

**IS THAT WHAT A MAN LOOKS LIKE?
NIHILISTIC TAUTOLOGIES AND THE SPLITTING OF SELF IN CHUCK
PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB***

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary masculinity is a complex structure based on Michel Foucault's vision of the panopticon. Men are always both the guard and the prisoner at once. They perform as those around demand and simultaneously perpetuate that performance onto others. For men, there is no escape from this structure. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* offers insight into the psyche of contemporary, white men. The characters are men, caught up between two mutually exclusive performances of masculinity. They can only perform one type but must perform both. This paradox creates a split in the masculine self, literally embodied by Tyler and the narrator. This essay examines the nihilistic interpretation of contemporary masculinity portrayed in *Fight Club* and its effects on the self.

INTRODUCTION

When Chuck Palahniuk released *Fight Club* in 1996, it became a cult phenomenon. Three years later, David Fincher directed the film version of the novel, which, despite average box office results, became an intensely popular underground film. In the Afterword of the 2005 paperback edition, Palahniuk describes a curious run-in he had with a tour guide on a Haunted Tunnel Tour. As the group began the walk, the guide said, "The first rule of the Haunted Tunnel Tour is you don't talk about the Haunted Tunnel Tour" (210). A middle-aged tour guide wearing cowboy boots repeated the author's words back at him, without even realizing what precisely this meant. The man in cowboy boots did not know that Palahniuk was on the tour. All he knew was his experience of media, of the movie based on the author's novel.

The novel and the movie came at a time when studies of white masculinity were on the rise. In the Afterword the author notes that Susan Faludi's book, *Stiffed*, was released in 1999, the same year as the film version of the novel. These studies, as well as the novel, were focused on the metanarrative of white male decline, which works to "construct a notion of male victimization and emasculation" (Friday 7). This is the dominant historical narrative about the loss of the hegemonic functions that normative, which is to say white, middle-class, straight masculinity enjoyed.

White middle class men continued to lose hegemony from the prosperity of the 1950s to the "recessionary winds of the early nineties" (Faludi 595). The sons' inability to fill the roles reinforced by their fathers, argues Susan Faludi, contributed directly to the modern male anxiety. They waited for confirmation of manhood that never came. This came about because of changing times and the 1960s equality movements, but the fact remained that masculinity had to be affirmed by power. Hegemony was lost for white middle class men because the very existence of normative masculinity was exposed as a simulacrum -- it created its own reality based on no empirical evidence. When that reality was exposed, those consequences and performances of masculinity came into question.

The children of Baby Boomers were born into and raised in a world where privilege is more accessible to all men than ever before. While men who perform normative masculinity still retain some of their old hegemonic privileges, they are always in crisis about them, whether it be from outside sources or white guilt. Minorities are now no longer just attacking white privilege, but are gaining access to it. The sons of the Baby Boomers are still part of a manhood that is very much in constant crisis, but not because they are retaliating against the supposed loss of privilege.

Normativity changed when this history was enacted, when the simulacrum was exposed. There is

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certainly a reason that the tour guide appreciated *Fight Club*: the metanarrative constructs his interpretation of manhood and toughness. He is comparing his own job to fight club by utilizing the same rules. But, why does he do this? It is no mistake that the cover of the paperback version of *Fight Club* depicts an eye looking and a fist punching at the reader. The eye signifies the panopticon within which contemporary men exist as both watcher and watched¹. The fist is both the doing of the actual deeds the panopticon necessitates and the imminent and immanent threat of not doing those deeds.

Fight Club characterizes contemporary normative masculinity in a nihilistic fashion. The novel views the paradox of white masculinity as presenting two irreconcilable ways of being, the narrator and Tyler². Respectively they represent two sides of the paradox, two sets of bodily discourses, neither of which is politically viable. The narrator is the contemporary "not man" and Tyler is the "heroic man" of the past. However, these are viewed as mutually exclusive sets of bodily discourses because of white male decline. They expose the tautological function in play between history and identity, between watcher and watched. This tautology, this choice between a "rock and a hard place," so to speak, is exactly why white men feel their identity is fractured and not fluid.

To engage in contemporary normative masculinity is to engage in a paradox of interpretative mechanics. One must choose between man and not man, though one must be both. Kevin Alexander Boon presents this paradox eloquently:

Contemporary American men are caught in a paradox. On one front, they face social dynamics hostile toward those characteristics culturally defined as masculine. The solution to what has been widely perceived as hegemonic masculinity is 'to distance the male self from the complex of male traits' (Ehrenreich, 1983, p. 122). On the other front, the more distanced men become from masculine traits, the less they are perceived as men. ("Heroes" 1)

White men are not allowed to be what they have to be -- or at least they interpret their identities this way. They are still caught up in the hold of the simulacrum of hegemony, meaning that to be identified as men they must exert power. To be considered a man, one must be dominant in power relations, one must be "the builder of culture" (Kimmel 9). Domination not only allows culture to be produced at the will of the dominator, but that very domination itself becomes part of the culture. It must therefore be sustained as a type of bodily discourse. Men must have hegemony in local power relations in order to be seen as men. Contemporary men inherited the juridical practices of the simulacrum but live in a society that has devalued them.

Dominant Western culture views gender as a binary, either male or female. When white men choose to avoid what Boon calls the "testosterone-based behaviors that define the hero figure" their bodily discourses are interpreted as not male ("Heroes" 2). However, since gender is a binary, by choosing this side of the paradox, a man is not only not a man, but a woman. They are constructed as feminine because they are not masculine, and cannot be, less they risk becoming a social pariah³. *Fight Club* displays these two sides of the paradox with the two main characters: the narrator and Tyler. Yet, as stated before, both ways of being have been devalued. One is feminine, and the other has become cultural trash. As the narrator states, "One minute you're a person, the next minute, you're an object" (Palahniuk 153). When heroic masculinity was exposed as a simulacrum, white men went from the top of the cultural hierarchy to trash objects.

All the juridical practices that composed heroic masculinity, especially the exertion of power on the female Other, have become cultural trash in the context of white male decline. Contemporary white men "feel social pressure to adjust their behaviors and redesign their rhetoric to accommodate long disenfranchised groups," and so the bodily discourses of so called "heroic" masculinity, to borrow from Boon's other article, are of little value to those around them ("Men and Nostalgia" 3). The increasing power of these disenfranchised groups, such as women, homosexuals, minorities and others considered non-normative, disallowed the exertion of power over them. This disallowance is often embodied in the postmodern sensitivity to non-normative performances of life⁴. Since men must be sensitive to them, they cannot dominate them and become trapped by the "collective reinforcements of the link between the idea of crime and the idea of punishment" (Foucault, *Discipline* 27). Heroic discourses become cultural trash, which can be defined as "the accumulation of artifacts for which there is no longer an observable social desire" (Henderson 146). No one wants to be dominated, nor see others dominate and so these discourses are unwanted. The male subject is constructed by those around him as trash. As the narrator says, "Everything you ever create will be thrown away. Everything you're proud of will

end up as trash," (Palahniuk 201). So these two conflicting sets of bodily practices, the narrator and Tyler, are one both in body and in their "trashness," as Henderson suggests: "*Fight Club* posits trash as the common language of these two value domains" (Henderson 147)⁵. The similarities between Tyler and the narrator lie in the lack of use-value in their given performances of normative masculinity.

Men are constantly in revolt against their own bodies because "the body becomes a potential site for exploring difference and creates both an alternative to and a critique of the distorted narrative of dominant society," but at the same time they must obey these narratives (Burgess 265). The paradox is between Kimmel's concept of the "Self-Made Man" and a "generation of men raised by women," (Palahniuk 50). Each sexed body requires of itself that it perform certain discourses, and the male body requires two. It is always in revolt with itself, because it is always the eye and the fist. A sexed body is always already watching and ready to punish, and if "masculinity is a largely homosocial enactment," then men are always both watching and watched by men (Kimmel 7). *Fight Club* views panoptic masculinity as futile. There is no way to embody both sides of the paradox or to escape from the panopticon, to give value to masculinity again, and so identity is fractured, not fluid, for white men. The two main characters display this split within the same body.

Tyler Durden is associated with the discourses of power that men utilized before the hegemonic functions of normativity were lost and represents Boon's "heroic" masculinity. Boon defines a hero as "one who is part god, part man, one who transcends the mortal and the mundane," taking the epic Greek version of a hero into the postmodern era ("Hero" 2). Tyler, in the first page of the novel, tells the narrator, "This isn't really death... We'll be legend. We won't grow old" (Palahniuk 11). He attempts to transcend mortality through his place as the creator of fight club and Project Mayhem. Boon stipulates that "the purposes of a hero are twofold: (1) to bring the protective power of the gods to Earth where they serve a practical function for people, and (2) to posit the possibility of human transcendence" ("Heroes" 2). The function heroic masculinity plays for men is the defensive function of the ideal. It provides them with something to emulate, to strive for. In this same fashion, human transcendence can come with the attainment of these ideals. For men, these ideals are composed of the bodily discourses that gave access to hegemony.

Tyler Durden both embodies and enables heroic masculinity. It should be noted that this version of masculinity is considered heroic because it had so much value in the past, and the ability to exert power appears god-like in comparison to contemporary normative manhood. Tyler enables the possibility for men to attain this status. Tyler starts fight club, a space in which heroic masculine qualities have value again, as the narrator recounts:

You saw the kid who works in the copy center, a month ago you saw this kid who can't remember to three-hole-punch an order or put colored slip sheets between the copy packets, but this kid was a god for ten minutes when you saw him kick the air out of an account representative twice his size then land on the man and pound him limp until the kid had to stop...Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. (Palahniuk 49)

Men have the ability to become "a god for ten minutes" while in fight club, because it is a context "where brutal fist fights, injuries, and pain instantly jolt participants back into an immediate connection with a primal, fully embodied, and, according to their principles, more genuine existence" (Burgess 265). Outside of fight club, participants feel as though genuine manhood is no longer available to them. The narrator calls this "insomnia distance," in which everything is "a copy of a copy of a copy. You can't touch anything, and nothing can touch you" (Palahniuk 97). They have had to give up the masculine identity of a previous age in order to accommodate long disenfranchised groups. A white man is likely to feel symptoms of the victimized, and, as Friday suggests, "he is then obliged to look for his symptom's proper context and thereby locate temporal means to frame his identity," and for these men, that context is fight club (Friday 18). The fights provide what Erving Goffman calls a "technical redoing," or a place where "strips of what could have been ordinary activity can be performed, out of their usual context, for utilitarian purposes" (Goffman 59). Frames, according to Goffman, are the ways in which humans organize social experience. They act as lenses of interpretation. In *Frame Analysis* Goffman describes the ways in which frames can alter interpretations of physical actions fight clubs provide a satisfying performance of manhood, because they exist in a place where heroic masculinity has value. The men involved in the fight clubs engage in similar framing and reframing of what fighting means. Their purpose is to make the

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option available to men that they do not have to be both masculine and not masculine. The self can then heal its fracture and become whole again. This is Tyler's domain. He not only enables this technical redoing, but embodies it. He is something that contemporary men can aspire to be: "I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world" (Palahniuk 174). Tyler is heroic, and he is looked up to. He is created because contemporary normative masculinity needs a hero to see, to emulate. As Boon suggests, "the greater the perceived risk of human mortality, the greater a culture's need to reassure itself of potential survival; thus the greater its need to seek embodiment of the hero figure" ("Heroes" 3). Tyler, throughout the entire novel, is always being watched.

Tyler's version of heroic bodily discourse is contingent on being seen, representing one part of the seemingly irreconcilable positions of watcher and watched in the panopticon. Every man is both the guard and prisoner of the panopticon in relation to those around them. By this, I mean that men are always watching the men around them. This statement works reciprocally, because it means that men are also always being watched by the men around them. Each man is the guard and the prisoner of a panopticon. In the body of the narrator, Tyler is contingent on being *seen*, while not necessarily *seeing*. Tyler is only a set of bodily discourses, meaning that he only exists as a certain way the narrator's body acts. What makes Tyler Tyler, is that others see these discourses and give them a name, meaning Tyler. When others see the narrator's body enacting heroic masculinity, Tyler is born. As previously stated, he is looked up to, looked at. His heroism, and therefore identity, is based on being seen. The narrator even sees Tyler himself, admitting to him, "But I can see you" (Palahniuk 167). In fact, Tyler is fully visible the first time that the narrator meets him: "How I met Tyler was I went to a nude beach. This was the very end of summer, and I was asleep. Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face" (32)⁶. Not only does Tyler need to be seen by the narrator to exist, but he is constantly concerned with being seen by the world at large, the public that creates the metanarrative. To Tyler, the options available for men are cultural trash or God's hatred: "How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God's hate is better than His indifference. If you could be either God's worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?" (141). He requires that his bodily discourses be seen and interpreted as something with value.

Tyler, similarly, needs Marla to exist because she invokes the binary of male and female that hegemonic manhood was based on. Before the arbitrariness of normative hegemony was exposed, male / female was the perceived binary. Granted, this still exists and is precisely why the paradox of contemporary normativity is a problem, but men did not feel trapped by femininity or forced into it as they did before. Tyler exploits this, and reinforces his own heroic masculinity, "I know why Tyler had occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla" (Palahniuk 198). The need for heroic masculinity to exert power over the feminine, to distance itself from it, is partially why Tyler needs her to exist. Their relationship, however, is mostly physical, meaning sex: "Tyler comes to the kitchen table with his hickies and no shirt and says, blah, blah, blah, blah, he met Marla Singer last night and they had sex" (58). The benefit of sex for Tyler is the domination of the narrator's body. Tyler needs sex in order for the heroic bodily discourses that constitute his, meaning Tyler's, body. This is to say when Tyler is in charge of the narrator's body, it becomes his body, "We both use the same body, but at different times" (164). Foucault suggests that sex is the only way to make one's body intelligible to oneself, "It is through sex -- in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality -- that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility... to the whole of his body" (*History of Sexuality* 155). Tyler needs a woman to act as the other half of the binary, to see him and his body as one and therefore validate his use of heroic bodily discourses. Yet, what Tyler is attempting through his own being and the institution of fight club, is to find a way to give universal value to this mode of being again.

Tyler Durden is a recycler of cultural trash, specifically the discourses of heroic masculinity. Cultural trash, "as it accumulates, assumes a kind of monumentality. It serves not only to index preexisting social values but it imposes itself upon society, and in a manner of speaking demands to know what we think of it, *as* trash" (Henderson 146). Tyler wants the public to see the trash both as trash and something that can be reused, something that has use-value. He makes explosives out of household products: "Three ways to make napalm: One, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate. Two, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and diet cola. Three, you can dissolve crumbled cat litter in gasoline until the mixture is thick" (Palahniuk 13). Tyler makes the useless useful, albeit in a destructive sense. He also uses the waste from

liposuction to make soap. Everything about this waste is trash: it is human fat created by excess. Marla's mother frequently undergoes liposuction, and Tyler tries to fatten her up: "We have a big order to fill. What we'll do is send Marla's mom some chocolates and probably some fruitcakes" (92). They then steal her fat from the clinic and "made soap out of it. Her. Marla's mother" (93). Tyler makes the useless pieces of the body useful again. His focus is on the way the body is used.

Tyler makes the narrator a useful body again by allowing him to engage in heroic discourses. Most importantly, Tyler makes contemporary men useful again through Project Mayhem and fight club. As the narrator recounts, "'What we have to do, people,' Tyler told the committee, 'is remind these guys what kind of power they still have,'" thereby escaping the metanarrative of white male decline (120). Tyler alters the context in which these men exist, and gives their identities value again. However, it is only in temporary contexts, and the only way to make heroic masculinity historically valuable again would be to destroy the metanarrative, an impossible task⁷ "Project Mayhem is directed outward toward a world that may or may not accept Tyler's beliefs," meaning that the world may or may not accept Tyler according to their frame (Burgess 268). The public creates the metanarrative and so they do not want to let these discourses of heroic manhood become valued again. Contemporary men, according to Tyler, are cultural trash, "'I am trash,' Tyler said. 'I am trash and shit and crazy to you and this whole fucking world,'" specifically because of the metanarrative of white male decline (Palahniuk 115). They are both created by and create this narrative. Men use this narrative as the guards and prisoners of the panopticon. The futility of escape from this is mirrored by the futility of the way of being the narrator engages with.

The narrator is constructed by the act of *seeing*, as the other half of Tyler. The narrator requires the act of seeing to be a self. He is a watcher, one who constructs others. Specifically, he sees Tyler and therefore creates him. As previously noted, Tyler needs to be seen and the narrator needs to see: they need each other to exist. This is so, because to be a male subject is to be interpellated by the panopticon. Contemporary white masculinity views being watched and watching as two mutually exclusive acts, a paradox. While the identity of Tyler must be seen to exist, the narrator must see to exist. His job as a "recall campaign coordinator" is to "apply the formula" (Palahniuk 30). The narrator must analyze and apply the following:

You take the population of vehicles in the field (*A*) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (*B*), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (*C*). *A* times *B* times *C* equals *X*. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If *X* is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If *X* is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall. Everywhere I go, there's the burned-up wadded-up shell of a car waiting for me. I know where all the skeletons are. (30)

His job requires that he see and therefore construct the value of human life around him. His livelihood is based on watching. He applies the formula with his sight, and gets paid for it. If money means food and shelter and these two things mean life, then the narrator is alive entirely because of his ability to see. In fact, the narrator's perception of time is based on sight: "My boss is wearing his gray tie so today must be a Tuesday" (96). The text creates a *seme*, a significant symbol, for the narrator by using verbs of sight for him. *Fight Club* takes the form of an extended flashback, as he states, "I remember everything" in regards to how he got to the roof of the Parker-Morris Building with a gun in his mouth (Palahniuk 15). The narrator exists because he is recounting what he has seen. The entire text is based entirely on sight, what the narrator experienced and how he has interpreted it. He is made through the act of seeing. In fact, he even gains the pseudo-name "Joe" by reading old issues of magazines. He finds a series of old magazines with articles about organs, written in the first person. After reading these, he begins to refer to himself in the same way, "I am Joe's Broken Heart," and "Joe" becomes a strange sort of pseudo-name (134). His identity as "Joe" is stipulated by reading, by seeing. It cannot be overlooked, though, that the narrator correspondingly embodies the opposing side of the paradox of modern normative masculinity. He is constructed by and constructs the discourses associated with feminized manhood.

The narrator is feminized by the metanarrative as the other side of the normative paradox. Boon posits that the paradox of white manhood today is that a man must perform two contradictory sets of bodily discourses, the heroic and the feminized. Neither of these ways of performing masculinity is politically viable, meaning that they are trash. This view, as discussed with Tyler, is nihilistic. The narrator does not do anything inherently feminine, but is interpreted this way simply because he is not performing heroic masculinity like

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Tyler. He is unable to perform like Tyler while he is in control of his own body. It feels wrong because the juridical practices of the contemporary manhood require that he not exert power as Tyler does. After Tyler blows up the narrator's office and boss, the narrator thinks, "The world is going crazy. My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job is gone. And I'm responsible for it all" (Palahniuk 193). The narrator cannot perform heroic manhood without some form of guilt, which is exactly the point. He cannot be himself and Tyler, and must choose.

The narrator is in an impossible spot, because without acting like Tyler, he becomes feminized by other men engaging and perpetuating the metanarrative. For example, his luggage vibrates while being loaded onto a plane. He recalls that "Nine times out of ten, the security task force guy says, the vibration is an electric razor. This was my cordless electric razor. The other time, it's a vibrating dildo" insinuating that the narrator owns a dildo (Palahniuk 42). If that was not enough, the security officer drives the emasculation home by saying, "It's airline policy not to imply ownership in the event of a dildo. Use the indefinite article. A dildo. Never your dildo" (42). If the narrator is not overtly masculine, then according to the binary logic of the white male metanarrative, he must be feminine. As Tyler preaches, "We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't," because both he and the narrator, nearly all contemporary white men, in fact, are being constructed by oppositional juridical practices of Self Made Manhood and contemporary masculine metanarratives after hegemony was lost (166). Manhood has seemingly become politically invalid. White men are in the middle and cannot be anything of value either way. The interplay between two politically invalid ways of being open up to a series of tautologies that are seemingly inescapable.

The most significant event that brings home the nihilistic attitude of *Fight Club* and shows the hopelessness of the fractured self is the death of Tyler Durden. At the end of the novel, the narrator is holding a gun in his mouth, or Tyler is holding a gun in the narrator's mouth, depending on the reading. He notes that "To God, this looks like one man alone, holding a gun in his own mouth, but it's Tyler holding the gun, and it's my life" (Palahniuk 204). Tyler disappears when Marla and the others show up. It dawns on the narrator that Tyler, who attempts to recycle the useless, cannot successfully make the male/female binary useful again. The ability to find use-value in trash has failed, and concurrently, he also realizes that, in this same line of thought, that paraffin has "never, ever worked" for him (204). This makes him realize what Tyler has done, how he has failed, "The barrel of the gun tucked into the surviving cheek, I say, Tyler, you mixed the nitro with paraffin, didn't you" (205). The roof does not explode. Everyone is not blasted free from history. Tyler fails, and with him, heroic masculinity fails. Trash has no use-value, heroic masculinity is just trash. Men are forced to confront the paradox that defines their very existence as subjects.

The aftermath of Tyler's death shows the absolute failure of modern men. The narrator shoots himself in the mouth, tearing apart his face and "killing" Tyler. The narrator then discusses what happened after the shooting and why he does not want to go back to the real world⁸. His reason is "Because every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches and he says: 'We miss you Mr. Durden'" (Palahniuk 208). The narrator is unable to escape the discourses of Tyler because others still *see* him, and therefore construct him, as Tyler. He is still expected to engage in the heroic discourses that are associated with Tyler, but he is unable to. The narrator is feminized, along with many men in his generation: "The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (43). The narrator, like all men, is "supposed" to perform heroic masculinity, but cannot. Neither side of the paradox can succeed. There is nothing contemporary men can do. They must be two seemingly contrasting things at once. Even Project Mayhem's mission to "break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world" reveals the underlying logical tautology that everything in *Fight Club* succumbs to.

Project Mayhem is about men escaping from the paradox they are caught up in by erasing its historical context. When Tyler and the narrator create Project Mayhem, they "wanted to blast the world free of history" and rescue men from both the heroic role they are supposed to inhabit and the metanarrative of decline that prevents them from doing so (Palahniuk 124). The plan, which fails because Tyler uses paraffin as blasting gel, is for the Parker-Morris Building to be blown up and "slam down on the national museum which is Tyler's real target" (14). His point, however illogical, is to eliminate the artifacts of the history that created the paradox. However, Krister Friday posits that the male subject must "look for his symptom's proper context," which is temporarily the fight club (Friday 18)⁹. Friday suggests that the context is history itself, but more importantly it

is the specific histories that create the interpretive practices that create the white male subject. She goes on to state, "What this means is that in *Fight Club*, the very identification with historical period, along with the essence it is thought to confer, becomes integral to the text's construction of masculine identity," which includes not just the characters interpreting each other in books, but how they become intelligible to the reader. (20). Individuals are constructed by the interpretive practices of their historical context. National identity, and therefore collective identity, for men is the paradox. This is precisely the tautology that makes the novel nihilistic, what makes fluidity into fracture.

Men are both made by and make the metanarrative of white male decline. Judith Butler suggests that the body and its discourses act as cultural signs which materialize themselves "in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this, not once or twice, but as a sustained and repeated corporeal project," meaning that the body acts the way it does because of its historical context, but must also repeat these acts constantly (Butler 190). White men who perform normative masculinity are watched by other men, and therefore constructed, within the historical context of white male decline. The narrator is made feminine by those around him: his boss, the security task force guy, Tyler, his friends who have pseudo-sexual experiences with IKEA catalogues, and the reader interpreting him as such. The fact that this essay is about white decline implicates certain interpretive strategies that are contingent on historical context. I, and presumably my readers, understand and believe what I am arguing *because* they are part of this metanarrative; it both is constructed by and informs them. This being said, then men of *Fight Club* are subjects because of the history they are trying to destroy, and that history exists because they make it exist. They are stuck within the metanarrative they try to destroy because while it is creating the juridical practices that make manhood, they are also perpetuating it. They watch with metanarrative seeing eyes, and are also watched by those same eyes. This tautology keeps them stuck exactly where they are. Even if they destroy history, the men will still look with the same eyes. It is not just the dominant narrative of the loss of hegemony that is constructed this way, but the "damned if you do, damned if you don't" mentality.

The paradox is constructed *and* perpetuated by men interpreting it as such. Before the arbitrariness of white male power was exposed, heroic masculinity was the valued set of bodily discourses. Normativity losing its hegemonic status made white men feel victimized. While they must perform heroic masculinity or risk being feminized, the idea of fracture is a specifically white normative experience. The belief that entities like Tyler and the narrator are mutually exclusive sets of discourses is so because that choice is created. Men interpret the paradox *as* a paradox; they see the two sides as mutually exclusive and, therefore, create the illusion of a required choice. Nihilism exists in the novel because the characters in it view their possible identities as tautological. The male reader, assuming that his is using the same interpretive strategies, will create the characters the same way. Nihilism in the novel comes from the endless strings of tautologies between the watcher and the watched and the normative conception that one cannot be both.

Fracture instead of fluidity is a white male experience because it comes from the view that one either exerts power or does not. There is no escape from the panopticon: one is made by the same things one is making. Foucault believes there is only power, there is no one who is powerless because power requires resistance to be power in the first place. The only difference is the efficacy of power. As he notes, "power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself," and so when white male power was exposed, it lost its efficiency (*History of Sexuality* 86). The truest thing that *Fight Club* stated is that we must "remind these guys what kind of power they still have" (Palahniuk 120). This power is not the normal exertion of power over others that seemingly constitutes masculinity, but the type of power that the panopticon allows. Men can resist the narratives and paradoxes they create themselves. Men can *resist*. They cannot escape the panopticon, but they can learn to alter the interpretive and juridical practices that exist within it. Normative white nihilism need not exist, because the world is only interpreted that way. If one looks back to the man with the cowboy boots who spoke the rules of fight club to Palahniuk, the universality of the nihilistic narratives in the novel becomes apparent. And this is exactly the point. Metanarratives come from local narratives which come from metanarratives which come from local narratives, ad infinitum. But this tautology, while it cannot be broken, can be altered from within. The contexts within the panopticon, within the tautology, can be altered.

Non-normative men, including homosexuals, men of color, and the disabled, have been accomplishing this for years. Under the shadow of normative hegemony, they created multiple bodily discourses in order to exist. They had to. Their identities had to be fluid in order to sustain the multiplicities of being that cultural ostracism necessitated. Fluidity versus fracture, non-normative versus normative, have become the two options.

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There is no reason that normative men cannot slowly alter their context, their interpretive mechanics, to see themselves as fluid. While the paradox of man or not-man certainly exists in non-normative masculinities, it is not necessarily an either/or phenomenon. Men can be more than one thing. Contemporary white men must respect those they once tried to reign over, because nowadays, fluidity has become the most efficient way of becoming.

NOTES

- 1 I use the term "panopticon" in the sense that Foucault uses it in his book, *Discipline and Punish*. Masculinity relies on Foucault's vision of the panopticon to act in a centripetal and centrifugal manner on the self. Foucault examines Jeremy Bentham's prison structure, composed of a circular building made of prisoners' cells, surrounding a large guard tower in the center. The crux of this structure is in the fact that the prisoners never know when the guard is watching them because they cannot see him, but he can see them; "Visibility is a trap" (200). He continues by suggesting that the panopticon "must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in the terms of the everyday life of men," (205). Men are both the guard and the prisoner at once.
- 2 In his series of articles on *Fight Club*, Kevin Alexander Boon argues for a contemporary paradox in white masculinity. He posits that white men must both reject and embrace past versions of masculinity, versions based on the exertion of power over others. Both "Men and Nostalgia for Violence" and "Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity" are contingent on the presupposition of this paradox. Although Boon provides an excellent case in both articles, he does not explain fully the causes and effects of this paradox. I argue that it is caused by the panopticon of male identity and causes, as Boon mentions in "Men and Nostalgia for Violence," the *fracture* of self.
- 3 By "social pariah" I mean that men risk being socially reprimanded or excluded if they succumb fully to either side of the paradox. The inclusive and exclusive practices that restrict possible bodily discourses are also those that can attach stigma to discourses that are not valued; in this case, I am referencing hypermasculine traits and "non-masculine" traits on either end of the paradox which Boon presents.
- 4 David Foster Wallace illuminates this cultural sensitivity quite lucidly. He calls the linguistic phenomenon "Politically Correct English," and states that under its conventions:

failing students become 'high-potential' students and poor people 'economically disadvantaged' and people in wheelchairs 'differently abled' and a sentence like 'White English and Black English are different and you better learn White English if you don't want to flunk' is not blunt but insensitive. Although it's common to male jokes about PCE (referring to ugly people as 'aesthetically challenged' and so on), be advised that Politically Correct English's various pre- and proscriptions are taken very seriously *indeed* by colleges and corporations and government agencies, whose own institutional dialects evolve under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police, (Wallace 54).

- 5 This captures what I call "postmodern cultural sensitivity" which restricts not only language, as Wallace suggests, but also bodily discourses. It is this sensitivity that supposedly denies men their masculinity. George L. Henderson relies on "Thing Theory" in order to interpret *Fight Club*. "Thing Theory," a mode of interpretation pioneered by Bill Brown, deals with how objects make people. Henderson looks at this theory through a Marxist lens, where ideologies can be conceived as objects. These objects, in turn, can be determined to have use-value by the culture that they find themselves in. They create people according to how those objects are perceived in reality. However, he does not take specific context into account, or how this "trashiness" of white masculinity is enforced. I will argue that it is contingent on the panoptic functions of white male metanarratives.
- 6 Excluding the obvious queer reading of this passage, I argue for a homosocial reading. There is certainly desire for Tyler, but not in the sense of sexuality. Rather, the narrator wants to *be* Tyler. He sees him naked because this is how men are *supposed* to appear, as sexual beings who build things. The narrator has desire for Tyler, but only insofar as he wants to become him.
- 7 I use the term "metanarrative" here in the sense of Jean-Francois Lyotard, meaning the grand,

overarching, and informing narratives about groups of people. He characterized the postmodern condition as a skepticism towards metanarratives, which I argue is true, but these metanarratives still influence men (especially white men).

8 He is presumably admitted to a mental hospital.

9 By "symptom" Friday means the drive towards a specific type of performance.

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