Cry*’s Alternative

“You are not a boy! That is what went wrong! You are not a boy!” (Pierce 5:58)

Brandon in *BDC*, like Jack in *Fight Club*, follows the masculine sequence outlined in Bly’s *Iron John*. He follows the path of wounding and growth, yet unlike Jack, Brandon receives severe wounding, but is denied growth and authenticity in his male identity. The two films even begin similarly with Brandon’s first brawl in a bar echoing Jack’s first fight outside a bar with himself as Tyler. They even get a similar looking wound on their upper cheekbone. Brandon goes through tests and trials such as “mud skiing” where he tries to do what he thinks “guys do” in Falls City. Through John’s influence he tries to out-race the highway patrol car and fails and then is told by the officer that he was close to the edge of a hundred foot cliff. He faces the vision of death just like when Tyler convinces Jack to let go of the wheel of the car and drive off of a ravine. All of these trials and tribulations are driven by his love interest, Lana, who stands in a similar position to Marla: a dark/troubled female subject with agency, power, and a sense of wholeness in identity.
However the similarities add up, the endings of these films are quite opposite and it is for a specific reason. Jack is able to take the phallic power from Tyler and then shoots himself in the face and kills the hyper-masculine initiator, thus achieving a pseudo-happy ending where he is given the chance for healing and growth. Brandon is not able to take the phallic power back from John, his hyper-masculine initiator because Brandon has been successfully castrated through the gaze of both characters in the film, the audience, and Brandon himself. It is specifically because Brandon’s physical body does not hold the “true mark” that he is denied access to achieving an authentic empowered masculine identity. This is not because the film is attempting to be true to real life events, but because of Pierce’s personal position that Brandon is really a girl with the illusion of being a boy (Pierce, “Brandon Goes to Hollywood,” 44). There is also a underlying drive to create a lesbian dynamic between Brandon and Lana, and as Noble suggests, “attempt to construct Lana as femme” (Noble, Without Men, 157). This is made known in one of the final scenes of BDC: the second time Brandon and Lana make love.

The intimacy and sexual dynamic between Lana and Brandon in the white barn is completely altered from what it was in the first sex scene where Brandon is positioned as “male” and pleasures Lana using his supposed penis, or as Noble says, the “simulacra” of one (156). In the white barn Brandon is lying on a couch, bathed in the white light. Lana walks in. She asks him he needs anything. He doesn’t answer and she begins softly stroking his hair and his face. Then she says, “you’re so pretty” (Pierce 1:39:38) instead of “you’re so handsome” (59:42).

44 a conventional-looking penis and testicles

45 Even if following the story line to portray the real-life events in a “accurate” way, Pierce could have kept Brandon’s male identity and male gaze intact rather than fracturing it and depicting him as “female” in the final sequences of the film.
Brandon doesn’t look at her and starts to cry, but he doesn’t object to her phrasing, instead he says “you’re just saying that cause you like me” (1:39:47). Lana holds him and kisses the top of his head while he cries. She asks what he was like, if he used to be like her, like a “girl, girl.” He says that he was a long time ago and then he guesses he became like a “boy, girl” and then he was “just a jerk” (1:40:31). In this singular sentence Brandon changes his position from heterosexual boy, or “not a dyke” to a “boy, girl.” Brandon then confesses to all the things that he lied or elaborated on and Lana leans in to kiss him. It is now Lana who makes the move on Brandon and takes his jacket off, and eventually, his shirt. Then she says, “I don’t know if I’m going to know how to do it,” implying that she doesn’t know how to make love to him as a woman (1:41:50). They then agree that Brandon’s initiatory path to manhood was “weird” and just like that, throw it to the wayside (1:41:56).

Both Halberstam and Noble closely interpret this scene in their respective analyses. They both come up with a similar conclusion: Pierce sacrifices Brandon’s transgender male identity in favor of a lesbian identity. Noble says that both subjects, Lana and Brandon “become their gender rather than transcend it” (Noble, Without Men, 152). Because the film takes a biological essentialist stance and reads Brandon’s ‘true’ gender as female and lesbian, Halberstam states that BDC “falls short of the alternative vision that was articulated so powerfully and shared so beautifully by Brandon and Lana in Lana’s bedroom” (Halberstam, “Transgender Gaze,” 298). In this second lovemaking scene, Brandon and Lana do not go to the ritual space of the figurative, but rather adopt identities in a specific kind of reality. In this reality imposed by biological essentialist ideology, Brandon’s natal female body forces us to read him as female. Unfortunately this ‘reality’ trumps both the fantasy of Brandon’s boy/male identification and the possible reality
that Brandon’s boy/male identification is not a fantasy and perhaps he is a man who was assigned female at birth.

In this ‘reality’ that the film imposes, where Brandon’s path to manhood is articulated as “weird,” rather than “authentic,” the alternative masculinity becomes one that specifically asserts itself as “female masculinity,” rather than one that asserts itself as “male masculinity” or one that eclipses categorization. This is problematic especially because the heterosexual male masculine identity that Brandon works so hard to achieve puts himself in the throes of violence and death for is, in the end, so easily disavowed. His crying, then, does not position him as an alternative masculine subject with agency and power, but an alternative masculine subject who has become the “specter of failure,” not because he cries, not because he was castrated, and not because he was raped, but because he forfeits his sense of agency and identification as male altogether. Noble suggests this is to position Lana as a femme: a “lesbian” or “queer” subject.

Though problematic, it is also interesting in terms of Brandon’s identification shifting and his embodiment of not quite male nor quite female. Though the film suggests that Brandon forfeits his identification of maleness and his male gaze, which is demonstrated when he burns the polaroid photographs that he has taken of Lana and of others during his stay in Falls City, he doesn’t quite embrace an identity of femaleness either. The vocalization that he is a “boy, girl” is the only thing we get in terms of classification of identity, which in itself is not much to go by. Noble says, “the space of identity is one site where power/knowledge regimes work” (Noble, *Without Men*, 151). *BDC* has the potential to fully “destabilize masculinity” by locating Brandon somewhere in-between male and female, to be “a site of unknowing,” somewhere completely different altogether, and/or “to create something new” (151). *BDC* fails this potential by forcing
Brandon “back into an economy where the penis is the ground of identity” (152). It does, however, give viewers a glimpse outside of the binary.

By positioning Lana as the new subject of the film, the ending attempts to be happy, or at least hopeful for the future. Lana, as Brandon’s mirror or double, is seen driving on the highway like Brandon in the opening title sequence. The song that Lana sings karaoke to earlier in the film, “The Bluest Eyes in Texas,” by Restless Heart is playing. The lyrics say, “like the stars that fill the midnight sky, her memory fills my mind.” When Lana was singing this song in the bar, it was interpreted through Brandon’s subjectivity and gaze, suggesting Lana as the girl in the song, the one with the “haunting blue eyes,” but now, Lana is the subject, and the song makes us think of Brandon as her. It is suggested that Brandon and Lana meet out there on the highway, in the beyond, and in a sense, Brandon is the sacrificial lamb for Lana’s newfound sense of self and empowered “queer” identity. We see Lana through the car window, the highway reflecting onto

Lana driving out on the highway, transcending time and space (Pierce 1:52:48).
her face, but rather than a fractured view of her in the rear window, she is center frame and complete as her lips slowly perk into a smile.

Along with the switching of Brandon’s potential empowered trans masculine identity in favor of a disempowered lesbian, butch, or female masculine identity, Pierce completely fails to depict Phillip DeVine’s murder or even mention his name in the ending credits.\(^{46}\) Phillip was a young black man who was dating Lana’s older sister and was murdered along with Brandon and Lisa Lambert (Candace). Noble suggests that this is “yet another articulation of white supremacy where one identity (gender) trumps another (race) to leave whiteness invisible and naturalized” (153). If Pierce had employed a “multi-accentuated dialogic lens” she could have depicted both a black man dating a white woman and a white trans-sexual man dating a white working-class girl as “others” challenging the unquestioned, “naturalized” power of white heterosexual hegemonic masculinity (153). A double erasure of trans masculine identity and black masculine identity occurs. Questions arise around how and why BDC fails to take an appropriate critical stance toward systems of white heteronormative understandings of race, gender, sex, and bodies.

Both of these potential alternative masculine identities are subject to abjection. They are cast out of the film in favor of a more coherent, normalized classification of bodies. Because they loose evidence of their subjectivity, they experience furthered marginalization and this champions them as symbols of masculine ambiguity and the panic that arises when bodies resist systemic categorization. Through erasure, Brandon’s and Philip’s bodies and identities become

\(^{46}\) This is not to say that a butch, lesbian, or female masculinity cannot be empowered, it is that in the film, Brandon doesn’t embrace this identity, but rather is forced into this category which renders this placement disempowering and problematic to his subjectivity.
evidence for Pierce’s failure to recognize the opportunity for further rupturing the unquestioned “naturalized” power positions held by John and Tom. The erasure of Philip’s body serves to obscure the veracity that race proliferates in its own accord and intersects with other factors to compound marginalization and threaten a white masculinity that responds to abjection with rage. These exclusions seem counteractive and contradictory to Pierce’s destabilization of white heterosexual masculinity, as she depicts many of the men with this identification as predatory, abusive, aggressive, and ignorant.

One potential, abeyant reason that Brandon’s trans masculine body and identity is altered is because it threatens the quest to normalize homosexual desire. In Just Add Hormones, Matt Kailey notes his experience with LGBTQ groups in the 1990’s and how “many in the gay and lesbian community have rejected transpeople in the larger scheme of things, arguing that “weird” and “crazy” transpeople will destroy the credibility of the mainstream GLB movement” (Kailey 93). Because Brandon’s body in BDC is depicted and acted upon as female after being revealed, rather than remaining enigmatic, the audience can rest assured that his body, and thus Lana’s identity is classifiable and solidified as lesbian and femme. This suggests that John and Tom’s rage can be attributed to both transphobia and homophobia, which is suggested in the line at 1:47:31 when John, Tom, and Lana are on the way to Candace’s house to shoot Brandon and John says to Lana, “we’re just taking a care of a couple of things,” and then asks her, “are you one of them” (Pierce 1:47:31)?

Completely categorizing Brandon’s body, identity, and gaze as female, rather than having one or all of these remain ambiguous, does exactly the opposite of what the fantastical time-lapse POVs seen throughout the film suggests: that there is something beyond and/or outside of the
physical, literal, biologically sexed self. One kind of seeing: the time-lapse POV isn’t logical or accurate, yet another kind of seeing: people’s natal sexed bodies, is taken as empirical truth. Since there is both a willingness for fantasy, “to see what is not there,” and a reluctance to see racial difference or to see beyond the binary classification of sex/gender, one can only think that devices were employed by Pierce to direct the audience’s gaze to something specific. Whether or not this is to highlight gender variance within homosexuality, create a sense of homosexual desire, and shift Lana’s identity to the focal point, one thing is determined: BDC loses out on chance to display multifaceted alternative masculine identities.

_BDC_ does however provide a representation of gender variance, a type of masculinity that is separated from the category of “men.” Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998) specifically offers a historical taxonomy of female masculinities, separating masculine identity from its association with specifically male bodies. This creates space for masculine identifications to be critically analyzed outside of “patriarchal constructions of men” (Wiegman 51). Pierce’s representation of white masculinity performed by natal male bodies in _BDC_ with characters such as John and Tom; and scenes with side characters, such as the man in the bar that Brandon fights and the man in the convenience store who tries to get Lana to drink with him; serve to juxtapose Brandon’s masculine identity and differentiate it from these “patriarchal constructions.” What I find particularly interesting is that Brandon’s movement to female both creates a depiction of masculinity in the vein of Halberstam’s work, one that is separate from men; but in doing this is, it simultaneously distances the possibility of an alternative masculinity existing through and in the categorization of men, male, or third gendered. If Brandon’s identity had remained male, his body too could have been designated as male, or resisted categorization,
thus providing audiences with a glimpse into the possibilities that bodies, like identities are fluid, changing, and have multiple, rather than two demarcations of sex or gender. It could have offered the transcendent vision that people are not only defined by how they physically appear.

Despite its complex problematic representations of a transgender masculine identity and complete erasure of a black masculine identity, *BDC* is an important film that opened up possibilities for more films to explore issues related to gender variance and gender variant people. *BDC*, along with the documentary film, *The Brandon Teena Story* (Muska and Olafsdottir 1998), created more awareness for the real-life events surrounding Brandon Teena’s rape and murder, Philip DeVine’s murder, and Lisa Lambert’s murder. Furthermore, much needed attention was brought to the veracity of transphobic and psychopathic transgendered representations in cinema. As trans* visibility increased, so too were critical conversations about gender identity and gender variant people happening in all forms of media and in the public and private spheres at large. *BDC* aided in these conversations, as well as sparked discussions about the border wars between butch lesbian identities and trans-masculine (FTM) identities. Mainstream cinema’s spectators had never seen anything like *BDC* and its positive critical reception was an important cornerstone in Hollywood’s opening up to more narratives about LGBTQI issues and peoples.

IV. Conclusion: Alternative Trajectories

A. 1999: The Turn of the Millennia and the Films that Followed

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*Fight Club* and *Boys Don’t Cry* can tell us significant things about masculine identity formation, and what was happening at this historical moment. Both films deal with ideas of initiation and ritual as fundamental participatory acts for the protagonists to lay claim to masculine identities. Both films investigate the fracturing and de-centering of self and the idea that one is never complete. Both films contain a vision of violence but with very different messages. *Fight Club*’s vision is one that glorifies specific acts of violence as a way to awaken the “wild man” and establish community with other men. *BDC*’s vision is one that exposes how white heterosexual masculinity is despotic in its phobic rage and policing of bodies that results in acts of atrocity. Where Jack’s experience of violence in *Fight Club* gives him agency, Brandon’s experience of violence in *BDC* reprehends it. Both films deal with physical and symbolic castration and threats of castration as means of taking away masculine agency, and with *BDC*, stripping away Brandon’s categorization of “male” altogether. Both films present masculine characters experiencing emotional release through crying and complicate the “specter of failed masculinity” by having them not fit neatly into stereotypical delineations. For Jack in *Fight Club*, emotional release through crying is the initial act that helps him start his journey to reclamation of his identity. For Brandon, crying situates his masculinity apart from John and Tom’s, humanizes him and allows the audience to empathize with him, making his character stronger. Both *Fight Club* and *BDC* give clear examples of alternative masculine identities, yet they are under developed. Despite the problematic ideological derivations of these alternatives, these two films along with other films produced in 1999 opened doorways for more films and other forms of media to explore these important themes and topics.
Films such as *Magnolia* (Anderson 1999) and *Memento* (Nolan 2000) take a postmodern and surrealist approach to masculinity, providing multiple contexts that break logic, order, and unified subjectivity. *Magnolia* provides multiple narratives that run parallel to each other, that fit together, but the viewer is not sure how. A main thread of the narratives is the various failures of all of the masculine identified characters who are trying to fit into society’s mold of what men “should be.” The film’s hyper-masculine misogynist, Frank T.J. Mackey (Tom Cruise), is masking his sadness, insecurities, and feelings of betrayal from his father who left him to take care of his mother who was dying from cancer. Upon first introduction he comes across as an aggressive and angry person who has a domineering, possessive, and objectifying attitude toward women. As the film progresses, we find out the root of his anger and aggression and in one landmark scene in the film, he experiences catharsis. He yells and releases the pent up anger at his dying father who left him to take care of his mother as she died of cancer. He then breaks down and weeps. His crying in this scene forces viewers to question if hyper masculinity is an authentic display of emotional strength or if it is a persona that is masking deeper feelings of loss.
and lack. This is just one narrative among others in the film that reveals the soft underbelly of the rigid hyper masculine figure. The masculine characters in *Magnolia* try to appear complete and perfect, but internally they are broken and emotionally struggling.

Similarly, *Memento*’s protagonist, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pierce) is the image of an ideal hegemonic masculine subject: cisgendered, young, white, heterosexual, and able-bodied with a sculpted and muscular physique. The only problem is that he suffers short-term memory loss because he took a blow to the head from his wife’s attacker who raped and murdered her. He is seeking revenge, to regain his masculine subjectivity by finding and killing his wife’s attacker. He thinks that he is on the trail of the attacker, just one step behind, but is never quite sure because for him, temporality is no longer linear and unified. He is no longer able to feel time passing. He tries to logically and methodically put together clues, but he never quite gets anywhere. The temporality of the film itself is jumbled and non-linear, giving the viewer the experience of what it must like to be Leonard. He can never put himself together. These two films among others produced in 1999 signify this fracturing of masculine subjectivity and point to the flaws and dangers of idealized media representations of unified, stoic, and impenetrable hyper masculinity. Since films at the turn of the millennia were breaking down stereotypes and revealing incompleteness in masculine subjectivity, this left space for re-envisioning other kinds of embodiments of gender.

It is vital to have representations of alternative masculinities in mainstream cinema and transmit a variety of paths to shaping such identities. In her essay, “Unmaking: Men And Masculinity In Feminist Theory,” Robyn Wiegman recognizes the importance of alternative representations and suggests that there is a next step. She makes an important point about
poststructuralist gender theory and feminist work in the 1990s. She says that “by de-emphasizing the normative relationship between men and masculinity” we are able to not only seek “alternative masculinities for men, but a broad re-articulation of masculinity as a production of gender, distinct form, if not in contradiction with, so-called male bodies.” This is how, she proposes, the critical work done through the 1990s has “transformed the content, scope, and political project of masculinity as a domain of critical inquiry” (Weigman 51). It is important to note her movement from placing emphasis on particular embodiments of alternative masculinities and widening the scope to the “broad re-articulation of masculinity as a production.” This was the goal of many poststructuralist feminists in the 90’s, but it was not quite achieved. I would agree with Weigman, that the 90s was a time of transformation, and, I would also add an addendum. By peering through a contemporary lens and reflecting back in time, one can see that there was an initial opening up to gender identity fluidity at the turn of the millennia, and then, there was an inevitable backlash and reconfiguration of white hegemonic masculinity as the normative, invisible, and dominant identity. The last sixteen years have been an uphill climb to continue a “critical inquiry” into masculinity and its practices.

Post 9/11 American cinematic representations of maleness and masculinity unfortunately took a dive back into hyper masculine, homophobic, transphobic, machismo, and misogynistic caricatures. This can be witnessed in the popularization of films that adapted comic book and graphic novels, “superhero” films, such as Spider-Man (Raimi 2001), Daredevil (Johnson 2003), The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (Norrington 2003), Hulk (Lee 2003), and Iron Man (2008) to name only a handful. Other films such as Forgetting Sarah Marshall (2008) and Hot Tub Time Machine (Pink 2010) take after Back to the Future (Zemeckis 1985) by pushing the
notion that specific male identified characters need to be “re-masculinized” in order to have a better life and better relationships. A lot of “romantic comedy” films like Knocked Up (Apatow 2007), Superbad (Motolla 2007), and Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World (Wright 2010) display eccentric, often “dorky,” or traditionally effeminate masculine identified characters who succeed in “getting the girl” through other means besides stoicism, good looks, and machismo antics. This is both interesting in terms of alternative masculinities and complicating the “specter of failed masculinity” through identification, but also problematic because of the ways in which the eccentric masculine characters must prove themselves in one way or another to the more conventionally attractive and machismo men in order to win over the interest of the woman they desire. These films show yet another articulation of the power and privilege of white masculinity being entitled to whatever it so desires. All of these films are attempting to fill in the cracks from whatever “fracturing” and “de-centering” that was done to white masculinity at the end of the 90s. The “crisis of masculinity” was yet again met with mainstream cinema pushing stereotypical representations of hyper masculine identities for the next generation.

B. Alternative Identities in Contemporary Narrative Cinema, Television, and Documentary Film

In comparison, there are some Hollywood films, as well as Independently produced American films, and International films that have provided differing takes on masculinity and sparked more “critical inquiry” and discussion of, as well as, embodiments of alternative masculinities since 1999. Films such as Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Mitchell 2000), Me and You and Everyone We Know (July 2005), Brokeback Mountain (Lee 2005), XXY (Puenzo 2007), Tomboy (Sciamma 2011), and 52 Tuesdays (Hyde 2013) are worthy of mentioning for their
breakthrough performances of alternative masculinities as well as entryways into important issues faced by LGBTQI peoples. Many of these films had controversial reception from the public and provided insights into non-normative experiences of gender and sexuality. For example, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* focuses on Hedwig, an AMAB person who escapes conservative and oppressive east Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall by getting a sex change operation and marrying an American man. The operation is botched and Hedwig is left with ambiguous genitalia, or, an “angry inch.” Hedwig both does and does not identify as female and throughout the film explores her/his identity in relation to others. In the end, Hedwig finds acceptance and fluidity in identification and embodiment for herself/himself.

In a similar vein, yet stylistically antithetic, *XXY* is a Uruguayan film that is a coming of age story featuring a young intersex person who has non-binary genitalia that could be defined as both male and female. This film shows the alienating effects that society has toward intersex people and the way that Western medicine attempts to surgically “correct” bodies to properly designate them into binary categorization. The protagonist, Suli (Valeria Bertuccelli), ultimately chooses not to surgically “correct” their genitalia and accepts his/herself as they are. These two films in particular stand out as progressive in their representation of gender variant identities and bodies. They also expose flaws of bigenderism, Western medicine’s system of classification, and the limits of dualistic discourses.

In addition to mainstream and independently produced narrative cinema, television programs and documentary films have been integral forms of “critical inquiry” into hegemonic hierarchy. Documentaries like *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity* (Jhally 1999) and *The Mask You Live In* (Newsom 2015) take on the concept of “manning up”
and notions of hyper masculinity that create problematic identifications for men and boys
growing up in American and Western culture. Documentaries like *Venus Boyz* (Baur 2002) and
*Still Black: A Portrait of Black Trans Men* (Ziegler 2008) portray and explore alternative black
masculine identities and true-life experiences faced by the people who embody them. Television
shows like *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan 2013-) and *Transparent* (Soloway 2014-) highlight
issues faced by trans-feminine (MTF) characters and force audiences to contemplate and
question institutionalized systems of white male power. Science fiction and fantasy shows like
*Farscape* (O’Bannon 1999-2003) and *Firefly* (Whedon 2002-2003) provide possibilities outside
of bigenderism and hierarchical positioning of gendered characteristics, identities, and
expressions. Over the years, documentary film and television have become rival mediums to
cinema as highly influential forms of ideological dissemination. People directly learn from the
things that they watch. The films and television shows mentioned above affirm that there is
potential for growth in conversation surrounding various media representations of masculinity,
femininity, and also LGBTQI people.

Trans* visibility has increased significantly over the past five years and as
representations of trans* identified characters has multiplied, so has the critique of these
representations intensified. When Hillary Swank won the Academy Award for Best Leading
Actress in 1999 for her role as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry*, there was little to no discussion
in the media about the problems of having a female identified person cast in a transgender male
role. Contrastingly, when Jared Leto won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 2014 for his role
as a transgender female, Rayon, in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée 2013), there was an onslaught of
visual and written media concerned with a male identified actor being cast in and receiving an

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award for a transgender female role. In recent years there has been a lot of critical conversation concerned with non-trans actors playing trans characters in films and television shows. Trans-folk and trans allies have emphasized the importance of casting trans people in trans roles. This reveals that it is not just the way the representation appears on screen that is important, but also the authenticity of the representation. Marginalized and oppressed peoples need to be able to tell their own stories, rather than having those stories interpreted by the dominant group and made for audiences apart of the dominant group.

As mentioned in the introduction, the emergence of the Internet in the 90s truly opened up outlets for people from different locations, cultures, and backgrounds to connect with one another. Niches of marginalized and oppressed people and people in sub-cultures could connect with one another from across the globe. Over the last sixteen years the internet has become even more an integral part of media dissemination and a format for “critical inquiry” into every subject imaginable. Social media sites and applications have furthered people’s ability to share media and converse in an analytical way about the things that they see and experience on a day to day basis. Political and social activism has been mounted on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These applications and technologies enable people from all over the globe to research, educate, and share opinions with one another regarding political and social activities in the public sphere, and also to share and explore private spheres of individual identity and spirituality.

On September 13th, 2013, Huffington Post Live, an Internet news site, aired a segment on black masculinity, hip-hop culture, and the stigma of loving trans women. This important discussion highlighted specifically representations of queerness in black culture, policing of
masculinity, and violence committed against trans women of color. Important things were pinpointed such as power hierarchies and rankings among men, the lack of language to describe identity, policing of people’s bodies and sexual identities, erasure of trans identity, and public shaming and ridicule that occurs when a black man in hip hop culture is outed as queer, trans-loving, or same sex loving. In the half hour long discussion, a consensus was reached that men need to encourage each other to stop the public shaming regimes, to embrace fluidity in gender and sexual identity, and to not be afraid to be themselves- whoever that may be. More and more of these types of discussions are occurring in mainstream media, social media sites, and in society at large, signaling a reemergence of “critical inquiry” into domains of maleness and masculinity. Men are beginning to realize that patriarchal constructions of masculinity are not only harmful to women and LGBTQI people, but harmful to themselves and communities of men as well.

Victor Seidler in his book, *Man Enough: Embodying Masculinities* (1997), discusses the need for men to not “sidestep” the negative effects of patriarchy and “what it has done to women, and gays and lesbians for over 2000 years and is still doing.” He suggests that this not leave heterosexual white men “feeling bad about themselves,” but rather “stimulate men into revisiting their inherited masculinities, working out different ways of relating both to themselves and to others.” He says it’s important for men to realize that they can change and embrace the present rather than “return to some lost notions of masculinity in the past” (Seidler 221). This is perhaps in opposition to Bly’s notion that men need to reflect on mythological allegories and Monick’s notion that men need to understand the symbolic phallos in order to reclaim some ancient, primal “maleness.” Seidler’s suggestion is that men define their own path to identity formation, that
“there are many different paths that men can take” (221). He suggests that men challenge each other’s notions of maleness and to listen to emotions and feelings as a way to better define personal boundaries. I think this is the key to the personal and the broader “re-articulation of masculinity as a production of gender” that Wiegman mentions (Wiegman 51).

Seidler also talks about the need to acknowledge “emotions and feelings as sources of knowledge” and that listening to one’s body is not irrational, but essential to establishing a deeper connection with oneself (Seidler 210). He talks about men needing to rediscover their own bodies as sentient, human, and imperfect, rather than treating them like machines or trying to escape them through logic and reason. Formulating personalized ritual acts or processes can help one restore the fracture between mind and body, to enter into one’s body and salvage a relation to emotional needs and desires. Perhaps this is why Fight Club stresses the importance of ritualized acts of pain, because this forces Jack back into his body. Experiencing pain through fighting or self-infliction is not the only way, or the most intelligible way to get back into the body. There are numerous ritualized or specialized processes that provide movement toward engaging with one’s physical and emotional body. Doing different types of body work might allow for a rediscovery of one’s personal boundaries as well as a reconnecting with emotions as an origin of self-awareness.

C. Concluding Remarks: Fluidity, Ritual, and Masculine Identity

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself” - George Bernard Shaw

When something is rigid and unmoving the first reaction is to think of strength and stability. In actuality, when something is rigid and unmoving it means that it is stagnant and that it is no longer working. Change, fluidity, and transformation allow for sustainable and functional
identifications and relationships. Having freedom to express oneself emotionally is an important aspect that allows for movement, growth, and development for an individual and also for a relationship or community. This is perhaps why men’s movement groups were successful at creating a sense of community among men, because it was a safe place for men to express their emotions without being shamed or ridiculed. Regimes of policing masculinity and the public shaming of boys and men who cry directly contributes to acts of male violence in our society. So, how do we accept crying into the repertoire of masculine tropes?

Returning to Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” and Erving Goffman’s “Gender Advertisements” we can devise how this task might be executed. Butler advises that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 519). Goffman calls these “stylized repetition of acts,” “ritualized expressions” and suggests that advertisements are hyper-ritualizations of actual life. Similarly to Butler, Goffman says, “one might just as well say there is no gender identity,” that “there is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender” (Goffman 8). Goffman’s idea is that “natural” expression of gendered relations are really “interpersonal rituals” (84) and that these “gender displays” are “like other rituals,” in that they emulate societal and cultural structures (8). Butler says that since bodily gestures, movements, and enactments engineer “the illusion” of gendered self, this relies on a repetition of these acts through time, a “constituted social temporality” (Butler 520). The temporality that exists within the film medium allows for the ritual and initiatory acts that both Jack and Brandon execute in order to build a “portrayal” of masculinity.
If identity is something that is fully constructed rather than found or salvaged, then maybe, Tyler Durden is correct that “it’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything” (Fincher). Deconstructing ritual “gender displays” and what we’ve been taught is “natural” leads us to recognize that no embodied acts are inherently gendered, but habitual and even ceremonial in discourse and process. Though I do believe that sexual dimorphism and hormone chemistry affects differing visual embodiments of certain “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments,” it is society that dictates how the range of human emotions or actions are prorated into ritual/habitual gender categorizations at any given historical moment. In Ancient Greek culture, through the Middle Ages, and at various times in the 19th century, crying was a sign of “true manliness,” strength, and honor. Today, we see men crying as the difference between a hero and a failure, a stoic man and a powerless man. This confirms that emotions (bodily acts) are not biologically gendered.

The Stoic schools of philosophy in Athens never taught people to stifle emotions or hold back tears, but focused on surmounting destructive emotions like anger, envy, and jealousy (Bertrand 254). In Stoicism it was more acceptable to cry than to “destroy things.” There is a difference between stoic self-control and self-suffocation. It is time that contemporary society’s “gender displays” are deciphered and that more individualized and divergent rituals infiltrate. Discovering that gender is not a stable identity and that “gender displays” are a social contrivance gives individuals the power to codify their own experience. I believe that many gender variant people are already doing this. They are dissembling the societally constructed sex/gender system through practice of atypical / non-normative “bodily gestures, movements, and
enactments.” Many gender variant people are showing in a tangible and tactile way that we shape multiple identities through time rather than find a one true identity. In this sense, perhaps the postmodern sensibility is correct in that the self can never truly be whole or complete. The Stoic Man archetype, along with other stereotypical masculine tropes perhaps can be reworked or restructured to reflect divergent ritualistic becoming rather than rigid and immobile completeness.

If dualistic thinking is abolished and dualistic discourses are expanded upon to more fully include the spectrum of experience, then masculinity and femininity could potentially free themselves from forcibly being negations of one another. The negation of any and all things feminine in order to discover what is masculine feels like a forced and potentially dangerous path to take. It also, in a sense, is an impossible and alienating task. It is impossible to fully separate what is a masculine behavior or characteristic from what is simply a human behavior or characteristic. Crying leads to a sense of liberation from one emotional state and entrance into another. Repressing this and/or shaming crying in any human can cause stagnation and subsequently powerlessness. Anger arises from feelings of powerlessness. Anger can lead to violence against others or against oneself. Enacting feelings of anger through violence or catharsis can get someone out of a state of feeling powerless, but it doesn’t solve the root issue of the anger, which is most commonly fear, pain, and insecurity.

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48 Instances in Boys Don’t Cry show Brandon’s ritualized practice of combing his hair back as symbolic of his “boy” identity being divergent from the other patriarchal masculine identities in the film.

49 Brandon and Jack’s sense of fracturing was perhaps a breaking down of the illusion of linear temporality governing a complete gendered self.
Anger arises in people who were or are conditionally loved; where one aspect of self is shamed while other aspects of self is approved of or encouraged. This creates a schism because the totality of who they are is rejected. For instance, when a transgender child is told that their gender identity is invalid and that part of them is denied, then a rift occurs as they try to conform to what their parents or what society tells them that they are, rather than who they feel they are inside. This creates shame, insecurities, feelings of rejection, inadequacy, fear, pain, and these emotions are the root causes for anger and violence. The only way to counter the anger is to be vulnerable and to unearth the underlying emotions. It is no surprise that Pascoe encountered high school aged boys spitting slews of homophobic remarks at one another, attempting to distance themselves from such identifications. With initial identity formation comes insecurity, fear, and others threatening personal boundaries because they are not well established. By giving boys impossible representations of hyper masculinity that equate with violence, bigender ideology, and then shame them for showing or connecting with their emotional bodies, we set them up for continued displays of anger, harmful behaviors, lack of empathy, and resentment toward and/or fear of women and societally deemed effeminate actions or characteristics. Succinctly, forcing children to conform breaks their unique nature.

When there is an opening up to and acceptance of our own expressions and temporally constructed identities, no matter how these manifest, no matter how different they are from what we perceive to be the norm, there is movement away from shame and toward feelings of empowerment. When someone is truly empowered, they don’t need to point fingers and create

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50 Transgender people age (13-19) are at the highest risk for suicide and self-inflicted violence out of any group. More than 50% of transgender identified teens will have one suicide attempt before the age of 20 ("Statistics about Youth Suicide").
“specters of failure” in order to feel more secure in their own identity. When someone is empowered and validated in their identity/identities, they are much better equipped to face others with dignity, respect, and empathy. We need more representations in cinema of men crying and it being portrayed as strength through vulnerability rather than weakness through failure. In the book, *The Places That Scare You*, Pema Chödrön talks about the times of vulnerability, insecurity, and pain as times with the most opportunity to transform. It is being vulnerable that makes someone strong and moves that individual toward further compassion and empathy for others.

If we shame boys, men, and masculine identified people for crying, we take away their direct connection with their own sense of vulnerability, and thus, their self-awareness and transformative abilities. If we shame boys, men, and masculine identified people for crying and label it effeminate and therefore undesirable, we cut them off from their capacity to empathize with other’s emotions and feelings, leading to continued issues with violence and inflicting harm on others. Returning to Julia Serano’s assertion that society must empower all forms of femininity in order to establish gender equality, this means that we must also empower all forms of perceived femininity within masculine subjectivity (Serano 6). It is vital to recognize one’s spectrum of affectations, to embrace, and then to utilize them to dictate strength and uniqueness. If life is not about finding oneself, but creating oneself, then space needs to be given for people to explore and to actualize various gendered identities and embodied expressions as well as establish other aspects of their identities. As media and cinema’s representations has a direct effect on how people view themselves and others, we can only hope for a further opening up to fluidity in identification, more “critical inquiry” into masculinity, and an increase in positive...
depictions of marginalized and oppressed people as well as embodiments of alternative gender identities and expressions in the future.
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