

TAKE IT LIKE A MAN:
MASCULINITIES AND VIOLENCE IN DAVID FINCHER'S FIGHT CLUB,
MARTIN McDONAGH'S THE LONESOME WEST,
AND MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S THE ENGLISH PATIENT

BY

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A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One	
“Is that what a man looks like?”: (Re)Creating Masculinity Through Violence in David Fincher’s <u>Fight Club</u>	12
Chapter Two	
“We shouldn’t laugh”: The Comedy of Violent Masculinity in Martin McDonagh’s <u>The Lonesome West</u>	35
Chapter Three	
“Smashed, revealed in new light”: Reading New Masculinities Beyond Violence in Michael Ondaatje’s <u>The English Patient</u>	57
Conclusion.....	83
Works Cited.....	94

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ABSTRACT

“Take it like a Man: Masculinities and Violence in David Fincher’s Fight Club, Martin McDonagh’s The Lonesome West, and Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient” explores the connection between masculinity and violence. Drawing from the theories of performativity developed by Judith Butler, and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal, this thesis questions the perception that violence is naturally masculine and that violent acts are evidence of “real” masculinity.

In David Fincher’s film Fight Club, Jack attempts to reconcile his anxieties about his feelings of masculine inadequacy through participation in underground boxing clubs. The violence of these fights, however, spirals out of control, and Jack discovers the destructive nature of violent masculinity.

Martin McDonagh’s The Lonesome West presents violence in a humorous fashion that through the shock it produces demands that audiences reassess the link between violence and masculinity.

The extreme violence experienced by the characters of Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient compels them to seek out new ways to understand masculinity free of violence and based upon community building performances.

Demonstrating that violence is simply an accepted performance of masculinity, rather than an essential trait, allows for the possibility of rethinking masculinity based on other, positive performances.

Take it like a Man:

Masculinities and Violence in David Fincher's Fight Club, Martin McDonagh's

The Lonesome West, and Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient

By David Foster

Introduction

In her book Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man, Susan Faludi proclaims that masculinity in American (and Western) society is undergoing a profound crisis (6-7). Since the end of World War II, Faludi contends, men have found themselves increasingly disconnected from the acts and structures that formerly defined them, most notably meaningful work and family life. The result of this disconnection, according to Faludi, has been the perception that men are “out of control,” the evidence for which constantly appears on television, in newspapers, and throughout popular media (Stiffed 7). But for Faludi the idea that masculinity is synonymous with violent behaviour as projected by the media is false. Rather, Faludi suggests, there are larger social forces working against men, and the only recourse available to men has been violence. To investigate what she terms “the betrayal of the American man,” Faludi examines some of the media stories that have presented an image of “masculinity run amok” (Stiffed 7). By examining such stories, from a ‘sex-for-points’ rape scandal at a Southern high school and violence at sporting events, to the violent practices at military institutions like the Citadel and the lingering violence of Vietnam veterans, Faludi attempts to demonstrate that “even the most ‘powerful’ man has had at least as much happen to him as [he] has made happen” (Stiffed 16). Faludi believes that men need to rediscover the kind of community and

purpose that previous generations found in military service, close-knit work environments, and other examples of the “old model of masculinity” that “showed men how to be part of a larger social system; it gave them a context and it promised them that their social contributions were the price of admission to the realm of adult manhood” (Stiffed 35).

Stiffed is an interesting book neither because it is the first work to seriously look at masculinity, nor because it is a particularly insightful and well-written book. There have been other, better books about masculinities and the problems associated with them. Daniel Coleman’s Masculine Migrations, for instance, is a significant work that focuses on concerns of masculinities and race, particularly for immigrant males. Peter Middleton’s The Inward Gaze looks at masculine subjectivity, while Kaja Silverman’s Male Subjectivity at the Margins explores issues related to marginalized masculinities and both Lynne Segal’s Slow Motion and Susan Hatty’s Masculinities, Violence and Culture have contributed to the debate over violence and masculinities. Faludi’s work, however, is the first “popular” book about masculinity to garner significant attention from readers and critics alike, but particularly from the media.¹ Stiffed is not only “popular” in the sense that it sold well, but also in its approach. Though Faludi points to the media as contributing to men’s disillusionment with their lives, most of her examples and stories come from pop culture – when discussing Vietnam veterans she examines the film Rambo at length. In fact, Stiffed is simply another example of pop culture’s interest in masculinity as a new realm of entertainment and discussion. Masculinity and “men’s issues” are becoming a popular genre unto themselves. While it is perhaps a reassuring

¹ See Joel Stein’s “The Emasculation Proclamation” article from Time for a particularly vicious attack on Stiffed as well as on Fight Club. Stein glibly notes that his review of Stiffed is another in a “continuing series on books no one outside the media is reading” (46).

sign that it is no longer assumed that only so-called “women’s issues” and works are a genre while the domain of the masculine is universal, it is alarming that TV programs such as The Man Show or magazines such as Maxim are by and large representative of masculinity in pop culture. Such examples of masculinity may do little to address men’s issues (at least those beyond flatulence and supermodels), but there are other examples of works that, like Stiffed, have captured the popular imagination, while also attempting to engage in serious discussion about masculinity. David Fincher’s film Fight Club, Martin McDonagh’s play The Lonesome West and Michael Ondaatje’s novel The English Patient are three such works, which, unlike Stiffed, attempt to reimagine masculinity not by simply discussing its crisis, but by enacting new visions of masculinity.

Though each work is in a different media, Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient all explore an issue central to any discussion of masculinity – violence. Violence, “the infliction of emotional, psychological, sexual, physical and/or material damage,” and “the expression – the physical manifestation – of aggression” as Suzanne Hatty defines it, has been traditionally associated with masculinity (46, 53). Lynne Segal notes that while violence “cannot simply be equated with ‘masculinity’ There are links between the prevalence of violence in our society and men’s endeavours to affirm ‘masculinity’ (269). In this way masculinity and violence are viewed as mutually formative; men make violence and violence makes men. In Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient this link between affirming masculinity through violent acts comes into question. Each of the three works explores the relationship between violence and masculinity by bringing violence to the forefront of male experience. In Fight Club, a group of men dissatisfied with their lives and questioning

their own masculinities in the face of consumer culture attempt to reassert manliness in their identities through underground boxing clubs. In The Lonesome West, two brothers must come to terms with the violent competition that has defined their lives together or risk destroying each other. And in The English Patient, a group of men, and one woman, scarred emotionally and physically by the violence of war come together to try and rebuild their lives as part of a community. Each work explores the changes that men's lives undergo when violence is done to them, rather than only when they themselves enact violence.

Acts of violence are generally understood as providing evidence of masculinity; by doing violence a man proves his manliness. This connection between masculinity and violence has traditionally been considered a product of "nature." Yet, in Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient, violence seems anything but "natural." To understand the relationship between men and violence in these works requires a rethinking of the naturalness of such a connection. Judith Butler's theories on gender performance provide a critical vocabulary for addressing the naturalness of the association of violent acts with masculinity. Butler theorizes that "gender is neither a causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex," denying the assumed "naturalness" of gender (Gender Trouble 9-10). Rather, she proposes that gender is "performative," and "constitut[es] the identity it is purported to be" (Gender Trouble 33). Gender is produced through "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Gender Trouble 43). These acts, over time, amount to "shared experiences and 'collective action'" that culturally and socially come together to define

gender (Butler “Performative” 276). In this way gender is a “social performance” in which a given script of gender “may be enacted in various ways” (“Performative” 277). The assumed “naturalness” or biological basis of gender is then the result of “discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex” (Gender Trouble xxvix). Butler notes that it is in the individual’s best interest to conform to an accepted gender performance, since “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (“Performative” 279). Alternative gender performances, however, can be powerfully subversive as they “*implicitly reveal the imitative structure of gender itself*” (Butler Gender Trouble 175). Accepting the performativity of gender, therefore, means there are possibilities for rethinking what it means to be masculine by performing alternative and potentially subversive acts that fall outside the “normal” understanding of maleness².

In light of Butler’s concept of gender performance, the connection between masculinity and violence is anything but “natural.” Violence is simply an aspect of the socially accepted script of masculinity. To do violence is to be a man only insofar as violence is culturally constructed as masculine. Performing violence has its rewards of power and privilege, guaranteeing the male actor “both individual and social control, while maintaining and perpetuating hierarchy and inequality” (Hatty 10). Failing to perform violence, then, is punished by negative associations with the feminine, a social stigma, which in turn can lead to other violence. Therein lies the problem of masculine

² Butler’s theories are, of course, not without controversy and criticism. In her “Preface 1999” to the tenth anniversary edition of Gender Trouble, Butler addresses some of the concerns of her critics (xiv). Butler notes that the text “does not sufficiently explain performativity in terms of its social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions” (Gender Trouble xxiv). For the purposes of this thesis, performativity will be considered under the terms outlined above.

performance of violence. To perform masculinity requires “repeated acts” of violence; to fail to perform violence likewise often incurs violence. Moreover, the performance of male violence is often competitive, and therefore demands increasingly more extreme acts of violence to maintain identity. These conditions generate a cycle in which violence is necessary to maintain identity, yet never sufficient to ensure masculinity. The destructiveness inherent in this cycle means that while violence may shore up gender identity, it also causes damage and produces an identity based on negative acts. Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient each explore the limits of violence’s ability to reinforce male identity. In each of these works, the damage done by violence ceases to define and build gender identity; in fact, the damage done by violence causes as much harm to the masculinities of the men in these works as it does to the world around them. In the face of such devastation, the men of Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient must search for alternative performances that will maintain their masculinities without the damaging effects of violence. In order to escape violence, these men need to reinvent their masculinities, subverting the social scripts that would tie them to violence.

Just as Butler’s theories of performance help to question the assumed naturalness of violence, Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal is also useful for understanding the masculine reinvention underway in these three works, as it questions the social structures that define the “reality” of masculinity³. Baudrillard proposes that as

³ Perhaps more so than Butler’s theories, Baudrillard’s theories have been harshly criticized; in his case for a perceived nihilism, and reductiveness (Lane 125-127). The seeming lack of practical application for Baudrillard’s concepts, the pointlessness of Baudrillard’s writing that his detractors claim, for Lane is in fact a strategy of Baudrillard’s style (127-129). Lane (following Rojek and Turner, and Gane) suggests that though Baudrillard attempts to replicate the hyperreality he criticizes by writing in an often disconnected and aimless manner, “that *does not* lead to a ‘meaningless’ text that has nothing to say” (129).

contemporary society is immersed in media and media culture, the distinction between the binaries of that which is “real” and that which is “imaginary” has been blurred to the point of erasure (5). Simulation is not simply the breakdown of the relationship between sign and signified, but, as Baudrillard says, “*the radical negation of the sign as value*” (11). With this implosion of difference, the real is displaced and deterred by the hyperreal. The hyperreal is a gesturing to the absence of the real when in fact the real (absent or not) is unverifiable (23-26). The hyperreal precedes the real, as it is only through the gesture towards the absence of the real that the real is said to exist (25). Though not directly related to Butler’s theories of performance, Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality shares Butler’s skepticism about essentialism, truth, and “reality⁴.” The hyperreality of gender, that is the assumption of its reality in the absence of any signs of the real, is apparent in Butler’s questioning of gender reality:

When such categories [of man and woman] come into question, the reality of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be ‘real,’ what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of genders is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality
 what is gender, how is it produced and reproduced, what are its possibilities? (Gender Trouble xxiii)

⁴ It is important to note the profound differences in the critical thought of Butler and Baudrillard. Butler’s work is rooted in the theories of Michel Foucault as well as feminist theory. Baudrillard, on the other hand, is critical of Foucault’s work, especially Foucault’s understanding of the operations of power, evident in Baudrillard’s text *Forget Foucault* (Semiotext(e) 1987). For this thesis, however, the correspondence between Butler and Baudrillard’s understanding of “reality” is significant enough to overcome some of their fundamental differences. Interestingly, Richard Lane’s suggestion that “one of Baudrillard’s attractions is the way he mixes theory with performance” may offer other affinities between Butler and Baudrillard (although Lane also notes “some critics have argued that this becomes a reduction of theory to performance”) (136).

In hyperreal fashion, to borrow from Baudrillard, gender can be said to be “*always already reproduced*” (146). “It is always a question of proving the real by the imaginary, proving truth by scandal, proving the law by transgression,” Baudrillard says, and it follows that it is also a question of proving gender by its performance, or perhaps more to the point, proving gender by those who fail to perform it correctly (36).

For the purposes of this thesis, Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal not only complements Butler’s theories on gender performance, but offers a means by which to understand the relation of gender to systems of power, such as capitalism, patriarchy and nationalism. Hyperreality, according to Baudrillard, is a product of capitalism and the systems of power such as patriarchy and imperialism that support it (43). Yet, while capitalism causes “the destruction of every referential” and produces the “abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialisation” of the hyperreal, in order to retain its power it must at the same time resist hyperreality by reasserting the real (43). Baudrillard says,

The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection [towards hyperreality], is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production “Take your desires for reality!” can be understood as the ultimate slogan of power, for in a non-referential world even the confusion of the reality principle with the desire principle is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality. One remains among principles, and there power is always right. (42)

In Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient, the hyperreality of these systems of power, and the “schizophrenic vertigo” they create, are contributing factors to

the crisis of masculinity that the male characters experience. Capitalism, patriarchy, and nationalism are all complicit in dictating what performances constitute masculinity. Not only do these systems of power generate and maintain the link between violence and masculine performance, but in doing so they also exert their own forms of violence. The experiences of the men of Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient suggest that it is through a recognition of the violence of capitalism, patriarchy, and nationalism that men can be freed of the constraints of violent performance.

The advantage to employing both Baudrillard and Butler's theories when discussing masculinity is that the concepts of hyperreality and performativity provide a critical vocabulary that resists the assumptions that have associated masculinity with violence. This critical vocabulary allows one to consider gender in an experiential rather than essential way. In defining the performativity of gender, Butler is concerned with the experience of gender, the acts that generate gender identity for the individual, rather than the supposed inherent attributes that determine gender. Similarly, Baudrillard's vision of hyperreality reflects an experience of "the real" as constructed and simulated, rather than "natural." Thus, from Butler and Baudrillard's points of view, the belief that violence is somehow innately connected to masculinity, one producing the other and vice versa, is simply a fallacy. For the men of Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient, understanding that violence is not masculine and that masculinity is not violent is the first step to rethinking and reinventing their gender identities.

By dealing explicitly with violence and its relation to masculinities, and by presenting male experiences of the effects of violence, these texts open masculinity to reappraisal. This experience of violence is not limited to the characters of each work.

The audiences of Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient are also witness to the ways violence tears apart men and their identities⁵. The violence in each work cannot be ignored. It is graphic and pervasive. It produces a visceral response, whether it is one of horror, humour, empathy, or excitement. By extending to its audience a different way of looking at masculinity and violence, each work begins to rethink and reinvent masculinities. Rethinking masculinities produces new acts and new performances that replace the link between masculinities and violence that would find masculinity in violent acts.

According to Faludi, masculinity has been built upon a paradigm of confrontation that has long outlived its usefulness (Stiffed 604-604). Faludi suggests that in order to escape their current crisis, men need to find a new model with which to reinvent themselves. Faludi's vision of new masculinity, however, is hindered by her idealization of men from a particular post-World War II era, the GI's who returned home to work in heavy industries such as ship building. Faludi ultimately undermines her argument by pointing to an image of masculinity from the past, one that imagines stoic, hard-working, men as the ideal, an image rooted in nostalgia that would ignore the violence that continued to exist in these men's lives⁶. In contrast to Faludi's nostalgic masculinity, Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient, call for new performances

⁵ Audience reception of Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient is of course influenced by the medium of each work. The differences between the representation of masculinities and violence that are a function of the different media of film, stage, and prose certainly play a part in shaping an audience's view of masculinity. Concerns of media, therefore, warrant further discussion and will be addressed in the conclusion of this thesis.

⁶ Baudrillard warns that "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning," which only exacerbates the movement toward the hyperreal. Faludi's nostalgia is problematic in that it imagines an ideal masculinity that may never have existed (or if so, existed under specific circumstances), one that may be impossible to replicate and live up to. Responding to Stiffed, Joel Stein facetiously remarks, "[men] don't want to go back to construction work with other men, mostly because construction work is hard and screaming 'Nice ass' never seems to work" (46).

other than violence; each offer visions of how masculinities can be rethought, remade, and revitalized.

Chapter One

“Is that what a man looks like?”: (Re)Creating Masculinity Through

Violence in David Fincher’s Fight Club

“In principle, violence is something that does not speak, or speaks but little”

- Gilles Deleuze (*Masochism* 16).

The first rule of *Fight Club* is “You don’t talk about *Fight Club*.” The second rule of *Fight Club* is “You don’t talk about *Fight Club*.” Sometimes, rules seem made to be broken. There are few, if any, films that deal so explicitly with masculinity and violence, and have elicited such a large popular and critical response as David Fincher’s *Fight Club* – it is a film that demands to be spoken about. Adapted from Chuck Palahniuk’s novel of the same title, Fincher’s film portrays masculinities in a graphic, frenetic, and hyper-violent fashion that, surprisingly, rips open conventional notions of what it means to be male. As the film’s name implies, *Fight Club* is about violence, particularly the violence involved in underground bare-knuckle boxing clubs where men beat other men into submission. But the violence in *Fight Club* is not simply mindlessly gratuitous or a spectacle of aggression; rather it is the vehicle by which the film explores issues of masculine identity. *Fight Club* presents violence as both the cause of and the answer to the problems facing men in the late twentieth century. In the film, violence, in its various incarnations, is portrayed as at once demoralizing and confusing yet freeing and redemptive. Despite this paradoxical view of violence, the film uses violence as a vehicle to address problems of patriarchy, capitalism, and power in relation to masculinity; ultimately, however, *Fight Club*’s primary concern is to reconcile violence to masculine

identity. The film focuses on a nameless narrator (played by Edward Norton) coming to terms with himself and his masculinity through violence. The narrator feels alienated from himself, specifically his masculinity, by the capitalist culture he lives in. Violence becomes the solution to reconciling identity and masculinity for the narrator and other men like him, a way to confront the questions asked by the charismatic prophetic voice of Fight Club, Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt), “How much can you really know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?”

Tyler’s question, his challenge to the narrator, strikes at the heart of Fight Club’s quest for masculine self-knowledge. If masculinity is connected with violence in Western culture, and traditionally it has been, then how can one be masculine without having experienced primal and visceral violence? The late twentieth century crisis of masculine identity is embodied by the nameless narrator. Throughout the film the other characters never refer to the narrator by a proper name. Indeed, recalling a series of articles he discovers in Reader’s Digest in which vital organs address themselves in the first person, such as “I am Jack’s medulla oblongata,” the narrator only refers to himself as Jack. But the narrator’s use of the name Jack is only an ironic substitute for identity, used to express his emotional state, such as “I am Jack’s broken heart.” The name Jack is no more the narrator’s own than it belongs to an anthropomorphized brain. Similarly, when Jack⁷ attends support group meetings feigning illness, he does not give his own name but rather adopts many pseudonyms such as Rupert and Cornelius to disguise or deny his identity. These names allow him to inhabit other identities, to pretend to be a testicular cancer survivor or host to a brain parasite.

⁷ For ease and clarity the narrator will hereafter be referred to as Jack. Doing so is in keeping with the practice of most critics who refer to the narrator as Jack. Notably, however, the film credits list Edward Norton as playing “Narrator.”

But Jack is not simply a con-artist. Jack's alienation, his lack of self, is a result of the cultural environment in which he lives. Matthew Jordan, speaking of Palahniuk's novel, suggests that "Fight Club ... is in part the narrative of a personal crisis arising from an apprehension of the modern world as corrosive of personal identity and in particular masculinity" (372). As Jack's lifestyle unfolds in the opening sequences of the film it becomes clear that he is experiencing an identity crisis symptomatic of the capitalist consumer culture he lives in. Jack suffers from insomnia, a condition in which, as he describes, "nothing is real. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy." Jack's experience of insomnia recalls Jean Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal (23-26). For Jack, insomnia is a manifestation of his experience of the absence of difference between the "real" and the virtual, particularly in terms of an individual sense of identity (Pisters 136). This lack of individuality is apparent when Jack notes that like many of his generation he has "become a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct," and his sense of self is tied to and constructed by the items he consumes. In a supremely hyperreal scene, Fincher characterizes Jack's sense of immersion in the consumer world and disconnection from reality by turning a shot of Jack walking through his apartment into a living Ikea catalogue. Through this scene, Jack actually becomes part of the consumer world. But instead of producing identity, "the consumer items he buys ... standardize rather than individualize him" (Jordan 373). Likewise, in his job Jack finds himself isolated and spiritually disconnected. Jack's job as a recall coordinator requires him to determine if it is in the best financial interest of the car company he works for to recall defective parts that cause fatal accidents; Jack is in charge of assessing the value of human lives in monetary terms. In such a dehumanizing occupation it is no wonder then

that Jack cannot sleep and seeks refuge in support groups for terminal illnesses. These support groups provide Jack with a sense of worth since he becomes someone with a disease whom others value or pity. Jack is able to reinforce his sense of self through these support groups because they allow him to escape from the workaday world where he is insignificant, to a place where he becomes “the warm little center that the life of this world crowd[s] around.” The support groups are spaces through which Jack can escape from the alienating hyperreality of the outside consumer world. He can believe himself to be in a “real” place, where “real” people with “real” problems congregate⁸. By association, therefore, Jack can believe that he too is “real.”

The sense of self that Jack feels as a result of the support group, however, is insufficient to maintain or generate a masculine identity. While this failure is, in part, a result of the false pretenses under which Jack attends the support groups, the support groups are also inadequate for Jack’s purposes because they are in opposition to conventional views of masculinity. The support groups promote inner peace, self-improvement, and emotional openness – they are places where it is “okay to cry.” In the “Men Remaining Men Together” testicular cancer support group it is even “okay to cry” in front of other men (provided, of course, they have no testicles). Jack takes refuge in the emotional release of the support groups, where he does not have to participate in the masculine world of corporate, consumer, or sexual competition. And, because he is not actually suffering from a terminal illness, outside the support group he is free of the pain of disease; Jack is able to experience cathartic release without having to undergo the pain

⁸ Of course, Jack’s own simulation ironically disrupts any reality present in the support groups. Jack’s presence in the support groups recalls Baudrillard’s discussion of the simulation of disease, where the simulator, who in enacting the disease begins to produce “‘true’ symptoms,” confounds medical knowledge of the disease and what it is to produce symptoms (5). For Baudrillard, the hyperreal operates in a similar fashion.

that should precede it. This idyllic situation is upset by the appearance of Marla Singer, a fellow faker, at the support group meetings, since, as Jack confesses, "Her lie reflected my lie." Not only does Marla disrupt Jack's ability to experience the release of the support groups because she reminds him of the falsity of his act, but her presence demands that he reassert his masculinity. While there are other women in the support groups, though of course not at the "Men Remaining Men Together," they do not present the same threat to Jack as Marla does. As a healthy woman, Marla should be, and in the end is, sexually desirable to Jack. Her presence requires that Jack act like a man, as he is socially scripted to do. With Marla around, Jack says, "Suddenly, I felt nothing. I couldn't cry," since crying and any other emotional outburst would undermine the control indicative of a "real" man. Marla is a physical reminder to Jack of how feminized he has become through his outward emotional expressions, his desk job, and his concern for domestic matters such as fashion and furniture. In fact, as Alexandra Juhaz notes, everything about the culture in which he lives is "overly feminized" (216). Jack laments the emasculation produced by consumer culture saying, "We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow Collection." Later, in an exchange in which they negotiate separate support group attendance, Marla further highlights Jack's femininity:

JACK. We'll split up the week. You can have lymphoma, tuberculosis
and --

MARLA. You take tuberculosis. My smoking doesn't go over at all.

JACK. I think testicular cancer should be no contest.

MARLA. Well, technically, I have more of a right to be there than you.
You still have your balls.

JACK. You're kidding.

MARLA. I don't know -- am I?

It becomes imperative that Jack find another outlet for his emotions, one that will not threaten his masculinity. Conveniently Jack meets Tyler Durden and together they discover Fight Club, a place where he can reaffirm his identity through acts that are the archetypical symbol of masculinity – violence

Fight Club is an assertion of masculinity through violence par excellence. As its rules outline, Fight Club is also all about the individual: there are only “two guys to a fight ... one fight at a time” and “if this is your first night at Fight Club, you have to fight.” These fights are man-to-man, one individual pitting his masculinity against that of another individual. The nature of the combat in Fight Club also distills violence to its most personal as male bodies inflict violence directly on other male bodies. But the fighting is not simply a competition of physical strength. In Fight Club size does not necessarily matter, as the supply clerk Ricky demonstrates by “trounc[ing] a maitre d’ twice his size.” Nor is it a matter of will or desire, with the kind of rhetoric that surrounds sporting events. In fact, winning is hardly the point at Fight Club, since “the participants are in it as much for the experience of pain and fighting itself as for the pleasure of winning” (Remlinger 143). If Jack feels half-asleep in his insomniac world, then pain and fighting are means to wake up to himself, since “physical hurt allows one to feel one’s self” (Remlinger 144). Like the support groups Jack attends, Fight Club amounts to therapy for its participants, a way to generate and maintain an identity. But, unlike the support groups which promote a denial of “real” experiences through imaginary exercises involving opening “heart chakras” and discovering “power animals,”

Fight Club is a therapy with instant and tangible rewards. Whether one experiences the pleasure of victory or the pain of defeat, Fight Club is a “real” experience for its participants, an escape from the simulated world of Ikea catalogues. The reality of Fight Club is made all the more “real” for the film’s audience by the way the fight scenes are filmed. The sounds of fists hitting flesh, and close-ups of men meting out or receiving violence with blood and sweat flying in graphic reality are a drastic departure from the computer generated distance of Jack’s Ikea catalogue apartment.

Two dynamics emerge from the violent therapy of Fight Club that together get to the heart of this struggle to establish a masculine identity. The first involves violence as masculine performance. In Fight Club the act of fighting is a performance of the violence that is an integral part of the script of masculinity. By fighting, Jack and the other members of Fight Club engage in a performance of masculinity that at once expresses and constitutes a gender identity (Butler Gender Trouble 33). Since as Butler says “performing [one’s] gender well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism to gender identity after all,” Jack’s performance of violence erases the confusion and alienation he experienced before discovering Fight Club (“Performative” 279). Through the proof of manhood that fighting provides, Jack overcomes his insomnia and his anxieties that he is feminized. He becomes “a real man,” distinct from the effeminate male models that grace the Gucci advertisement he and Tyler critique, asking, “is that what a man looks like?”

But the performance Jack and the others undergo at Fight Club is not simply one of violence, as there is a second dynamic behind their struggle for identity. Because of the focus on the self and the experience of the self through pain, the violence of Fight

Club is a particularly masochistic exercise. It is the masochism inherent in the violence of Fight Club that makes the film's expression of masculine identity so problematic. In the film Tyler Durden says, "Self-improvement is masturbation. Self destruction . . .," implying the statement which in the novel ends in "is the answer," a wholly masochistic sentiment that defines the violence of Fight Club (Palahniuk 49). Since the goal of Fight Club is not to defeat one's opponent, but rather to have an experience that affirms one's masculinity, then one must question why this experience is profoundly masochistic. In his book Masochism Gilles Deleuze offers a reading of the pathology of masochism based upon the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch that reveals some of the issues behind the masochism in Fight Club. According to Deleuze, masochism has long been associated with sadism in a relationship that incorrectly aligns the two as complementary opposites – like two sides of the same coin (38-39). While he notes that there may be elements of the other in each sadism and masochism, Deleuze suggests that these are "paradoxical by-product[s], a kind of sadism being the humorous outcome of masochism, and a kind of masochism the ironic outcome of sadism" (39-40). Deleuze also notes that it is also a mistake to assume that for the masochist pain is equivalent to pleasure, since for the masochist "pain, punishment or humiliation are necessary prerequisites to obtaining gratification" (71). So, while Jack and the other men of Fight Club may revel in their victories, it is more a celebration of their ability to withstand pain and to share the experience of pain with their opponent than either a sadistic enjoyment of inflicting pain or pleasure from receiving pain (Remlinger 143). Masochistic violence directed against the self in Fight Club, then, is a far cry from the sadistic violence typically associated with masculinity. In this way the masochism of Fight Club rewrites the script of the

performance of male violence and its relation to identity. The self-destruction involved in *Fight Club* is the subversive act that forms the basis of the revolutionary philosophy that Tyler Durden espouses (Remlinger 145).

Fight Club itself is just a small part of the social and cultural revolution that Tyler Durden envisions as developing around the recreation and reassertion of masculinity. Tyler's revolution is not merely a movement against the feminization of culture, but rather an attack against the two pillars of Western society that he sees as corrupting not only men, but all peoples – patriarchy and capitalism. In *Fight Club*, patriarchy and capitalism are aligned as the two forces which cause the erosion of masculine identity. Primarily represented in the film by absent fathers and consumer culture, patriarchy and capitalism demand that men conform to impossible ideals of masculinity. Tyler Durden preaches an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian philosophy intended to free the men of *Fight Club* from the shackles of the hyperreal culture in which they live:

Advertisements have [men] chasing cars and clothes, working jobs they hate so they can buy shit they don't need. We are the middle children of history, with no purpose or place We were raised by television to believe that we'd be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars -- but we won't. And we're learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed-off.

Likewise, Tyler rails against patriarchy embodied by absent and neglectful fathers: “Our fathers were our models for God. And, if our fathers bailed, what does that tell us about God?” Behind each of Tyler's revolutionary targets lies a desire to reshape masculinity by destroying the structures that have created and perpetuated the existing concept of what is masculine.

Ironically, the anti-patriarchal tone of the film is rooted in a sense that the present generation of men lacks male role models, particularly fathers. As a "generation of men raised by women" the men of Fight Club resent the fathers who abandoned them in their childhood. Jack and Tyler discuss how their fathers failed to provide them with real models for "how to be a man":

JACK. I didn't know my dad. Well, I knew him, till I was six. He went and married another woman, had more kids. Every six years or so he'd do it again -- new city, new family.

TYLER. He was setting up franchises. My father never went to college, so it was really important that I go After I graduated, I called him long distance and asked, "Now what?" He said, "Get a job." When I turned twenty-five, I called him and asked, "Now what?" He said, "I don't know. Get married."

The vision of patriarchy Tyler describes, tainted by the consumerism implied by the "franchises" it gives birth to, suggests men of Fight Club inherited a corrupted masculinity from their fathers. Thus, the men of Fight Club, in search of paternal figures that will answer their questions of identity and show them "real" masculinity, find surrogate fathers in each other, particularly evident in Tyler and Jack's relationship. Tyler is an alternative father for Jack (and later the other Fight Club members), who provides answers to the questions that an absent father could not and models a way to be a man that Jack and others can emulate. But it is not simply animosity towards absent fathers and a feeling of abandonment that fuels Tyler's anti-patriarchal attitude. There is a sense in Fight Club that patriarchy, and all it stands for, is preventing men from

growing beyond an adolescent masculinity. The men of *Fight Club* direct their violence at symbols of patriarchal control, such as the city police chief, who they threaten with castration. Even the masochism in the film reflects a desire to break free of the patriarchal pattern that requires conformity to accepted notions of masculinity. As Deleuze suggests,

The masochist feels guilty, he asks to be beaten, he expiates, but why and for what crime? Is it not precisely the father image in him that is thus miniaturized, beaten, ridiculed and humiliated? What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father's likeness to him. (60)

Deleuze insists that “the masochist thus liberates himself in preparation for a rebirth in which the father will have no part,” a rebirth that in *Fight Club* is a reconstitution of masculine identity (66). For Jack, Tyler, and the other *Fight Club* members the masochistic experience of fighting defines them against their fathers, distinguishing their masculinity and therefore their identities.

Like it does patriarchy, *Fight Club* portrays capitalism as a force against which men must struggle in order to form their identities. As previously noted, the early parts of the film cast capitalism and the consumer culture that drives it as having a feminizing effect, particularly on Jack. However, as the film progresses, capitalism becomes an issue of power. With the formation of Project Mayhem, an anarchist group off-shoot of *Fight Club*, the focus of Tyler's philosophy shifts from self-destructive reinvention to the destruction of the symbols and instruments of the capitalist system. In Tyler's view, capitalism robs men of power and makes them slaves to things such as their jobs and the accumulation of possessions. As Tyler says the night Jack and Tyler first fight each

other, there is always potential for capitalism to control individuals: “the things you own end up owning you.” Jordan suggests that “the aim of Project Mayhem . . . is to foster a sense of individual power” (374). Through violent acts such as vandalizing luxury cars, blowing up “corporate art,” and destroying Starbucks-like coffee shops, the participants in Project Mayhem attack the symbols of capitalism they pursued in their pre-Fight Club lives. These acts of mischief and vandalism impart the men with a sense of control over the objects that previously controlled them. The men exhibit a power to resist and reject the consumer values of their society. By asserting power and control over the symbols of capitalism and consumerism that once manipulated them, the men of Project Mayhem simply claim power for themselves.

It is with Project Mayhem, however, that the violence in Fight Club shifts from the seemingly productive process of the identity building through masochistic fighting to a destructive, and perhaps fascistic, violence. Rather than being directed inwardly as in Fight Club, the violence of Project Mayhem is directed at others. The members of Project Mayhem assault the city police commissioner, threatening to castrate him; headlines that Tyler cuts from newspapers read, “Police Seize Excrement Catapult” and “Performance Artist ‘Molested’.” Violence becomes the impetus for change in Project Mayhem, whether or not others are willing to change. The personal choice that was part of Fight Club is replaced by the dictum “in Tyler we trust.” For instance, in carrying out one of the Project Mayhem’s “homework” assignments, Tyler and Jack perform a “human sacrifice” by holding a young convenience store worker at gun point to persuade him to return to college and better himself. While Tyler rationalizes this violence as

giving the convenience store worker a new lease on life, it is clear that Project Mayhem is more about exercising power than about building a sense of empowerment in others.

With Tyler as its de facto leader and its violence shifting from masochistic self-destruction to a destructive exercise of power, Project Mayhem, as critics such as Henry Giroux note, increasingly resembles a fascist group (11). The members of Project Mayhem, so-called "Space-monkeys" dressed in black shirts and living and working in Tyler's homemade-bomb-making factory, recite Tyler's words of wisdom like political slogans. The rules of Fight Club, ostensibly meant to maintain a sort of order to the fighting, are condensed in Project Mayhem to a single rule that sounds frighteningly fascist: "The first rule of Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions." The individuality that Fight Club promoted is abandoned in Project Mayhem as "there are no names in Project Mayhem." Furthermore, Tyler envisions Project Mayhem's inevitable outcome as producing a tribal primitivism where men are "stalking elk in damp canyon forest around the ruins of Rockefeller centre," eerily reminiscent of the primitivism espoused by Nazi propagandists. And the world of Project Mayhem also bears a striking resemblance to the capitalist world it is meant to replace (Jordan 376). The Space-monkeys "work in shifts" making explosives and soap from liposuctioned fat. Space-monkeys repeat Tyler's words like advertising catch phrases, ironically highlighted when one Space-monkey gives Tyler's "You are not your job" speech while on a television in the background a Pepsi commercial featuring the Spice Girls proclaims the coming of "Generation Next." Juxtaposed against the "girl power" marketed by the Spice Girls and Pepsi, Tyler's masculine revolution seems equally hollow and hyperreal. Tyler even begins to play the part of the patriarchal father, disappearing for extended periods of time

and leaving Jack to muse: "My father dumped me. Tyler dumped me. I am Jack's broken heart."

But what is most alarming about Project Mayhem is the destructive violence it promotes. The assaults on innocent people that are part of Tyler's homework assignments demonstrate that Project Mayhem consists of violence that is directed at the Other under the auspices of social revolution. Directed at the structures that according to Tyler are eroding masculinity, Project Mayhem is an attractive violence that promises power. Even Jack is seduced by what Project Mayhem represents when he beats the Space-monkey Angel Face into a bloody pulp, proclaiming, "I felt like destroying something beautiful." Jack succumbs to the emotions that Fight Club was supposed to have freed him of, such as competition – he feels jealous when Angel Face receives Tyler's attention. The violence of Project Mayhem also breeds further violence when Bob (a former member of Men Remaining Men Together) is killed by a police officer after a Project Mayhem "homework" assignment goes wrong. But rather than awakening the men of Project Mayhem to the realities of violence, the destruction and dehumanization that it entails, Bob simply becomes a martyr to the cause. Even when Jack tries to remind the Space-monkeys that Bob was an individual by saying "his name is Robert Paulson," the phrase becomes merely another Project Mayhem mantra. Far from overturning the society that it ostensibly is opposed to, Project Mayhem seems focused on taking control of the engines of power that drive society and culture. Project Mayhem is less a cultural revolution than a regime change through a violent coup.

Yet the extreme violence of Project Mayhem does have an effect on Jack. In addition to his beating of Angel Face, and Bob's death, Jack is forced to face the realities

of violence head on (literally) when Tyler intentionally drives a car, occupied by Jack and two Space-monkeys, off a highway and into a ravine. All three survive the crash, but Jack comes to understand the effects of violence on others. Reflecting on the experience Jack says, "I'd never been in a car accident. This must have been what all those people felt like before I filed them in as statistics in my reports." An unwilling victim of violence for the first time, Jack is forced to face the unglamorous and destructive side of violence, a far cry from his experiences of Fight Club. Through his revulsion at the violence he has become party to, Jack begins to think beyond himself, beyond masochism. As Jack begins to recognize the effects of violence on other people he gains a better awareness of his own relationships with others, particularly with Tyler and Marla.

The first result of this awareness of the effects of violence on others is Jack's realization that he and Tyler are in fact the same person. In what Patricia Pisters calls the film's "schizophrenic twist," Tyler is revealed as a manifestation of Jack's troubled psyche (137). Recalling Deleuze and Guattari's notion that the breakdown inherent in capitalism is a fundamentally schizophrenic process, Pisters sees Tyler as the psychic expression of the alienation that consumer culture produces in Jack (136-37). Tyler is the means by which Jack can force himself to break free of the dissatisfaction of his former life. Jack has created Tyler as something of an alter-ego through which he can live out fantasies of powerful masculinity. In an incredibly self-aware moment Tyler describes himself as Jack's embodied wish fulfilling other, saying, "I look like you want to look, I fuck like you want to fuck. I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not." In a way, since Tyler is the one who has a sexual relationship

with Marla and who is the father figure to the Space-Monkeys of Project Mayhem, Tyler is Jack's masculine side come to life. Tyler also always wins at Fight Club, except when he fights the bar owner Lou and "allows himself to be beaten up," thus proving that he is capable of masochistic power and control (Remlinger 143-44). Tyler performs masculinity in a manner that Jack can only dream of, but also is afraid to do himself. So at the beginning of the film when Jack says, "People were always asking me, did I know Tyler Durden," the question Jack is getting at is not simply about being acquainted with Tyler the person(ality), rather it is a question that asks whether he knows himself, particularly the most masculine aspect of himself. Fight Club, then, is about Jack coming to terms with himself and his masculinity – it is about *knowing* Tyler Durden and everything he represents.

But knowing Tyler is not as simple for Jack as understanding that he has another personality. In fact, far from reconciling all of Jack's issues of identity, the revelation that he and Tyler are the same person creates more problems for Jack. Jack must come to terms with both his feelings for Tyler and the consequences of Tyler's actions in light of his new understanding of himself. Tyler and Jack's relationship, as Suzanne Clarks says, "goes beyond male bonding in its intimacy" (417). Recalling Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's hypothesis of a "continuum between homosocial and homosexual," Tyler is at times a paternal figure for Jack, while at other times Jack's feelings towards Tyler drift from admiration to love in a manner that is intensely homoerotic (1). There are strong homoerotic elements to much of Fight Club, from the "bodies of sweaty, nearly naked men, touching, pummeling, rolling, and bleeding together in a dark basement," to the gun Tyler sticks in Jack's mouth at the end of the film's narrative (Juhasz 216-217; Peele

863). Thomas Peele, in his reading of "Fight Club's Queer Representations," is quick to point out that Jack and Tyler are not gay, yet asks, "What are we to make of a man who desires another man sexually but is not gay?" (865). Peele sees this question as largely unanswered by the film. He suggests that while Fight Club "provide[s] excellent opportunities to think about gender normativity," it is ultimately heteronormative (868). For Peele, the homoeroticism in the film aligns with Tyler's ethos of self-destruction and therefore is portrayed negatively (864). Juhasz, on the other hand, suggests that "[t]he film's anxiety is rooted in the dilemma that its homophobic, biology-based mission [to re-masculate men] is impossible to accomplish outside homosexuality," since Fight Club is most successful in "single-sex worlds" (216-217). Clark also offers that Fight Club "suggests homosexual themes and relationships even though the narrative does not openly admit them" (417). This is certainly true of David Fincher, the film's director, who in response to the suggestion of homoeroticism in Fight Club says, "I think it's beyond sexuality The way the narrator looks up to Tyler and wants to please him and get all of his attention doesn't seem to me to have anything to do with sex" (qtd. in Taubin 44).

In considering Fight Club's homoeroticism, however, Clark, Juhasz, and Peele overlook one important dimension to Jack and Tyler's relationship – they are the same person. So when Jack desires Tyler, whether as a father figure or as a sex object, he is in the end desiring himself⁹. This fact does not diminish the importance of homoeroticism in the film, but it does complicate it. In part, Jack's problem is that he loves himself too much, possibly because it is easier to carry on a relationship with one's self than it is to

⁹ In this self love, Jack/Tyler is almost a physical manifestation of Freud's assertion in "On Narcissism" that narcissism is the basis for homosexuality. See Michael Warner's "Homo-Narcissism; or Heterosexuality" for a critique of Freud's assumptions.

deal with other people, such as Marla for instance. This recasts Tyler's dictum "Self-improvement is masturbation. Self-destruction ..." as self-love is masturbation, self-destruction (that is, moving beyond the self) is the answer. Jack and Tyler's relationship again returns to the question of the real, since it is a relationship based on fantasy. By displacing his affections for Marla through Tyler, Jack is able to satisfy his desire for both Marla (whom he has sex with as Tyler) and Tyler (whom he imagines having sex with Marla) without having to accept responsibility for his desire. The film's "sex scene," in which Tyler and Marla appear merged as a monstrous computer generated vision of sex, suggests that Jack's desire for both Tyler and Marla is so intermingled that the two are inseparable.

Perhaps the homoeroticism in Fight Club is less concerned with issues of sexual attraction than it is with disrupting and recasting masculine gender performance. By presenting men and male bodies in such an erotic fashion, sweating men fighting other sweating men, Fight Club calls attention to the fine line between so-called male bonding and sexual activity. The film never shows men actually hitting each other in the Fight Club scenes (the sound of flesh against flesh stands in for the image), but the wrestling and holding they engage in, and the highly erotic way it is enacted, suggests that violence is the only way in which men can come into contact with each other. This contact appears vital to Jack's masculinity in a way that also suggests a disavowal of homosexuality¹⁰. Violence then becomes a stand-in for desire. In this way, the homoerotic relationship between Jack and Tyler begins to explore Peele's question –

¹⁰ Such disavowal invites a psychoanalytic reading of desire and eroticism in the film, as Alexandra Juhasz does in her essay "The Phallus Unfetished." For Juhasz, the homoeroticism of the Fight Club fight scenes is rooted in a desire for "access to the phallus" and the power it entails that develops from homophobic male anxiety related to castration (211-215). Juhasz's reading, however, deemphasizes the role of violence in Fight Club.

“What are we to make of a man who desires another man sexually but is not gay?” – challenging the viewer to re-evaluate the accepted notions of what is masculine behaviour¹¹.

Beyond the male bodies that combat each other in a stylized and erotic way, there are also the frames of pornography depicting male genitals that Tyler inserts into family films. At the end of Fight Club this penis reappears, cut into the film itself before the end credits, a signal of the continued presence of disruptive gender play, despite a seemingly heteronormative ending (Juhasz 214). This gender play extends beyond the film’s narrative as well, as it reflect on the film’s stars, such as Brad Pitt, who “seems more feminine the more [he’s] butched up” (Taubin 44). While the film is certainly playing with Pitt’s “Hollywood hunk” status, by doing so it is also upsetting the viewer’s expectations. Are male viewers to identify with Pitt/Tyler or to desire him in the same way Jack does? Are female viewers to desire Pitt/Tyler in the same way they are meant to desire him as in other films such as Thelma and Louise? What about Norton/Jack? According to Peele, it is this gender play that makes Fight Club a “queer space where men don’t have testicles and where women have penises” in reference to Bob’s testicular cancer, and Marla, who owns a dildo that she assures Tyler is “not a threat” (867). And though the film may be ultimately homophobic in the way it reinstates a heteronormative order in the end, this order hardly seems stable or fixed, since all around it the buildings that maintain patriarchal and capitalist power are crumbling.

If Fight Club is a space where gender lines are crossed and re-crossed, then it is Jack/Tyler and Marla’s relationship that is most important to the film. Following the

¹¹ Fincher’s denial of the film’s homoeroticism seems suspect because it is coming from a director who deploys the male body in such a sexually charged way that the erotic physicality of these bodies seems impossible to ignore.

film's opening, as the plot shifts to the beginning of the narrative, Jack notes that "all of this, the gun, the bomb, the revolution, has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer." Jack is correct. As the sole female character of importance in a film full of men, Marla represents the ultimate Other. Unlike the male characters in the film, particularly Jack, Marla seems to have a clearer sense of self. She does not attend the self-help groups for enlightenment or self discovery, but admittedly for entertainment, free coffee and human contact. She is comfortable with both her body and her sexuality, proudly displaying her dildo to Tyler and seeking Jack's help doing a breast exam. Though Marla is hardly perfect (she steals, she smokes, she attempts suicide as a "cry for help"), what sets Marla apart from her male counterparts is her awareness of and desire for relationships with other people. When Jack confronts Marla with a question meant to uncover his true identity she replies: "You fuck me, then snub me. You love me, you hate me. You show me your sensitive side, then you turn into a total asshole. Is that a pretty accurate description of our relationship Tyler?" While Jack is stunned by Marla's addressing him as Tyler, he fails to pay attention to Marla's erudite assessment of their relationship. It is only after he begins to realize the effects of the violence unleashed by Project Mayhem that Jack is able to express his feelings for Marla:

JACK. The full extent of our relationship wasn't really clear to me up until now I know I haven't been treating you so nice I'm trying to tell you that I'm sorry, cause what I've come to realize is that I really like you Marla.

MARLA. You do?

JACK. I really do. I care about you and don't want anything bad to happen to you because of me.

Although Jack is still partially focussed on himself, at least he is able to recognize Marla's importance to his life, and perhaps significantly, his importance to hers. In fact, Jack's apology would be a good place to start for relations between men and women in general.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that even though critics such as Giroux view Fight Club as "misogynist," others such as Susan Faludi see it in the opposite light (19). For Fauldi, Fight Club is "a quasi-feminist tale, seen through masculine eyes" ("It's Thelma" 89). According to Faludi, the image of Jack and Marla holding hands while witnessing buildings collapse around them represents a "mutual redemption" as men and women are symbolically united against the hollowness of the consumer world ("It's Thelma" 89). Moreover, there are further indications that Fight Club places particular importance on re-evaluating the relationships between women and men. One exchange in particular suggests that Fight Club is interested in addressing gender relations seriously, as Tyler and Jack comment:

JACK. I can't get married. I'm a thirty year old boy.

TYLER. We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.

On one hand, these remarks can be seen as a further indication of a fear of feminization in the film. On the other hand, they also suggest the need for maturity when it comes to relationships. Jack feels he is a "thirty year old boy," an indication that he lacks the understanding of both himself and his relationships with others to effectively interact

with a partner. Noting Fight Club's popularity among both men and women, Geoffrey Sirc offers a view of the film along these lines: "Misogyny is an awfully tricky issue, and I'm not sure if films such as Fight Club ... aren't just showing that romantic love is complicated and messy, that people in relationships are often stupidly human" (430).

Fight Club's "gender drama," however, is tempered by the continued presence of violence that threatens to undo any development Jack might make. His relationship with Marla in perspective, Jack is faced with the frightening fact that he is the cause of all the violence that has occurred. Jack amplifies his disgust at his own violence to include all of the violence done in the name of Project Mayhem. Recognizing that he and Tyler are the same person requires Jack to "Take some responsibility," as Tyler so astutely reminds him. Though Jack claims to accept responsibility, it is only through the return of the violence of Fight Club, but in a way that contradicts the building-of-self-through-combat ethos that permeated the early fights. Now Jack is in fact fighting a self that is trying to destroy him. In a series of flashbacks in which Jack sees himself where he once saw Tyler, it is made clear that in the initial fights between the two Jack is fighting himself. As in the scene where Jack beats himself up in order to intimidate his boss, the absurdity of a man beating himself is at once humorous and horrifying. Later when Jack/Tyler's battle for control of their consciousness is dramatized as Jack throwing himself through windows and down stairs, any semblance of empowerment that was evident in Fight Club or blackmailing his boss is lost. The violence that previously seemed glamorous and affirming becomes ugly and frightening. In fighting himself, Jack/Tyler strips away all the rhetoric and ideology that could justify and maintain Fight Club and Project Mayhem. Violence can be seen as it really is – brutal, destructive, and humiliating.

It is ironic, therefore, that despite his new understanding of violence Jack must again turn to violence to free himself of Tyler. Finally coming to terms with the fact that they occupy the same body, Jack shoots himself in the mouth, blowing out the side of his face, an act that destroys Tyler. This horrible act of self-inflicted violence seems to contradict the development that Jack experiences on his way to confronting Tyler. It is a puzzling and regressive action that suggests that despite the overtures towards developing relationships with others, Jack is still caught up in himself. Instead of learning to deal with the other-within that Tyler represents, it is necessary for Jack to destroy it and regain a sense of singular identity. Moreover, the violence of shooting himself returns Jack to the self-absorbed state of Fight Club, and the salvation through self-destruction that Tyler espoused. In a way, Jack is simply taking control of the violence for himself, usurping Tyler's power. While Jack and Marla are united in the film's finale, it is hard to imagine that Jack is free of the violence of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, especially as buildings explode around them.

Chapter Two

“We shouldn’t laugh”: The Comedy of Violent Masculinity

in Martin McDonagh’s The Lonesome West

At the lunch ceremony for the Evening Standard’s theatre awards in November 1996, Martin McDonagh caused a stir. Having won the award for most promising playwright, a drunken McDonagh reportedly got into an argument with tablemate Sean Connery in what could have been a scene from one of his plays (Wolf 48; Kroll 73). While reports of the incident vary, it apparently turned into quite a “row,” with Connery telling McDonagh to “shut up,” and McDonagh replying “fuck off” (Zoglin “When” 216; Wolf 48). At once amusing and shocking, McDonagh’s performance at the ceremony, and others like it, have fueled his image as the bad boy of Irish theatre (Wolf 48). With his bravado (he’s willing to challenge James Bond) and general disdain for theatre (he calls himself a “film boy”), McDonagh acts the part of the “angry young man” in which critics have cast him (O’Toole 64; Diehl 108). McDonagh’s public image also perfectly complements the plays he writes. The characters in his Leenane Trilogy¹² are violent, ill-mannered (though they would tell Connery to “feck off” instead), and often drunk. In fact, the resemblance between McDonagh and his characters is often so strong that it is hard to take his persona seriously. How much McDonagh is simply misbehaving and how much he is playing up his image for the press is unclear. Yet he is guilty of constructing his image in other ways, such as boasting to have only seen twenty plays in his life and claiming to be unfamiliar with the work of J. M. Synge in some interviews

¹² The Leenane Trilogy is made up of The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara, and The Lonesome West.

and admitting the contrary in others (Price 113). Such remarks have fuelled critics' interest in McDonagh, as they attempt to construct an identity for him that reconciles his rough public face and his success in the respectable theatrical world. What is evident is that McDonagh is playing both sides; McDonagh balances in himself and in his plays the fine line between violence and humour that is the mark of dark comedy.

McDonagh's public self, whether it is authentic or not, is a reflection of the tensions at work in his play The Lonesome West, the final play of the Leenane Trilogy. A story of two feuding brothers, the play presents the problems that arise when gender performance fails to secure identity and men are required to learn to live not only with themselves, but with other men. In The Lonesome West, McDonagh's mix of shock and humour, violence and comedy, dislodges masculine gender performance from a sense of gender normalcy. Coleman and Valene Connor act out in a way that is both violently funny and humorously violent, and that constantly defeats any notion of masculinity. For the Connor brothers, the performance of masculinity is central to their identities and the fuel that drives their competitive feud. Coleman and Valene define their manhood in relation to each other. The brothers constantly attempt to undermine and defeat each others' performances in order to reconstitute their own performances and affirm their masculinities. When the performances of other characters threaten their masculinities, Coleman and Valene must reassess their relationship and learn to live with each other. In coming to terms with each others' masculinity, Coleman and Valene must eventually confront the violence that has been the basis of their relationship and discover how men can live with other men and their masculinities.

Both Coleman and Valene are deeply concerned with performing masculinity correctly, yet each of them fails to meet generally acceptable criteria for masculine behaviour. If masculinity is judged largely on qualities of independence, sexual and financial success, and other such measures of status, then Coleman and Valene fail to satisfy such standards on all accounts. The two brothers live together, are ostensibly unemployed, and certainly have no education to speak of. Their only means of income is from welfare cheques, which they mostly spend on potato-chips and bootlegged alcohol they call poteen. Likewise, neither brother appears to have had any sexual experience, evident in Valene's reaction to Coleman's claim that Girleen, the daughter of a local bootlegger, gave him poteen in exchange for sexual favours:

VALENE. What did it feel like?

COLEMAN. What did what feel like?

VALENE. The touching below.

COLEMAN. Em, nice enough now. (190)

While Valene lets on that he has no idea what such a sexual encounter would feel like, Coleman is unable to even invent a description of the incident. Clearly, the brothers' knowledge of sex and sexuality is adolescent at best. In fact, the entire exchange between the two is the result of Coleman's attempt to compensate for the fact that he cannot afford to buy poteen himself and has to steal from Valene. Unable to perform masculinity in the traditional ways engrained in them by society, Coleman and Valene compensate by constructing a view of masculinity that they can satisfy and perform within their limited means and imaginations.

To shore up their failed masculinity, the primary focus of Coleman and Valene's compensatory performance is an inordinate emphasis on material objects. With their lack of occupations and dependence on state provided income, however, Coleman and Valene exhibit a sort of abstract materialism. In the absence of typical symbols of material wealth and the ability to procure such symbols, items such as potato chips, poteen, magazines, gas stoves and plaster figurines take on excessive significance for Coleman and Valene. Valene, in particular, is preoccupied with material things, constantly drawing attention to and assigning value to his possessions. Concerned with identifying his possessions as his own, Valene marks everything he owns with a large 'V' in black felt-tip pen and reminds Coleman of what belongs to whom at every possible occasion:

VALENE. This stove is mine, them figurines are mine, this gun, them chairs, that table's mine. What else? This floor, them cupboards, everything in this fecking house is mine, and you don't go touching boy. Not without me express permission. (185)

Valene's materialism is so intensely significant to his masculinity and identity that he is willing to excuse his brother's murder of their father and lie on Coleman's behalf in exchange for Coleman signing over his half of their inheritance (Lonesome 206-207). For his part, Coleman also ascribes a great deal of value to material goods, even though he owns hardly anything himself. While Coleman mocks Valene's collection of figurines of the Saints, calling him "Mr. Figurine-man," he does so out of jealousy and a desire to devalue Valene's possessions (Lonesome 176). From drinking Valene's poteen and drawing beards in the Women's Own magazines, to melting the figurine collection, Coleman also takes great satisfaction in small acts of violence, in stealing and destroying

Valene's possessions. Materialism for the Connor brothers, then, is a competitive performance of masculinity. Valene collects possessions to demonstrate his financial superiority, while Coleman ruins and undermines Valene's property in order to devalue it and demonstrate his own superiority.

Yet Coleman and Valene's materialism is by no means a successful way for them to shore up their masculinity, since they focus their material desires on items that seem to be contradictory to maleness. The material wealth that the brothers compete over is not only meager, but strangely inappropriate and therefore amusingly un-masculine. Valene's love of Women's Own magazines, for instance, is so ludicrously effeminate that it seems to cancel out Valene's other efforts to prove his manhood through material possessions. The Women's Own magazines should also be an easy target for Coleman to use to contrast his masculinity to that of Valene; yet while he does draw beards in them (an oddly masculinizing act in itself), he also reads them. Even when he comments to Valene that "Only women's magazines is all you ever go reading," Coleman quickly suggests Valene buy a different women's magazine: "Get Bella if you're getting magazines" (228-229). The Lonesome West presents the feminizing nature of materialism in such a ridiculous manner that it seems impossible for Valene and Coleman to be any more masculine because of their material possessions.

The brothers' compensatory performances also take other forms beyond materialism, though all based on their competition with each other. To mask their fears of being inadequate men, Coleman and Valene attack each other with suggestions meant to demonstrate the other's inferiority and failed masculinity. These attacks are usually based on the brothers' prejudices, as they seek to undermine each others' masculinity by

relating it to other racial groups or homosexuality. One of the favourite insults in the Connor household is “virgin fecking gayboy,” which the brothers use because it not only highlights each other’s lack of sexual experience, but also associates the other with homosexuality (Lonesome 192). Though the insult is hilariously contradictory, it serves to attack two of the root anxieties of Coleman and Valene’s masculinity. Another insult Coleman directs at Valene employs a similar strategy, this time connecting homosexuality and racial prejudice to assail Valene’s masculinity. Calling his brother “Mister ‘I-want-to-marry-a-Paki-man’,” following a discussion of the difference between “darkies” and “Pakies,” Coleman again combines two qualities meant to indicate feminization (Lonesome 186). That Valene would want to marry a “Paki” is doubly threatening to his masculinity as it again associates him with homosexuality, as well as with another racial group, whose different skin colour represents effeminacy to the brothers¹³. Such racism is not exclusive to the Connor brothers; even the local priest Father Welsh makes reference to an Irish goalie saying, “That Pakie fecking Bonner. He couldn’t save a shot from a fecking cow” (Lonesome 211). Bonner is in fact not of the ascribed race, yet Welsh’s comment associates the goalie’s failure with the racially derisive nickname, which carries with it suggestions of effeminacy. Father Welsh may simply be a football fan rooted in a racist culture, but for Coleman and Valene such insults are vitally important. Racial and homophobic slurs allow Coleman and Valene to construct negative masculine others that reinforce their own masculinity and make up for their own failed performances.

¹³ The “lonesome” male West feminizing the East has been thoroughly explored by Edward Said in his Orientalism.

Yet it is the performance of masculinity by others that further threatens Coleman and Valene's sense of self and the masculinity that supports it. Father Welsh, for instance, offers a model of masculinity that despite its own deviance from the norm compromises the brother's performance. A Roman Catholic priest, Father Welsh does not fulfill the requirements of normal masculinity. He cannot have sex because he has taken a vow of celibacy. Although he is financially secure, he is not wealthy nor can he become financially successful. Even his social status as a man of the cloth, traditionally a position of respect, is diminished by the current public opinion that priests are pedophiles who "go abusing poor gasurs" (Lonesome 177). The fact that he is also an alcoholic, "a terror for the drink" as Coleman points out, certainly does not help his position in the parish either (177). In fact Father Welsh is even a failure at his job, by his own admission: "I'm a terrible priest, and I run a terrible parish Two murderers I have on me books, and I can't get either of the beggars to confess it" (177). In spite of such factors that should prove Father Welsh to be a failure as a man, his performance remains threatening to Coleman and Valene's masculinities. Rather than reinforcing the brothers' sense of masculine self, Father Welsh's presence highlights the aspects of their performance that are insufficient. For instance, even though Welsh is sexually unavailable, Girleen is in love with him; that Girleen would be more sexually attracted to a priest than two sexually available men provides further evidence to Coleman and Valene's of their sexual ineptitude. Likewise, regardless of popular opinion of priests and Welsh's own failings, he still commands at least the show of respect from the community, far more social status than the Connor brothers can claim. By acting out a

masculinity so incongruous to accepted performance, and yet more successful than that of Coleman and Valene, Welsh's performance parodies that of the brothers.

While Welsh's performance of masculinity undermines the brothers' masculinity by its efficacy, Girleen is a threat to Coleman and Valene simply because she performs masculinity at all. It is not that Girleen pretends to be a man; rather she exhibits qualities and behaviour that are typically considered masculine. By selling her father's bootlegged poteen, Girleen is able to maintain a degree of financial independence. Likewise, Girleen wields her sexuality with a high degree of power and control that for Valene and Coleman should be exhibited by males. Unlike the adolescent sexuality of Coleman and Valene, Girleen is aware enough of her sexuality to make jest of it: "Well, a fella won't be getting into my knickers on a postman's wages. I'll tell you that, now" (180). Yet sexuality is not simply about power and control for Girleen, since she is actually in love with Father Welsh, which she half admits when she jokes, "I do only tease you now and again, and only to camouflage the mad passion I have deep within me for ya" (211). Far from the stereotypical "virgin/whore" that Mary Trotter describes her as, Girleen challenges notions of masculinity in the play by revealing masculine qualities to be nothing more than performance (164). In part, Girleen challenges masculinity because she challenges gender roles in general. Dissatisfied with the prospects that her society offers her as a woman, Girleen defies gender norms. Girleen's name, for instance, is a moniker she has adopted perhaps because it mocks her gender¹⁴. Additionally, by taking on a nickname, Girleen avoids the associations with an impossible ideal femininity that her real name carries:

¹⁴ The suffix "een" elsewhere means "a bit" or "a little." Thus the name Girleen suggests that she is both "a little girl," and only "a bit of a girl," and therefore less feminine.

WELSH. What kind of a name's Girleen for a girl anyways? What's your proper firstname?

GIRLEEN. (*cringing*) Mary.

WELSH. (*laughing*) Mary? And you go laughing a Roderick then?

GIRLEEN. Mary's the name of the mammy of Our Lord, did you ever hear tell of it?

WELSH. I heard of somewhere along the line.

GIRLEEN. It's the reason she never got anywhere for herself. Fecking Mary. (215)

It is not the name "Mary" that is "the reason she never got anywhere," but the associations of the name with an ideal feminine. With its suggestion of the nearly fetishized significance of the Virgin Mary in Irish culture, the name already predestines a particular gender role for Girleen. McDonagh plays with the stereotypes that Trotter sees in Girleen, not only giving her a virginal name, but also a literal heart of gold, the locket that she wishes to give to Father Welsh. Girleen's role seems certain, clearly decided by these outward signs. Yet determined not to be held back by the script of gender, Girleen puts on a masculine act, playing the part of an "oul tough" (Lonesome 218). In doing so, Girleen exposes the weakness of Coleman and Valene's performance, forcing them to rely on other means by which to demonstrate and verify their masculinity.

With their masculine performances constantly undermined and compromised, Coleman and Valene fall back on the old standard of masculine performance – violence – to reinforce their masculine identities. For Coleman and Valene, violence is the only masculine act that they can perform successfully, the only means of proving their

manhood. Even though others, Welsh and Girleen, compromise their masculine performances, Coleman and Valene only direct acts of violence at each other or at the things the other values. The brothers are reluctant to use violence against Welsh or Girleen because they risk being further compromised should violence be used against them more successfully, demonstrated when Girleen turns a knife against Coleman to breakup the brothers' fighting (Lonesome 231). Violence towards each other, however, is an effective way for the brothers to demonstrate their masculinity and simultaneously prove the masculinity of the other deficient. In fact, Coleman and Valene resort to violence most often when their masculinities are challenged by the other's performance. In each instance when the brothers' fighting intensifies and becomes physical violence, the catalyst for the escalation is the perception that one brother is undermining the other's masculinity. The first fist-fight that Coleman and Valene engage in is instigated by Valene rubbing his unemployment cheque in Coleman's face, proclaiming his superior wealth (Lonesome 180). Other scenes of violence between the brothers follow in a similar fashion. Coleman melts Valene's figurines in retaliation for being called a "virgin gayboy" and Valene in turn threatens to shoot Coleman with a shotgun over the melted saints (Lonesome 198). Later, the Connors get into a wrestling match over a bag of Taytos potato chips. Coleman and Valene's violence is as competitive as their other attempts to prove their masculinity, producing a cycle of fraternal violence¹⁵.

Yet, ironically, violence does little to reinforce Coleman and Valene's masculinity, as it only highlights the failures of the other aspects of their performances. When Valene pulls the shotgun on Coleman over the melted figurines, Welsh points out

¹⁵ The feud between Coleman and Valene is often viewed by critics as an allegory for the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland (Wolf 50). If so, in this play, it undermines the traditional masculinity of the "hardmen" who participate in those "Troubles," enacting a failure of both nationalism and masculinity.

the ridiculousness of both Valene's violence and his materialism: "You can't go shooting your brother o'er inanimate objects, Valene!" (204). Similarly, Welsh scolds Coleman for murdering his father, saying, "getting your hair-style insulted is no just cause to go murdering someone, in fact it's the worst cause I did ever hear" (221). Even Coleman and Valene's acts of violence themselves are upstaged by the violence of another. While the brothers are fighting over the melted figurines, Welsh places his hands in the boiling plastic of the saints, an act of self-violence that overshadows the quarrel between Coleman and Valene. Likewise, during their wrestling over the Taytos, Coleman and Valene's violence is again trumped by Girleen, who pulls a knife on Coleman in order to get their attention. In both cases, Coleman and Valene can only respond to Welsh and Girleen's violence with astonishment, as each act proves their own violence inferior.

As Welsh and Girleen demonstrate, in Leenane violence seems to be endemic. Welsh describes Leenane as a place where "God has no jurisdiction" (175). The violence in Leenane recalls "the association that Synge creates between the West of Ireland and violence, lawlessness and madness," and McDonagh continues this portrayal of the region. (Lanters 213). The murders of Mag Folan by her daughter Maureen and of Oona Dowd by her husband Mick are events that permeate the town's folklore and weigh heavy on Welsh's conscience as a priest¹⁶. The girls' under-twelves football team are also a reflection of the violence of the society, as Welsh attests,

WELSH. Ten red cards in four games, Coleman. That's a world record in girls' football. That'd be a record in boys' football. One of the lasses from St Angela's she's still in hospital after meeting us. (179)

¹⁶ Maureen's murder of Mag is the climax of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, while Mick's murder of his wife is a frequent subject of *A Skull in Connemara*.

The Beauty Queen of Leenane reveals that even Welsh is susceptible to the allure of violence, having “punched Mairtin Hanlon in the head once, and for no reason” (15).

For all its violence (and sometimes because of it), however, The Lonesome West is a comedy. In fact, the humour of the play is often derived from its violence, as the example of the aggression of the girl’s football demonstrates. The play’s audience often finds itself laughing at moments when Coleman and Valene are inflicting horrible physical and psychological violence upon one another. Indeed, the audience is invited to laugh at this violence, such as when Coleman and Valene first get into a fight and “GIRLEEN *laughs as they struggle together*” (182). Other scenes, such as the climactic competitive confession between the brothers where Coleman and Valene attempt to out do each other, by confessing to the terrible violence they have inflicted upon each other, resulting in a standoff at knifepoint and gunpoint, are simply hilarious and demand an appropriate response. The comedy of such scenes lies in the ludicrous behaviour of the brothers, who, like the audience who continue to laugh through the scene, do not immediately recognize the gravity of their actions, especially when at other times they react violently “over minor matters” (Feeney 26). Initially, Coleman and Valene enjoy confessing to their violent deeds as it “is a great oul game ... apologizing” (239). It is funny to watch the brothers confess to increasingly appalling crimes, from Coleman burning Valene’s comic books to Valene dropping stones on Coleman’s head in his sleep. As William Boles notes, “the audience laughs at ... [McDonagh’s] ability to capture the everyday cruelties we practice ... because of the richly textured and humorous characters he has created” (129). The humour in The Lonesome West comes from the absurdity of such situations, where violence is present in unfamiliar circumstances or where the

degree of violence seems to be over-amplified. Pre-teen girls causing each other bodily harm in a football game or brothers fighting over potato chips seem to be incidents of violence so absurd that they would be impossible in everyday life. Coleman and Valene even transform confession and apologizing into an extremely violent act in a disarming, and therefore comic, way.

Audience reaction to the violence of The Lonesome West is of course influenced by how the play is staged. Reviewers of the play frequently differ in opinion on how productions handle the play's comic violence. Both Richard Zoglin and Robert Brustein, reviewing performances from the play's 1999 run at New York's Lyceum Theatre (directed by Gary Hynes), praise McDonagh's balance of violence and comedy ("Broadway" 85; "Spring" 34). Zoglin sees "sadness" in the play that adds depth beyond the "grisly laughs" ("Broadway" 85). On the other hand, Kate Taylor, reviewing a performance from the 2002 production at the Bluma Appel Theatre in Toronto (directed by Jackie Maxwell), argues that The Lonesome West's comic violence "wears thin" (R3). For Taylor, once the play's violence "has extinguished all possibility of redemption, a theatregoer is left weighing the darkness, now too uncertain of the fun to keep laughing," perhaps overstating a lack of hope in the play's conclusion (R3). Kevin Prokosh's review of the 2002 MTC Warehouse production in Winnipeg (directed by Jean Morpurgo) emphasizes the irony of the opening night audience "laughing itself sick at one of the blackest, bleakest stories ever told" ("Lonesome" C5). For Prokosh, the "cartoon funny" violence is effective in conveying the tensions of the play, yet he does note that "there is barely enough time between outbursts of laughter to reflect on what McDonagh is really talking about" ("Lonesome" C5). The potential for the play's comedy to at times over

shadow its serious subject matter is highlighted by the comments of Morpurgo, the director of the Winnipeg production, who says, “You find yourself laughing at things you know you shouldn’t be laughing at” (Prokosh “Wild” C6).

To respond to Coleman and Valene’s violence with laughter may be to respond to the absurdity of their situation, but there are moments in The Lonesome West where laughter should be the least appropriate response. Welsh’s scalding of his hands in the melted figurines, for example, occurs when the brothers are fighting over a bag of potato chips, at which an audience cannot help but laugh. But in the overlap between these moments, between the hilarity of Coleman and Valene’s skirmish and Welsh’s masochism, laughter loses its appropriateness. Yet, at a performance of the play at the MTC Warehouse in Winnipeg, much of the audience continued to laugh through Father Welsh’s scalding, while others watched in horror at both this act of masochism and the reaction of their fellow viewers¹⁷. The audience was seemingly divided in half by the scene, with some members still laughing into the ensuing intermission. The shock from members of the audience in this instance matches the shock Coleman and Valene demonstrate on stage, while the laughter of other audience members echoes the levity which other horrors in the play have been treated with (Lonesome 208). Referring to Quentin Tarantino’s film Pulp Fiction, Sharon Willis suggests that “to be caught laughing when something horrific happens, gasping at the mismatch between our affective state and the next image, reproduces or recalls the embarrassment, or even shame, of being caught in breach of social discipline” (281)¹⁸. Lanter sees such moments in The

¹⁷ These observations are derived from the performance at the MTC Warehouse on April 18, 2002, and are of course neither scientific nor objective.

¹⁸ Comparisons between McDonagh and Tarantino permeate criticism on McDonagh. Lanter suggests that “McDonagh’s plays have as much in common with film like Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction as they do

Lonesome West as “audience manipulation,” where McDonagh “shifts the moral center from the play to the audience” (219). The shock of such breaches, “derived not as much from the horrific torture on stage ... as from the spectator’s realization that McDonagh has cleverly deceived them,” produces moments where the destructive nature of violence becomes clear (Boles 130). Moreover, by laughing at the violence they are confronted with, the audience is made complicit in the brothers’ violence. The audience’s laughter itself has become a form of violence, aligned with the gleeful cruelty that Coleman and Valene take such glee in inflicting on each other. The shock of the breach makes the audience aware of their complicity with the violence onstage, as well as the violence done to them by the play. The audience’s laughter is violence, and McDonagh’s manipulative comedy that forces them to laugh is a kind of violence done to them.

The intrusion of reality on the audience’s experience of the play, their sudden recognition of violent acts as harmful rather than comic, draws attention to the hyperreality of the absurd lives the Connor brothers live. Much of Coleman and Valene’s understanding of the world comes from media and pop culture, particularly television. When Tom Hanlon commits suicide, Valene (and later Coleman) is only able to comprehend the gravity of the situation by relating it to a British television program:

WELSH. Rotting in hell now, Tom Hanlon is. According to the Catholic Church anyways he is, the same as every suicide. No remorse. No mercy on him.

VALENE. Is that right now? Every suicide you’re saying?

WELSH. According to us mob it’s right anyways.

with [J. M.] Synge’s *Playboy [of the Western World]* (213). Other critics and reviewers, such as Joseph Feeney, Jack Kroll, and Richard Zoglin, echo Lanter.

VALENE. Well I didn't know that. That's a turn-up for the books. So
the fella from *Alias Smith and Jones*, he'd be in hell.

WELSH. I don't know the fella from *Alias Smith and Jones*.

VALENE. Not the blonde one, now, the other one.

WELSH. I don't know the fella.

VALENE. He killed himself, and at the height of his fame. (201)

As Lanters notes, the importance of media to Valene is so great that Alias Smith and Jones "immediately comes to dominate the conversation, to the exclusion of Thomas" (216). The significance of the hyperreality of media reality surpasses the reality of Hanlon's suicide. The inability of Valene to distinguish between the significance of Hanlon's death and the suicide of a television star demonstrates the disconnection of reality in the play. This disconnection is itself mirrored by the audience's experience of watching the drama unfold, with real human bodies acting out fictitious violence on stage. The presence of real bodies on stage always threatens the potential for real violence, evidenced by the riots that have erupted from stage productions such as Synge's Playboy of the Western World¹⁹ (Price 115). For Brustein, the violence of McDonagh's plays often resembles that of "an animated cartoon, the one genre in which violence has no lasting physical consequences" ("Aesthetics" 34). However, the moments when the violence The Lonesome West is at its most real, those places where violence and humour come into mutual violation (notably Welsh's scalding of his hands), produce a tension between reality and representation that defies the frivolity of cartoon. For Coleman,

¹⁹ Comparisons between Synge and McDonagh are as frequent as McDonagh's denials of Synge's influence. Critics generally point to evidence of Synge's influence in McDonagh's language, and particularly in his use of violence. See Brustein Diehl, Feeney, O'Toole, Lanters, and Price for accounts of the similarities between both playwrights.

Valene, and audience alike, coming face to face with the reality of violence (in both real and unreal ways) is to be required to reevaluate one's understanding of the effects of violence. Though the violence of the play's climactic confrontation remains cartoon-like, with Coleman shooting Valene's stove, the reality of this violence remains present in the audience's implication in the violence on stage.

By destabilizing accepted notions of violence through humour, The Lonesome West offers new possibilities for violence, particularly redemptive violence. Welsh's suicide proposes that sacrificial violence can be productive. In his suicide note, Welsh outlines his hopes for his sacrifice:

WELSH. I have been thinking about ye non-stop since the night I did scald me hands there at yeres. Every time the pain does go through them hands I do think about ye, and let me tell you this. I would take that pain and pain a thousand times worse, and bear it with a smile, if only I could restore to ye the love for each other as brothers ye do so woefully lack, that must have been there some day. (222)

Welsh's desire to displace Coleman and Valene's violence onto himself recalls René Girard's concept of sacrificial violence. According to Girard, sacrifice is meant to suppress "all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies and quarrels within the community," by providing a surrogate victim for such violence (8). The surrogate victim acts as an outlet for the violence of the community, at once a real and symbolic means of protecting "the entire community from its own violence" (Girard 8). Girard cites the example of Cain and Abel as demonstrating the importance of sacrificial violence:

Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into. Such, perhaps, is one of the meanings of the story of Cain and Abel One brother kills the other, and the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal A frequent motif of the Old Testament ... is that of brothers at odds with one another. Their fatal penchant for violence can only be diverted by the intervention of a third party, the sacrificial victim or victims. Cain's 'jealousy' of his brother is only another term for his one characteristic trait: his lack of a sacrificial outlet."

(4)

Since Coleman and Valene, like two Cains, lack an outlet for their frustrations, Welsh intends his sacrifice to inspire the brothers to reevaluate their relationship, to "go stepping back and making a listen of all the things about the other that do get on yere nerves, and the wrongs the other has done and be forgiving each other them wrongs, no matter what they may be"²⁰ (223).

Welsh's sacrifice also has masochistic implications, particularly resembling what Kaja Silverman calls Christian masochism. Silverman describes the Christian masochist as one who "seeks to remake him or herself according to the model of the suffering of Christ, the very picture of earthly divestiture and loss" (198). In putting his hands in the melted plastic of the figurines and later committing suicide, Welsh aspires to a Christ-like goal of saving the Connor brothers²¹. Certainly Welsh's promise to "take that pain and pain a thousand times worse, and bear it with a smile" reflects a desire to emulate the

²⁰ Ironically, this line inspires the out of control violence of the play's climax.

²¹ The goal of Welsh's suicide sets it apart from the suicides of Tom Hanlon or the actor from Alias Smith and Jones, which seemingly lacked such a noble purpose.

sacrifice of Christ (Lonesome 222). Interestingly, Silverman suggests that “Christian masochism has radically emasculating implications, and is in its purest forms intrinsically incompatible with the pretensions of masculinity” (198). In this context, Welsh’s suicide challenges Coleman and Valene’s masculine violence, as its purpose is to negate the possibility of violence as masculine performance.

Welsh’s sacrifice, however, ultimately fails to subdue the violence between Coleman and Valene. The brothers lack the knowledge to comprehend the significance and intention of Welsh’s suicide. Girard warns that “the difference between sacrificial and non-sacrificial violence is anything but exact; it is even arbitrary” (40). An understanding of the religious and ritual structure that defines sacrificial violence against non-sacrificial violence is required for sacrifice to be successful; “when this difference has been effaced,” Girard suggests, “purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community” (49). Coleman and Valene’s concept of religion is certainly as warped as their concept of masculinity. When Welsh criticizes Valene for threatening to kill Coleman over “inanimate objects,” the melted figurines, Valene demonstrates his understanding of religion:

VALENE. Inanimate objects? Me figurines of the saints? And you call
 yoursel’ a priest? No wonder you’re the laughing stock of the
 Catholic Church in Ireland. (204)

Thus, without an understanding of its religious significance and roots, Coleman and Valene’s confessing is quickly transformed from a humbling act into a competitive act of violence. Instead of pacifying Coleman and Valene’s violence, Welsh’s sacrifice fuels it anew.

Yet, despite the failure of Welsh's sacrifice to inspire reconciliation between Coleman and Valene in the way Welsh intended, it is the catalyst for a profound change in the brothers' relationship. The renewed violence between the brothers that Welsh's suicide triggers escalates to nearly homicidal proportions, with Valene threatening Coleman with a knife and Coleman turning a shotgun on Valene. The increasing psychological violence of the confessing competition matches these physical threats, as Valene admits to intentionally injuring a girl Coleman was in love with and Coleman confesses that he cut the ears off of Valene's dog Lassie. In the process, however, the connection between violence and masculinity that the brothers depend upon is weakened, if not completely dissolved. As Coleman aims the shotgun at Valene's stove, Valene twice proclaims, "You're not a man at all" (252-53). This ultimate denial of masculinity implies not only feminization or homosexuality in the extreme, but also the possibility that masculinity is unattainable for Coleman. While the violence between the two continues, with Coleman destroying Valene's new figurines and stove, and both coming to the verge of killing each other, Valene's statement suggests a new understanding of violence. Coleman and Valene reach the limits of their violence only to come to the realization that to continue as they are means to have to kill each other:

VALENE. I want to kill you, Coleman.

COLEMAN. Ar, don't be saying that, now Val.

VALENE. (*sadly*) It's true, Coleman. I want to kill you. (255)

Coleman and Valene back down and eventually sincerely apologize to one another, aware that in some way they need each other.

Coleman and Valene's recognitions that masculinity is not dependent on violence and that they are dependent on one another, offer hope at the end of The Lonesome West. A pervasive theme in the play is loneliness, suggested by the play's title, itself drawn from the line "there is a sainted glory this day in the lonesome west" in Synge's Playboy (7). Though Lanter points out the irony of the "appalling lack of 'sainted glory' on the part of any of its characters," it is the "lonesome" of the title that is most significant, because the fear of being lonesome is in the end more threatening to Coleman and Valene than any violence they act out (213). The brothers take to heart Welsh's words following Tom Hanlon's suicide:

WELSH. ... a life full of loneliness that took him there but a life full of
 good points too. Every life has good points, even if it's only ...
 seeing rivers, or going traveling, or watching football on the telly
 Or the hopes of being loved. (200)

To avoid a fate similar to Hanlon and Welsh the brothers must learn to live with each other and learn to control the violence between them. The two do agree that they "do like a good fight" because it "does show you care" (Lonesome 256). This agreement is perhaps grounds upon which Coleman and Valene can build a relationship. There is life for Coleman and Valene beyond violence, but it requires that each learns to accept the other. The challenge for Coleman and Valene is to define their masculinities by means other than violence and opposition. To define their masculine identities against that of the other is to compete with the other's masculinity, which for the brothers inevitably leads to violence. They need to find a new means of affirming their masculinity, which may be their fraternity. When Valene chooses not to burn Welsh's letter and instead keep

it and the gold heart Girleen bought for Welsh hanging from the crucifix on the wall, his actions indicate that there is hope for him and Coleman. While he may not “be buying the fecker a pint anyways,” he will at least try to get along with Coleman. They will try to live with their own version of “love for each other as brothers” that Welsh asks for in his suicide letter (Lonesome 222).

Chapter Three

“Smashed, revealed in new light”: Reading New Masculinities Beyond Violence in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient

“Men had always been the reciters of poetry in the desert”

- Almásy, the English patient (The English Patient 240)

In an entry in the English patient’s copy of Herodotus’ The Histories, his nurse Hana reads, “*There are betrayals in war that are childlike compared with our human betrayals during peace. The new lover enters the habits of the other. Things are smashed, revealed in new light*” (Ondaatje 97). While what Hana reads may be about love, throughout Michael Ondaatje’s novel The English Patient, the “things” that are most often smashed and revealed in new light are men. Set against the backdrop of the end of World War II, Ondaatje portrays masculinities shattered by the effects of the extreme violence of war and forced to be reinvented. Violence in the novel, manifested in various forms from direct physical violence to the violence of nationalism and racism, destroys flesh and breaks down the foundations identity. Each of the novel’s primary characters, the English patient, Caravaggio, Kip, and Hana, have been directly affected by this violence, their bodies and lives irreparably scarred. But though this violence brings about destruction, in its aftermath the men of The English Patient are imbued with a resolve to rewrite the scripts of masculinity that tie their identities to violence. Together with Hana, the novel’s central female character, who is an equal partner in their

recreation of masculinity, these men reshape themselves and embrace community as a means of overcoming the inevitability of violence. The community that the four characters aspire to requires that they try to escape the structures related to masculinity, such as nationalism, patriarchy and capitalism, which have fueled the violence in their lives. These structures and the violence that they generate are in turn replaced with new performances that promote community through multiplicity and fluidity of identity as opposed to the solitude and singularity associated with masculinity. Like the English patient's copy of Herodotus' Histories, the ever expanding book which becomes the group's model for reconstructing their lives, they break free of their bindings, the boundaries of gender norms.

In The English Patient the violence of war is pervasive; it lurks everywhere in hidden mines and fallen bombs, in torture rooms and burning planes. It is written on the bodies of the men it touches and shapes. But whereas war is often sentimentally linked to masculinity through associations of glory and power as proof of manhood, in The English Patient war's violence is only destructive and dehumanizing. Rather than building and defining masculinity, the novel characterizes war as producing loss and ruin. If it does not destroy them completely, the physical violence of war shatters the bodies and identities of every man in the novel. This violence is not the "aestheticized brutality" that Christian Bök identifies as a trademark of Ondaatje's early works, such as The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming Through Slaughter (111). Instead, as Susan Ellis points out, The English Patient does not romanticize violence, but considers its implications (29). Furthermore, the connection between violence and masculine

performance that Bök notes in Ondaatje's early works is severed in The English Patient²² (116). The men of The English Patient are not the purveyors of violence, but the recipients of its damaging effects.

The effects of physical violence are most tellingly written on the body of the English patient, a man whose body has been devastated. Having crashed his plane in the desert during the war, the English patient's body is "burned beyond recognition" (Ondaatje 165). Various passages in the novel describe the English patient's body as "burned into the colour of aubergine," with "destroyed feet" and "volcanic flesh" (4, 3, 205). Because of his injuries, the English patient hardly resembles a person, looking instead "like a burned animal" (41). In fact, the English patient's burns are so severe that all physical markers of his identity have been erased: "There is a face, but it is unrecognizable. The nerves all gone. You can pass a match across his face and there is no expression" (Ondaatje 28). He is, as Raymond Younis says, a "*tabula rasa* so to speak" (4). Mirroring the physical erasure of his self, the trauma caused by the crash also seems to have erased his identity in a psychological sense. He has partial amnesia to the extent that he does not remember who he is²³, like the "soldiers lost from themselves"

²² Bök suggests that the male characters in Ondaatje's early poetry and prose act out violence as an art form. Characters such as William Bonney from The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden from Coming Through Slaughter are artists whose art is closely tied to violence. As Bök traces the violent masculinity of Ondaatje's work, however, he notices a "subtle shift in attitude" in Ondaatje's later works Running in the Family and In the Skin of a Lion (119). This shift in attitude is a movement away from the aesthetic violence of Bonney and Bolden towards recognition of the limits of violence as a creative medium. As Bök says: "the early Ondaatje appears to believe that great literature must be sociopolitically indifferent, the later Ondaatje appears to express a burgeoning tension between two conflicting, artistic impulses: the will to social retreat and the will to social contact" (112). Bök's essay predates the publishing of The English Patient, which according to Ellis continues and expands on the changes Bök discusses (25-26).

²³ Whether or not the English patient is indeed Count Ladislaus de Almásy is left open to a certain amount of interpretation in the novel, and, as Stephen Scobie suggests, "scarcely matters" (98). For the purposes of this thesis it will be assumed that the English patient and Almásy are different identities of the same person. For clarity and consistency, however, this person will be referred to as the English patient except in direct quotations stating otherwise.

coming out of the war without identification (Ondaatje 95). The English patient speaks “sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person,” which suggests that his sense of self is as fractured and damaged as his burned body (Ondaatje 247).

Like the English patient, Caravaggio is horribly mutilated by the violence of war. A spy for the Allies during the war, Caravaggio was captured and tortured, his thumbs severed from both hands leaving “what looks like a gill where the thumb has been cut away” (Ondaatje 54). With his hands maimed, Caravaggio, a thief before the war, also loses his sense of identity. Not only does the removal of his thumbs inhibit Caravaggio’s skills as a thief, but after the ordeal of his torture he feels incapable of performing the actions that once defined him, saying, “I lost my nerve” (Ondaatje 33). Hana writes, Caravaggio “is in a time of darkness, [he] has no confidence” (61). Having lost his potency as a thief and “in near ruins” psychologically, Caravaggio sinks into morphine addiction (Ondaatje 27). Caravaggio was independent and self-sufficient as a thief and a spy, occupations commonly associated with masculinity. Without his thumbs, however, he becomes dependent on the assistance of others and on the drug to assuage the pain in his hands and the pain of his loss and to provide him the “balance” he feels he has lost (Ondaatje 121). Like the English patient, Caravaggio is dehumanized by his injuries, becoming like “a large animal” (Ondaatje 27).

Though they do not suffer terrible disfigurement, Kip and Hana experience the horrors of the physical violence of war first hand. Both Kip and Hana perform roles in the war that place them face-to-face with the realities of violence and its effects. Working as a sapper for the British army constantly exposes Kip to the potential violence housed in mines and bombs. This hidden potential, and the threat it poses, is itself

violence that affects Kip. When defusing a bomb, Kip must deal with the possibilities of tricks that could literally explode into violence, which makes him feel like “an animal reacting just to protect [him]self” (Ondaatje 216). Kip knows the destruction that mines and bombs are capable of causing, since he has lost two men close to him to bomb disposal accidents. The first, his mentor Lord Suffolk, was killed by an unexploded bomb in England. The second, his second-in-command Sam Hardy, is killed by a landmine in Italy. Both Suffolk and Hardy were English men that Kip, a Sikh from India, respected and was respected by. Suffolk had taken Kip into his company of sappers and “was the first real gentleman [Kip] had met in England,” while Hardy would not hesitate to acknowledge Kip’s superior rank despite their racial difference (Ondaatje 187). In losing Suffolk and Hardy, Kip loses two men who helped define him as a sapper.

Hana, too, is exposed to the horrors of war and loses those dear to her to its violence. A nurse on the Italian front, Hana’s encounters with the effects of war, the wounded soldiers that she cares for, traumatize her. Constantly having to deal with death and injury, Hana becomes “shell-shocked”: “her body had been in a war and, as in love, it had used every part of itself” (Ondaatje 81). In addition to the endless flow of wounded and dead, Hana suffers the loss of three males in life: her father, her lover, and her unborn child. Both her father and her lover are killed in battle. Following their deaths, Hana chooses to terminate her pregnancy: “I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war” (82). Notably, she identifies the child as male, like the other victims of the war she loses: “I had continued conversations with the child In my head. I was talking to *him* while I bathed and nursed patients” (82)²⁴. Surrounded by men torn apart by war in whom she “kept seeing the child whenever they died,” Hana chooses to save

²⁴ Italics added for emphasis.

her child from such violence (Ondaatje 83). In many ways the violence done to the men in Hana's life is violence done to her since, in the context of violent war, she chooses to abort her child and must cope with the grief of losing her father and lover.

Behind the physical violence of war in The English Patient is a violence that may not directly leave visible reminders of its presence such as burned bodies and mutilated hands, but is equally devastating and leaves scars that run just as deep – the violence of imperialism. According to Ellis, the way The English Patient portrays the violence of imperialism calls attention to the “implications of colonialism ... and, to some extent gender relationships” (22). Driven by the interrelated structures of nationalism, patriarchy, and capitalism, imperialism is the aggressive force that perpetuates and fuels the physical violence of war. Imperialism in The English Patient, however, does not simply propel war's violence. Rather it wields its own subtle violence through discourses of ownership and racism that in their own way are as destructive and oppressive as land mines and bombs, which are the expression of colonial violence. Though they may not directly destroy or mutilate bodies, these weapons of imperialism devastate the spirits and minds of those they are directed against. The forces of imperialism – nationalism, capitalism and patriarchy – each create artificial and imaginary boundaries that define difference and assign value to this difference in a process of Othering²⁵. Nationalism generates boundaries between peoples of one nation and those of another, relying on discourses of race and national identity to maintain and promote hierarchical distinctions that value “white” over “black” and “English” over “German” or “Indian.” Similarly, capitalism erects hierarchical divisions between owner and that which is owned.

²⁵ For an in depth discussion of Othering and the Other in The English Patient based upon the theories of Homi Bhabha and Edward Said see “The Other Questioned: Exoticism and Displacement in Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient” by Eleanor Ty.

Patriarchy, too, creates hierarchies between genders, with masculine as positive in relation to feminine. In The English Patient, the hierarchies that imperialism constructs and maintains, the systems of “trade and power, money and war,” have, as the English patient says, “shaped the world” (250). For the English patient, Caravaggio, Kip, and Hana, each of whom has been affected by the violence of imperialism, to resist imperialism and its values means shaping the world anew. To do so requires an attempt to erase limiting and divisive hierarchies, as the English patient’s desire to “walk upon an earth that had no maps” suggests (Ondaatje 261).

Though the English patient’s body has been devastated by the physical violence of war, he has suffered greater injury through the violence of imperialism. Fire from his plane crash may have burned his body, but his psyche was damaged before the accident by the violence done in the name of imperialism to the people he loved. Moreover, the realization that he has been made complicit in the violence of imperialism through his past work as a desert explorer and geographer causes the English patient to reject the values of nationalism, capitalism, and patriarchy. In the desert, the English patient learns to see beyond national affiliations and race as he becomes involved in a community of explorers who “reconceive themselves in ways other than through their national identities” as “an ideal circle of international men” (Ty 12-13). As the English patient recounts, “We were German, English, Hungarian, African, - all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless” (Ondaatje 138). However, as the Second World War looms, concerns of national identity invade this desert community, forcing its members to choose national allegiance and placing artificial borders between them. Whereas the common goal of discovery and exploration brings together a diverse

population in the desert, for the English patient, as David Williams suggests, “nations come between people, forcing them to betray each other” (“Book” 188). The most striking evidence of the destructive potential of nationalism for the English patient is the death of his friend Madox, who the English patient claims “died because of nations” (Ondaatje 138). Although Madox commits suicide, a “jingoistic” sermon in support of the war which has forced him to return to England and has made him an enemy of his friends in the desert spurs him to the act (Ondaatje 242). As Younis notes, the “constructive human relationships in the novel” are in sharp “contrast to the lack of cohesion that conflict, nationhood, and nationalism engender on the international stage” (4). In light of the devastation brought about by nationalism that the English patient witnesses, it is no wonder that his creed becomes “Erase the family name! Erase nations!” (Ondaatje 139).

In addition to the “annihilation that nationalism ... motivates,” patriarchy and capitalism contribute their own destructive impulses (Younis 4). The English patient demonstrates that the desire to name and own that capitalism and patriarchy promote are just as damaging as the related division caused by nationalism (Ellis 27). Even within his desert community the English patient is aware of those who wanted to name and own parts of the desert themselves: “Still some wanted their mark there Fenelon-Barnes wanted the fossil trees he discovered to bear his name. He even wanted a tribe to take his name” (139). The English patient, on the other hand, believes that “the desert could not be claimed or owned,” and celebrates the mapmakers who “named the places they traveled through with the names of lovers rather than their own” (138, 140). Even in his

love affair with Katharine Clifton, the wife of a fellow explorer, the English patient rails against possessive desires:

“What do you hate most?” he asks.

“A lie. And you?”

“Ownership,” he says. “When you leave me, forget me.” (152)

Yet, despite his proclaimed hatred of ownership, the English patient finds himself naming and claiming within his love affair: “This is my shoulder, he thinks, not her husband’s, this is my shoulder” (156). His desire to have Katharine as his own ultimately betrays both of them. Following Katharine’s husband’s attempted murder-suicide that leaves Katharine injured and her husband dead, the English patient fails to save her because he claims ownership of her. Having left Katharine in a cave in the desert, the English patient seeks help from British authorities, but is rejected because of the false claim he makes. He confesses to Caravaggio,

“I didn’t give the right name.”

“Yours?”

“I gave them mine”

“I said she was my *wife* Whereas the only name I should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton’s.” (250-251)

The prejudices of ownership and nationalism in concert are the cause of Katharine’s death, and the English patient bears part of the responsibility for succumbing to the lure of ownership. Indeed, Katharine’s death, and the guilt that the English patient feels for his part in it, shapes the first part of his creed “Erase the family name!” that suggests a denial of the patriarchal patronym and the ownership that it implies (Ondaatje 139).

The English patient is not the only character “deformed by nation-states” and the discourses of nationalism, patriarchy, and capitalism (Ondaatje 138). Caravaggio, Kip, and Hana are each hurt by these forces of imperialism and the violence they bring. The injuries to Caravaggio’s hands may have been a result of torture, but that torture was driven by imperialism. Before the war, Caravaggio was an unusual thief. Hana tells the English patient, “Some thieves are collectors, like some of the explorers you scorn, like some men with women or some women with men. But Caravaggio was not like that. He was too curious and generous to be a successful thief” (169). In the war, however, Caravaggio becomes a spy, though he says, “Really I was still a thief. No great patriot. No great hero. They had just made my skills official” (35). The military appropriates his abilities for the use of the nation. His talents stripped of any curiosity or generosity, Caravaggio says to Hana upon stealing a bottle of wine, “‘My country taught me all this. It’s what I did for them during the war.’ ... ‘And look what they did to you,’ she said to herself” (85). It is in the service of the nation that Caravaggio is captured, and it is in the interest of another nation that he is tortured – he is simply a pawn in game of agents and double agents. Caravaggio’s suffering and experiences as a spy have taught him the workings of imperialism and the destruction it brings, which he rails against to Hana and Kip:

“What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? ... What is Kip doing fighting English wars? ... It’s only the rich who can’t afford to be smart They have to protect their belongings. No one is meaner than the rich But they have to follow the rules of their shitty civilized world. They declare

war, they have honour, and they can't leave. But you two. We three. We're free." (122-123)

Caravaggio recognizes that he has been exploited, "used ... during this war," and in turn rejects the values of imperialism that have made him a tool of war (Ondaatje 253).

Hana, too, recognizes the injustice and exploitation brought about by the violence that imperialism inflicts on people's lives. Through her exposure to the constant flow of wounded, the "thermometer of blood [that] moved up the country," Hana comes face to face with the effects of imperial violence (Ondaatje 50). Having witnessed it first hand like Caravaggio, Hana knows the dehumanizing nature of imperial violence:

"Every damn general should have had my job. Every damn general I could never believe in all those services they gave for the dead. Their vulgar rhetoric How dare they talk like that about a human being." (84)

Hana has also felt the effects of imperialism's patriarchal hand herself. She is turned into a commodity because of her gender: "I was sick of the hunger. Of being lusted at Sick of being treated like gold because I was female" (85). But Hana's views of imperialism are best represented by a story Caravaggio tells of her childhood in which she sings "La Marseillaise" and by her repeat performance of it at the Villa San Girolamo. While in her first performance Hana "knew what the song was about ... the cause pouring out so distinct," she sings in a drastically altered manner when she dedicates the song to Kip at the Villa (53). In her second version of this national anthem Hana sings "as if it was something scarred, as if one couldn't ever again bring all the hope of the song together," and for Caravaggio "there was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against all the mountains of power" (269).

Hana's second performance echoes her earlier statements about the violence of imperialism. Her original vision of nationalism has been destroyed by the violence she has seen done in its name. So Hana, too, rejects imperialism, refusing to allow its violence and values to control her.

Of all four characters, however, the one most affected by the violence of imperialism is Kip. A Sikh conscripted into the British army, Kip is exposed to the racism inherent in nationalism and imperialism. A lone foreigner among the sapper units, Kip is constantly reminded of the difference marked by his skin colour, of his otherness. When first interviewed for a position in the sapper team, Kip feels self-conscious because of his colour, misinterpreting the gaze of Lord Suffolk's secretary Miss Morden as the suspicious glare of racism: "He turned and caught the woman's eyes on him again. He felt as guilty as if he had put the book in his pocket. She had probably never seen a turban before. The English! They expect you to fight for them but won't talk to you" (188). While Kip mistakes the intention of Miss Morden's gaze, he is justified in his error by the constant prejudice he is exposed to, such as the "hesitation by the soldiers to call him 'sir,'" despite his superior rank (Ondaatje 213). Even in his relationship with Hana, Kip cannot escape his feelings of difference and alienation: "But as even she had said, he was the brownness of rock, the brownness of a muddy storm fed river. And something in him made him step back from even the naïve innocence of such a remark. ... And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh" (105). Moreover, the bestowing of the name "Kip" itself that erases his real name is a clearly imperialist act by his commanding officer: "In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, 'What's this? Kipper grease?'" and laughter surrounded

him the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten" (87).

Despite the racism he experiences, Kip finds places where his otherness does not exclude him, first with Lord Suffolk's sapper unit and later with the community at the Villa San Girolamo. The isolation that Kip feels as a result of his difference is overcome by Suffolk, who says, "I trust you, Mr. Singh, you know that don't you?" (186).

Likewise, as Younis suggests, things such as nationality "cease to matter in the light of Hana's love and care for [Kip], or more broadly, in the light of fundamental affinities that exist between seemingly disparate people such as Hana, Caravaggio, Kip, and Almásy" (4). In fact, Kip's interactions with both these communities instill in him an appreciation of English values. He loves Western music, constantly listening to the songs that come through his crystal radio set. Moreover, Suffolk and the English patient, Kip's "assumed English fathers," are particularly influential in shaping an image of Englishness for Kip that is not strictly imperial (Ondaatje 217). Kip "follow[s] their codes like a dutiful son" in spite of the warning of his brother who "thinks [him] a fool for trusting the English" who hang "Sikhs who are fighting for independence" (Ondaatje 217-18). The English patient sees in Kip a reflection of himself, noting, "Kip and I are both international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives" (176). To be an "international bastard" is to be wholly anti-imperialist and therefore a fitting title for both the English patient and Kip. It suggests being not only nationless, and therefore free of nationalism, but also fatherless, and therefore free of patriarchy. By accepting such a title, both men deny

association with the values of imperialism and are open to live within broader communities outside the boundaries of nationalism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

The sense of community that Kip feels with Suffolk and at the Villa is quite literally exploded, however, and his brother's concerns are justified when the atomic bomb is used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With the dropping of the atomic bomb, the violence of imperialism intrudes upon Kip's life at the Villa and he is again made to feel isolated: "Kip looks condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping" (Ondaatje 283). For Kip, the bomb is the ultimate symbol of Western imperial violence, as "he sees the streets of Asia full of fire This tremor of Western wisdom" (Ondaatje 284). The violence and the racism that Kip sees in British Imperialism undermines the ideals of Englishness that Kip has built around Suffolk and the English patient, since "when you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" (Ondaatje 286). Caravaggio, too, recognizes the racism behind the bomb, noting that "they would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (286). Kip also imagines the dropping of the bomb as patriarchal violence, saying, "In my country, when a father breaks justice in two, you kill the father" (285). The bomb ends for Kip the possibility of ignoring imperial violence and racism. Lorna Irvine draws a parallel between the English patient's discussion of Savonarola's cry of "the deluge is coming" and the Bonfire of the Vanities and the destructive fire of the atomic bomb (142). His image of Western civilization shattered, Kip first contemplates killing the English patient, but retreats from violence, choosing instead to return to his homeland and reclaim his original name: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (Ondaatje 287). By

reasserting his name Kip rejects the colonial power that would rename him and the imperialist violence that this power wields against him²⁶.

The violence done to the English patient, Caravaggio, Hana, and Kip by war and imperialism, while damaging their bodies and psyches, also produces in them a new understanding of self that embraces multiplicity. Along with their rejection of imperialist values, the four characters also come to reject the related “masculinist illusion of autonomy” that would see the self as individual, private, and egocentric²⁷ (Coleman 113). Instead, the English patient, Caravaggio, Hana, and Kip live out selves that are multiple, interconnected, communal, and fluid. In doing so they are not only reinventing themselves, but also what it means to be masculine, by freeing masculinity from the boundaries that would tie it to imperialism. In *The English Patient*, the ultimate symbol for the multiplicity of self that the four characters adopt is the English patient’s copy of Herodotus’ *The Histories*. In the novel, the English patient’s *Histories* is filled with “fragments – maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books” (96). It is an ever expanding book, having broken its binding and become “almost twice its original thickness” (Ondaatje 94). *The Histories* is also a communal text for the residents of the Villa; it is read aloud and its contents shared and supplemented. It is, according to Williams, not “*The Histories of Herodotus by Herodotus any longer*” (“Book” 182). As the book is read, written in, and even linked to

²⁶ By reclaiming his name, however, Kip is not reverting to a singular sense of identity. Instead, he is incorporating his past and his present, bringing his Indian heritage together with what he has learned and experienced at the Villa. While reclaiming his name may appear to be a reversion to nationalism, the end of the novel suggests that Kip carries with him the values that he shared with Hana, Caravaggio and the English patient into his life in India.

²⁷ Coleman here refers to masculinity in Ondaatje’s earlier memoir *Running in the Family*, which he sees as presenting a “male subject” who “breaks the tradition of autonomous masculinity and instead celebrates an interdependency which is ... a form of masculine innovation” (130). *The English Patient* is clearly a further development of the “masculine innovation” explored in *Running in the Family*.

other books, Williams suggests that The Histories resembles the flow of hypertext, becoming borderless where “another text always looms behind every text” (“Politics” 42). As such, The Histories is the model for the reinvention of selves and masculinities that the Villa community undertakes.

By the time he reaches the Villa, the English patient has already internalized the lessons of multiplicity taught by his copy of The Histories. Having already abandoned the borders and boundaries of nationalism and imperialism, the English patient has adopted the hypertextual multiplicity of self and identity that The Histories symbolizes. He acts like a borderless text himself, a constant flow of knowledge, as he says, “I have always had information like a sea in me” (18). Williams acknowledges the English patient’s hypertextual nature, saying, “Even Almásy’s mental processes are instances of networked, rather than of linear, thinking, as his mind moves through catalogues of information, slipping beneath the surface of embedded texts where further texts are stored” (“Politics” 50). The English patient is not only a store house of information, not simply “a book ... to be read” (Ondaatje 253). Rather, his flow of knowledge requires interaction – “You must talk to me,” he says to Caravaggio who seeks to determine the English patient’s identity (253). The English patient’s new ideology celebrates the multiplicity that such interaction allows, as he believes that “we are communal histories, communal books” (261).

Following the English patient’s example, and through the community they find at the Villa San Girolamo, Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio learn to live beyond their former selves. They are able to cast off the narrow and singular identities that would name them simply nurse, sapper, and thief, or Canadians and Sikh, or even woman and men. These

identities may have been shattered by the violence of war and imperialism, but, like the English patient, Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio do not try to reconcile themselves to singular identities. Instead they too adopt an ethos of multiplicity and reinvent themselves in relation to the community that they build: “here they were shedding skins. They would imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others” (Ondaatje 117).

To “look for the truth in others” is to define themselves by community, and as such Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio are defined by their relationships to each other. Thus, Kip, in his love affair with Hana, becomes at once a “warrior saint” and “Indian goddess,” a fusion of East and West (Ondaatje 217-18). Like the statue of the “grieving angel, half male, half female” he encounters during the war, in Hana’s eyes Kip is bigendered, free of the borders and boundaries of gender norms (Ondaatje 90). Caravaggio, meanwhile, who “had been trained to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh,” and felt like “everything offered up to those around him was a lie,” finds new purpose upon finding Hana (Ondaatje 117). He is the uncle she needs, “a member of the family” to connect her present life to her past life (Ondaatje 85). This new relationship also places Caravaggio in a triangle with Hana and Kip; however, it is not a competitive love triangle. Rather, Caravaggio is a teacher to the two lovers, sharing his knowledge of relationships, instructing them on “the tenderness towards every cell in a lover that comes when you discover your mortality” (Ondaatje 225). Ellis argues that the relationship between Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio denies the “pattern of ‘male traffic in women’” that “allows [men] to dominate women”²⁸ (31-33). Thus Hana is not defined

²⁸ Ellis traces the patriarchal heterosexual structure of the “male traffic in women” from Levi-Strauss through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (31). In denying such commodification of women and the violence it

simply as Kip's lover, or Caravaggio's niece, or even the English patient's nurse. From the time she met the English patient, Hana has been engaged in making herself borderless, not confining herself to singular roles or identities, so that she even notices profound change in herself: "She watched the little portrait of herself as if within a clasped brooch She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself" (Ondaatje 52). By the end of the novel, it is Hana who is perhaps most multiple and fluid, so much so that she is indefinable, even to the authorial narrative voice of the text, which briefly emerges to admit: "She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life" (301).

In light of this new multiplicity of identity, and through the example of the English patient's copy of The Histories, the act of reading is transformed from a solitary act to a participatory communal exchange. Reading aloud and the related act of storytelling are alternative performances, particularly for the male characters, to acts of violence, both physical and imperial. Reading to each other is the way in which each character is able to produce and has access to community; it is the practice by which they are able to find "the truth in others." Thus, as the English patient tells Caravaggio, when Hana first came to the Villa, reading was the means by which he could build a relationship with her: "She was distant from everybody. The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me" (253). And from the reading lessons that the English patient gives Hana, the art and practice of storytelling and reading are passed to Caravaggio and Kip.

inevitably produces between men and women, the triangle of Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio is further resistance to patriarchy and imperialism.

The English patient has learned that books, reading, and telling stories offer means by which to interpret and understand life, and it is this practice of reading that he shares with the others. The reading practices of others, particularly those to whom he was closest in the desert community of explorers, have shaped the English patient's understanding of reading as a way to make sense of the world and communicate it to others. Both Katharine and Madox share stories with the English patient to give insight into "real life" problems. Katharine reads the story of Candaules and Gyges from The Histories, a story of a love triangle, "as a window to her life," informing both the English patient and her husband Geoffrey of the triangle between them (Ondaatje 233). Madox, whom the English patient calls "a saint in his own marriage," carries Tolstoy's Anna Karenina with him and tries to use it to warn the English patient of the dangers of his affair with Katharine (Ondaatje 237). The stories the English patient "recites" to Hana, who "travels like a squire beside him during these journeys," continue these practices, offering her insight into her own life based on his experience or his understanding of stories (4, 135). The stories that he tells Hana, of his own loss and his own love, echo Hana's own loss and her love for Kip: "I promised to tell you how one falls in love" (229). Reading and storytelling are dialogic acts for the English patient, acts that require careful performance: "Read him slowly dear girl, you must read Kipling slowly" (94). This lesson to Hana on reading Rudyard Kipling suggests the necessity of an awareness of more than simply the words on the page, but also the importance of the ideas behind the words and the way they are conveyed, for as the English patient later reminds Caravaggio, "Words They have power" (234).

The reading that the English patient practices is not simply a return to the sharing of stories as in an oral culture. The English patient's way of reading is a means of conveying information, often in subtly intertextual ways, and is less about direct instruction than about sharing experience. But more so than passing on the lessons of experience, this manner of reading is a way to bring people together and bridge the gaps and boundaries that separate them. Reading this way is a performance because there is as much in the act (how, when and where things are read) as there is in what is actually being read. In the English patient's lesson in reading Kim, for instance, he asks Hana to imagine Kipling's own experience of writing and to read with that in mind (Ondaatje 94). The English patient's intention is not for Hana to connect to the long dead author, but rather to begin to understand the experiences of others. This sort of reading practice imagines a community connecting readers, writers, and listeners, bringing people together in new and productive ways.

Hana is the first member of the Villa community to use reading and storytelling to make sense of her life. Early on in the novel, Hana uses books as a "door out of her cell," as a means of escaping her self and her grief (Ondaatje 7). As she receives the lessons the English patient offers her, however, Hana's reading practices shift and begin to mirror the interactive performances of the English patient. She recognizes the value of stories and their healing potential, particularly when they are shared, such as when Caravaggio tells her of the events leading up to his thumbs being severed: "Moments before sleep are when she feels most alive ... her body full of stories and situations. Caravaggio had for instance given her something. His motive, a drama, and a stolen image" (Ondaatje 35-36). Moreover, Hana is also a writer, an artist as Lorraine York suggests (83). She

records stories that are shared with her by the others in a manner similar to the English patient's supplementing of The Histories. In Kipling's Kim, a book she and Kip have "read ... together," Hana writes what Kip has told her about the "*Zam-Zammah cannon*," adding to this imperialist text the perspective of the colonized (Ondaatje 111, 118).

Reading, writing, and storytelling give Hana an agency that frees her; to paraphrase a line that Hana reads from The Charterhouse of Parma, "she gets out of her difficulties" (Ondaatje 222). No longer tied to scripted performances and no longer tied to the memory of lost men, Hana is finally able to confront the death of her father by writing about it to Clara, her step-mother (Ondaatje 292-293). Having communicated the roots of her pain and grief, she is free to be and to love as she wishes, to tell and write her own story: "What she was now was what she herself had decided to become" (Ondaatje 222).

While Hana learns new reading practices at the Villa, Kip has already experienced the interconnection that reading and stories can provide. As a sapper, Kip has learned to read bombs, "unraveling that knot of wires and fuzes someone has left him like a terrible letter" (76). In order to defuse the bombs, Kip tries to divine the author who has created them, "the personality that had laid the city of threads," so he can better understand the bomb's structure (99). Tom Penner suggests, however, that since the bomb-maker is "anonymous" to Kip, the bomb's author cut off from its text, it is therefore unknowable and problematic to the sapper (89). In Suffolk's unit, Kip has contributed to the communal book of bomb disposal, in which "solutions" to bombs are passed among sappers like stories (Ondaatje 199). Yet the sharing of bomb "solutions" lacks the interconnection and community of reading and storytelling, since Kip's time in the sapper unit was "*a period of individual prowess ... whose protagonists remained obscure ... for*

reasons of security” (Ondaatje 184). Lord Suffolk, however, does introduce Kip to a community generated by storytelling, sharing with his “clan” not only his knowledge of bomb disposal, but his love of Lorna Doone and the “exotica” of each village in the Devon area (Ondaatje 185-86). Suffolk’s willingness to tell stories and share makes Kip feel as if he had “stepped into a family” and been “embraced with conversations” (Ondaatje 189). Already introduced to the community that comes from shared knowledge and stories, Kip fits easily into the Villa community and the reading practices of the English patient and Hana. Kip’s voracious appetite for Western culture, with its songs, stories and condensed milk, is aptly fueled by the stories the English patient, Hana, and Caravaggio provide him. Moreover, following Suffolk’s example, Kip willingly shares his own culture with Hana who in turn transcribes his stories into “random” books (Ondaatje 209). Within the Villa community, Kip has a voice, his Eastern culture and knowledge welcomed in communion with the Western discourse of the English patient and the others. Like Hana’s image of him as “the knight. The warrior saint,” Kip inhabits both worlds and acts as bridge between them (Ondaatje 273).

Whereas Kip extends his reading practices, Caravaggio must reinvent his, to separate them from the violence of imperialism. Like the English patient, Caravaggio has experienced the power of words and reading, the potential violence they can unleash. As a spy, Caravaggio has become intimately acquainted with the possibility for reading to quite literally convey information. Caravaggio tells Hana of reading Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca in an effort to try and catch “Rommel’s Rebecca spy,” who used the Rebecca as a code book (164). Rebecca becomes a means by which British intelligence is able to understand German code and eventually communicate “false information” to

Rommel (Ondaatje 165). But just as Kip is cut off from the author of the bombs he diffuses, during his time as a spy, Caravaggio is cut off from others, communicating through the “phantoms” he invents (Ondaatje 117). At the Villa, however, he has true connection, particularly with Hana, with whom he can pass on stories of their shared past. Likewise when he tries to uncover the English patient’s identity, Caravaggio becomes implicated in the confession he elicits from the patient. By bringing the English patient into “one of [his] spy dramas,” Caravaggio uncovers not only what he believes to be the English patient’s identity, but also a connection between them (Scobie 98). From British intelligence reports, Caravaggio knows all about the events that lead to the patient’s being burned, but the story that the English patient tells Caravaggio leads him to conclude that “it no longer matters which side [the patient] was on during the war” (Ondaatje 251). In fact, the English patient’s story helps Caravaggio break his connection to the world of spying and intelligence, his world during the war. After hearing the English patient’s account of what happened in the desert, Caravaggio “wants to rise and walk away from ... the detritus of war” (Ondaatje 251). The English patient’s story helps Caravaggio come to peace with his own story, regaining the balance he perceived he had lost, as his walk across a tightrope at the end of the novel suggests (Ondaatje 297). Caravaggio may not be “whole,” since the damage inflicted to his mind and body is irreparable, but he is able to reconcile himself to his fractured state, putting the pieces together in a new way.

Reading, performing, and living hypertextually are means by which the characters can reconcile the problems of the real they face in their post-war environment – the disconnection between themselves and the violent realities surrounding them. Williams draws connections between Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal and the hypertextuality

of The Histories that carries over into the lives of the residents of the Villa San Girolamo ("Politics" 44-45). Stories and their transmission are just as "real" to the English patient, Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio as the scars they bear that mark the violence of war. The story of Candaules and Gyges, Williams points out, "works to create reality out of illusion," its telling prefiguring the actual love affair between Katharine and the English patient ("Politics" 45). As Katharine reads from The Histories, the words of the story "begin to produce their own simulacrum" (Williams "Politics" 44). Similarly, Rufus Cook notes that Hana's reading of Kim lays the "groundwork" for "Kip's eventual appearance" at the Villa (37). Kip "entered their lives, as if out of fiction," like hypertext come to life, a magical product of Hana's reading (Ondaatje 94). Yet Kip does not directly correspond to Kipling's story. "It was Hana who was the young boy in the story ... If Kip was anyone he was the officer Creighton" (Ondaatje 111). The "reality" of stories, like the English patient's identity, "no longer matters" (Ondaatje 251). Rather, since their telling, their performance, can directly affect so-called "reality," stories in their hyperreality function to bridge the gaps between experience and understanding. Although Baudrillard "despairs at the loss of the real," Williams (drawing on the theories of Donna Haraway) sees hypertext as facilitating the production of "disassembled and reassembled ... collective sel[ves]" ("Politics" 48). Williams sees Kip as the character that embodies this collective self of hypertextuality, which Kip achieves through "his relationships with Hana, Caravaggio, and ... Almásy" ("Politics" 48). Because storytelling and the community it creates generates this hypertextuality of self, Kip is not the only "collective self" at the Villa. In fact, since the multiplicity that Williams believes Kip attains is constituted in relation to the others, clearly the Villa community is

the collective self/selves. This is most evident in the novel's final image of ultimate hyperreal and hypertextual connection between Kip and Hana, now living on separate continents:

He sits in the garden. And he watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country This is a limited gift he has somehow been given, as if a camera's film reveals her, but only her, in silence And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles." (300-302)

Kip and Hana are linked to each other hypertextually, beyond the confines and boundaries of "reality." And as Kip and Hana carry each other into their future lives, so too are they connected to Caravaggio and the English patient through the stories and knowledge shared between them. Even though the community they shared at the Villa is disrupted by the atomic bomb, it is not a result of a failure of their values. Though violence and imperialism again intrude upon their lives, effectively ending the physical reality of their community, the ideals that the English patient, Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio share continue to link them even away from each other. In fact, as they carry these values to other aspects of their lives, perhaps by telling stories of their experiences at the Villa, they are expanding their community.

Reading, storytelling, and other such hypertextual practices are ultimately alternative performances to violence for the male characters of The English Patient. By

reading and telling stories, the English patient, Caravaggio and Kip are able to escape the boundaries of imperialism that demand particular gender performances, singular identities, and violence. By living hypertextually, these characters recreate their own masculinities, gender identities that embrace multiplicity, flow, and community. The boundaries that once defined gender norms, limiting gender identity to specific performances such as violence, are made permeable and shifting. Thus Hana, though not of the same sex as the other residents of the Villa, is able to participate as an equal partner in the same community. Difference is not erased, but the borders between masculine and feminine are open to flow and interaction. Propinquity, a term the English patient uses to describe what led him into an affair with Katharine, aptly defines this new gender relationship, suggesting not only nearness and proximity, but also kinship and affinity (Ondaatje 150). In this propinquity of genders, the English patient's words echo: "We are communal histories, communal books" (Ondaatje 261).

Conclusion

If masculinity is undergoing a crisis as Susan Faludi suggests, and violence at the heart of masculinity, then at the heart of this crisis is violence. Faludi's response to this crisis is to call for a return to past masculinities based upon a nostalgic, and perhaps imaginary, ideal that does not address the problem of violence. David Fincher's Fight Club, Martin McDonagh's The Lonesome West, and Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient, on the other hand, each confront the relationship between masculinity and violence, and offer strategies for rethinking masculinities free of a dependency on violence. Taken together, Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient present tactics to reconcile masculinities to violence. Both Fight Club and The Lonesome West tackle violence head-on, attempting to uncover positive uses for violence in understanding and defining masculinity. These works explore the potential for violence to build a sense of self and maintain masculine identity, particularly in resistance to a capitalist system that disempowers individuals. Ultimately, however, the approaches to violence that Fight Club and The Lonesome West take cause more problems than they solve. Violence in these two works only begets more violence, largely at the expense of the men who try to use it as a means of self-discovery. In The English Patient, on the other hand, the intense violence experienced by each of the characters during World War II leads them to reject it, and the imperialist systems that perpetuate it. Instead, the residents of the Villa San Girolamo find the means to build and maintain identity within community, rather than in conflict with it. For the men of The English Patient, violence

no longer makes the man, and thus they are free to base their masculinity on other grounds, on other performances, namely reading and storytelling.

These works demonstrate a changing understanding of masculinity in which violence is not essentially male, nor are men naturally violent. In fact, the alternatives to violence that each work proposes all point to a new understanding of masculinity defined not by the acts of the individual, but by participation in community²⁹. The truly positive aspects of each work are those which suggest the possibilities of men being contributing members of a productive and creative community. Although Fight Club and The Lonesome West both gesture towards the potential of masculinity to find its place in community, both works fall short of realizing this potential. In Fight Club, Jack's development is primarily a result of the sense of fellowship that he feels with the other men of Fight Club, and later with Marla. Fight Club itself is, on some levels, a community that offers men the opportunity to reevaluate their lives and begin working towards a new vision of their masculinity. The failure of Fight Club lies in the fact that it is based on violence. The seemingly controlled violence of Fight Club inevitably leads to the out-of-control violence of Project Mayhem and undermines any of its positive potential by the overwhelming destructiveness of the violence. Likewise, the brothers in The Lonesome West realize that they are dependent on each other, and come close to recognizing that they are part of a larger community including Father Welsh and Girleen. Coleman and Valene reach the limit of what violence can do for them, becoming aware that the violent cycle in which they are engaged will eventually destroy both of them.

²⁹ This community is not the nostalgic, idealistic community that Faludi imagines having existed in the ship yards of post-war America. Faludi's image of community, much like that of Tyler Durden's, is insufficient for rethinking masculinity because it remains exclusionary and dependent on a singular vision of masculinity.

They fail, however, to comprehend the potential to move beyond the fraternal violence that has defined their existence. In fact, while Valene's preservation of Father Welsh's letter suggests that Coleman and Valene will attempt to live together without violence, or at least without extreme violence, the play's conclusion leaves only a lingering hope that such a situation is within the brothers' capacity. Coleman and Valene lack a clear vision of how to get along without the crutch of violence to support them.

Where Fight Club and The Lonesome West fail, however, is in effect where The English Patient begins its rethinking of masculinity. The community that the English patient, Caravaggio, Kip, and Hana create and maintain is in opposition to the traditional male domains of imperialism, nationalism, patriarchy and capitalism, and the violence that they produce. The Villa community is proof of the potential for masculinity to be reinvented outside of violence. This community is neither exclusive nor dependent upon violence like that of Fight Club, nor is it as tenuous as the fraternity between Coleman and Valene at the end of The Lonesome West. Even though Kip abandons his life at the Villa following the dropping of the atomic bomb, the community the four characters established lives on in the cross-continental bond that the novel's ending hints at. In leaving the Villa, Kip is not rejecting community and the values he shares with the others; by returning to India, where he becomes a doctor, Kip is bringing community back with him. The cataclysmic events of the bombing of Hiroshima may prevent Kip from remaining in the Villa community, but the values he helps build there are preserved in his life in India³⁰.

³⁰ It is notable that Kip returns to India, presumably some time in 1945 or 1946, where anti-imperial and anti-colonial revolution would soon come from the practice of non-violence, the passive resistance promoted by Mahatma Gandhi. With the lessons he learned during the war and at the Villa, it is not hard to imagine Kirpal Singh being involved in such peaceful protest.

Hana, with her central role in the The English Patient, is an integral part of the positive development of masculinity in the community in the novel. While the female characters Marla and Girleen both play significant roles in Fight Club and The Lonesome West respectively, neither plays an active part in the recognitions that the male characters in each work come to. Hana, on the other hand, is an equal partner in the community and reinvention that she, the English patient, Caravaggio, and Kip engage in. Hana is neither simply an object of desire, like Girleen, nor the female element of a love triangle, like Marla. Just like her male counterparts, Hana is involved in self-redefinition and resistance to imperialist ideas and values in favour of community.

Furthermore, Fight Club and The Lonesome West do not develop the relationships between the male characters and female characters as in The English Patient. Jack may appreciate Marla's independence and her disregard for the oppressive values of consumer culture, and he certainly is attracted to her, but even though the film's final image is of Marla and Jack holding hands, the image is tainted by the destruction they are witnessing. There may be hope for Jack and Marla, and they may be on the verge of a new kind of relationship, but the violence of Fight Club and Project Mayhem still lingers. In The Lonesome West, Girleen's role is even less significant than Marla's. Girleen remains, to a certain extent, the unattainable and fetishized object of desire for Coleman and Valene, while Father Welsh misconstrues her intentions towards him. Girleen's function in the play is more about highlighting that gender is performance through her masculine behaviour than actually participating in the development of the male characters and the community. At the end of the play, Coleman and Valene certainly do not understand or relate to Girleen any better than before. In contrast, Hana

has strong and mutually beneficial relationships with all the men at the Villa. She is nurse, pupil, and surrogate child to both the English patient and Caravaggio, and lover and friend to Kip. Hana bases her relationships on sharing experience and knowledge with an equality that suggests a new view of relationships between genders.

Despite the positive developments involved in the community proposed by The English Patient, and to a certain extent Fight Club and The Lonesome West as well, there are limitations to the re-evaluation of masculinities that these works offer. The masculinity represented in all three works is primarily a heterosexual masculinity that lacks consideration for other marginalized gender groups. The Lonesome West addresses homosexuality in a comic and largely heteronormative way with its “virgin fucking gayboy” jokes. The English Patient, while it emphasizes concerns of race, pays little attention to heteronormativity beyond Hana’s imagining Kip as an Indian goddess³¹. Fight Club is the most explicit of the three works in its dealings with homosexuality, though as the debate on the film’s homoeroticism that Clark, Juhasz and Peele engage in suggests, it may not be a positive portrayal. The homoerotic relationship between Jack and Tyler is at the very least problematic, and certainly leaves the place of gay men within masculinities and in relation to violence open to question. The absence of other gender groups and the failure to address the possibilities for non-heterosexual masculinities may be a sin of omission in these works, but it suggests an area in which more work must be done in reconsidering and rethinking masculinities. If the sense of

³¹ In Anthony Minghella’s film version of The English Patient, however, there is a scene in which a homosexual relationship is hinted at. In the desert the explorer Bermann and his Bedouin guide have an intimacy that suggests homosexuality. They are seen embracing and engaging in playful activities. This playful behaviour, however, causes Bermann to crash one of the trucks. Following the accident, Alamsy (Ralph Fiennes) gives Bermann a look that suggests that he views such behaviour as improper, and perhaps even disgusting. The heteronormativity of this scene is clear, and given the emphasis on heterosexual romance in the film this negative portrayal of homosexuality is more alarming.

community proposed by The English Patient is to be a positive way in which to rethink what it means to be male, then this community must be open to men of other gender groups and sexual persuasions.

Yet, while Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient clearly have their limitations and failings, all three have been immensely popular. The popularity of these works is widespread; all three have received praise from audiences and critics alike, and each has proven popular with a wide variety of ages, genders, and races. Remlinger notes that while there may be a number of critics who judged Fight Club harshly, the film received a largely positive response from audiences³² (141). Similarly, despite his own dislike of Fight Club, Sirc acknowledges that he resists his reading of the film “because [his] students loved this film” (424). Sirc further attests to the film’s popularity by discussing his students’ responses, noting that the class of diverse genders and races “all felt it was politically interesting, intellectually substantive,” and in regards to his perception of the film’s misogyny, he remarks that “the young men and women ... hadn’t seen it that way at all” (424- 25).

The Lonesome West also appeals to a diverse audience as well as critics. The play has been performed all over the world, from Dublin to New York and London to Winnipeg, and was nominated for a Tony Award in 1999 (Adam 70). Though audience

³² Remlinger cites data from the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), based upon user reviews of the film and a weighted average vote produced from reviewer responses. According to Remlinger, over 2300 IMDb users had given Fight Club an average of 8.5 out of 10, which ranked it at number 40 in the IMDb top fifty. Remlinger notes that the IMDb results are not proof of Fight Club’s popularity, and certainly factors such as the demographic of IMDb users and the currency of the film affect its ranking. The evidence Remlinger offers, however, should be, as she says, “an indicator” of the film’s wide appeal. Current IMDb demographic information on Fight Club has the film at 8.5 on the weighted average vote scale, with males giving the film an average of 8.5/10 and females giving the film 8.2/10. Nearly seven times as many user reviews come from males as from females. By comparison, The English Patient, which receives a weighted average of 7.0/10, has only four times as many male reviewers as female reviews, with females giving the film a higher ranking on average. Not all users, however, contribute information regarding their sex when reviewing films.

and critical reactions are often divided, with some viewers finding the play outrageously funny, while others recognize dark undertones behind the laughter, The Lonesome West inevitably produces a visceral response³³. Reviewers such as Kate Taylor may criticize the play's humour for obscuring the serious subject matter, particularly the play's violence, but fail to recognize that comedy is an effective way to communicate with an audience (R3). If an audience is caught laughing when they should not be, in the breaches that Sharon Willis describes as the root of dark comedy, they are likely to think about such moments to reconcile their reactions to what is otherwise appropriate (281). The Lonesome West may draw an audience because of its promised comedy, but viewing the play is not simply about laughing at the jokes. In a line seemingly designed to resonate with audience members, Coleman, having laughed with Valene about the late Welsh's name, reminds his brother that it is still a solemn moment, saying "We shouldn't laugh" (Lonesome 235). For any viewer, such a line strikes at the heart of the experience of watching The Lonesome West, encouraging them to reconsider what it is they are laughing at and why they should not be, even as they laugh again.

Perhaps most popular of the three, The English Patient has become an international bestseller, though David Williams notes, "more by virtue of an Oscar-winning film adaptation than of the Booker Prize" ("Book" 175). The novel's popularity, however, is not solely based upon the film's success, David L. Krantz suggests, since surveys he conducted among students and library patrons point to a positive reception of the novel that is not simply a result of having viewed the film (101)³⁴. Krantz's surveys

³³ For such responses, see reviews by Robert Brustein, Kevin Prokosh, Kate Taylor, and Richard Zoglin.

³⁴ Krantz makes no claim that his surveys are scientific and notes that the majority of students questioned were Caucasian women. Notably, Krantz's surveys focuses on the question of the film's fidelity to its source material, and not on the question of comparative popularity of the two works.

suggests that audiences recognize the differences between the novel and its film counterpart, but are also willing to address and appreciate each version on its own terms (101-103).

Audiences and critics may be attracted to these works for different reasons. Certainly David Fincher's frenetic MTV-style, along with the appeal of movie icons such as Brad Pitt, may account for Fight Club's popularity. Likewise, the comedy and shock of The Lonesome West, or the romance and poetry of The English Patient may explain their success. But these attributes are only part of what makes each work so widely esteemed. Though not always reacting as positively as audiences, critics have also paid a great deal of attention to all three works, and these critical responses are certainly not only a result of the more stylistic or entertaining aspects of each work. It is possible then to conclude that there is something more to these works that has attracted the attention of audiences and critics. Perhaps then there is something attractive and engaging in the portrayals of masculinities that Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient offer. While Fight Club is the only work that overtly presents itself as dealing with masculinities, each in their own way bring concerns of masculinity to the forefront. Their popularity suggests that audiences are willing to accept works that endeavour to challenge and rethink traditional notions of violence and masculinities. Though Fight Club and The Lonesome West may not ultimately rethink masculinity themselves, the questions both works raise, and the problems each present, draw attention issues of violence and masculinity that have been otherwise taken for granted. The popularity of these three works also points to a changing understanding of gender and a desire on the

part of audiences and critics alike for new visions and representations of masculinities that account for this change.

Film, theatre, and prose fiction, while some overlap may occur, generally have very different audiences, yet these three works are evidence that the same subject matter is popular and successful in all three media. Perhaps most interesting is the way in which The English Patient puts forward community as the future of masculinities even though it is a novel, generally considered a solitary and introspective media. In Anthony Minghella's 1996 film adaptation of The English Patient, however, this sense of community does not come to the forefront as in the novel³⁵. For Jacqui Sadashige, the film version ironically "encourages us to ignore the rest of the world, and it is the private encounter with Ondaatje's novel that insists the world will always intrude upon our private longings, because that world is already out there, and our desires, our very selves, are wrought deep within its making" (252). As Younis notes, in the reduction of the roles of Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio, and an increased emphasis on the story of Almàsy and Katharine, the film abandons the "troubled cross-cultural relationships evoked so vividly in the book" in favour of the "primacy of love stories" (6). In fact, the differences between the novel and the film, particularly in their emphasis on community, leads Williams to suggest that Ondaatje's version is a "filmic novel," while Minghella's version is a "bookish film," where the novel "translates the shock of film into a challenge to the social rigidities of print which is meant to revolutionize apperception and to transform the character of human relations ("Book" 196).

³⁵ For an overview of criticism relating to the adaptation of The English Patient from novel to film, see Krantz's "*The English Patient: Critics, Audiences, and the Quality of Fidelity.*" Krantz compares various critics views on the question of the film's fidelity to its source, ultimately concluding that the film is "essentially faithful to Ondaatje's novel, though simplified and romanitized" (109).

The relationship between the film and print versions of Fight Club is quite different from that of The English Patient. Fincher's film version is more faithful to Palahniuk's novel than Minghella is to Ondaatje's, but such fidelity and what it signals seems to be of little interest to critics. The film version of Fight Club has received a great deal of the critical attention, while the novel has received virtually none³⁶. Significantly, the disparity between the nihilistic ending of the novel, in which Jack ends up in a mental institution and Project Mayhem lives on, and the "happy" ending of the film makes the issue of adaptation worthy of critical attention³⁷. Yet, ultimately, there is little difference between the messages of either versions of Fight Club, and certainly the visually graphic violence that the film provides makes it the more compelling of the two.

The way an audience experiences different media affects the reception of a work, which is an important concern when considering masculinity and violence in Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient, and warrants further research³⁸. Is there a relationship between ways of representing violence and masculinities and audience reception of new views on gender? Does the perceived "reality" of violence on stage, in comparison to violence on film and in turn violence in print have bearing on the way an audience understands violence and masculinity? Perhaps it is easier to imagine new

³⁶ Only Matthew Jordan's "Marxism not Manhood" engages solely with the novel, while most critics only make passing reference to Palahniuk.

³⁷ An in depth look at the adaptation of Fight Club and the issues that arise from such concerns is a topic that requires considerable discussion, but is outside the scope of this thesis.

³⁸ Unlike Fight Club and The English Patient, The Lonesome West is not an adaptation from another medium, nor has it been adapted to another medium. Stage plays, however, involve a great deal of adaptation when being transferred from play text to stage performance. Certainly the experience of seeing the play live and reading the play text is very different. The MTC Warehouse production, for instance, was very focused on the play's comic aspect, at times overplaying jokes at the expense of other narrative aspects. A reading of the play text highlights the darker aspects of the play, in part because of the absence of the physicality necessary for some of the humour. Yet the play text also does not give the reader the same experience of moments such as Welsh's scalding, which are far more powerful when viewed on stage. Perhaps most important to the live theatre, however, is the communal experience of viewing a play, particularly evident in the way audiences of The Lonesome West witness suffering and laugh at it.

masculinities when the physical reminders of traditional gender views are not present. Each of the media of film, theatre, and print has limitations regarding what they can effectively represent. Would Fight Club, for instance, be as popular if it addressed issues of gender more directly and in a more serious manner? Sire questions whether or not it is worthwhile to “demand a better, more politically rigorous Fight Club,” saying, “I can’t fathom who would pay money for a feel-bad lesson like that” (425). But if the popularity of Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient demonstrates anything, it is that audiences are prepared and willing to accept works that challenge gender norms, at least as long as they are entertaining. By rethinking masculinities and violence, these works also encourage their audiences to at least think about gender and violence in new and productive ways.

The field of masculine studies is still very much in its infancy. There remains a great deal of work to be done to begin to understand the factors that shape men’s lives and define masculinity. There are many works that have explored important aspects of male experience such as race, sexuality, and subjectivity and opened up masculinities to important discussions. What Fight Club, The Lonesome West, and The English Patient offer, particularly, is a means by which to begin a discussion of masculinity and violence. Their popularity points to the potential for such a discussion to extend beyond the academic field of masculine studies and into the daily lives of those in the “real” world. If, as Deleuze says, “violence is something that does not speak, or speaks but little,” then in order for masculinities to begin to make positive changes the place of violence in men’s lives must be addressed, spoken about, and thereby rethought. By thinking of violence as performance and understanding its effects, as Fight Club, The Lonesome

West, and The English Patient encourage, men can be no longer dependent upon violent acts to define their masculinities. Instead new masculinities can be produced by looking for other ways of defining, or acting masculinity, such as through the community The English Patient proposes.

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