INTRODUCTION

With all of its contradictions, Postmodernism created a world of dislocation and fragmentation, an era that blasted the continuous thread of history to provide counter-histories and incredible potentials. Following the psychological transformations of the 1960s and emerging within an era of immense uncertainty, the postmodernist impulse denied the modernist systems composed by Enlightenment rationales of “reason,” “truth,” and “universalism” by first wading through a period of Nietzschean nihilism and End-of-History declarations before settling itself upon a system of social justice and multiculturalism. The Modernist belief in the benefits of mass production and industrialization gave way to anxieties about consumerism and technological influence. Formalist construction shifted to Deconstruction, artistic purity to eclectic hedonism, and coherent narrative to cluttered scraps of signifiers. As a form of Neo-Romanticism edged with neurotic narcissism, Postmodernism sought to eliminate elitism while nevertheless constructing its own form of elitism by expelling evasive jargon and contemptuous non sequiturs. As a philosophical practice, it privileged the individual but denied the autonomy of the individual, proclaimed the death of the author and reality, and continuously allowed theory to precede sheer creative innovation. At the dawn of the New Millennium, however, Postmodernism has been declared obsolete.

Of course contemporary arguments about the “death of postmodernism” denote a significant signpost for determining how influential the ideological establishment has been, since it rather frivolously and frequently declared the “death” or “end” of intangible constructs in its own right. Highly self-conscious of itself as an era, Postmodernism announced itself a historical period and practice before retrospective historians had the ability to do so, and an exact date for its beginning is still debatable. Overall though, Postmodernism seemed to profess a sense of newness for itself that differed from Modernist practices, as it became the dominant form of “serious” literary and cultural practice while at the same time attempting to disparage itself as a “serious” enterprise. Literature of the New Millennium has conferred another sense of “newness” that differs somewhat from postmodernist leanings, although it lacks a specific name as of yet. Post-postmodernism sounds too clunky, and while Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker have suggested “metamodernism,” other critics prefer attaching the prefix trans- to denote occurring oscillations in global and national identities with a newfound emphasis on trans-subjectivity. An entire cultural tone emerging from a younger generation experiencing the uniting benefits of technology, rather than its previously theorized deterrents, have sought to distance themselves from the flaws of postmodernism while still deploying aspects of its foundational ideals.
Although appropriate in rejecting the naïve Modernist presumptions of objectivity and systematic order, Postmodernism’s general resentment toward capitalism and liberal democracy profoundly undermines efforts for global reconciliation and disdains some of the most important features of humanity and modern society. Perhaps the most beneficial achievement of postmodernism, though, is its skepticism toward grand narratives, in turn inspiring multiple concepts of history from various perspectives. This feature has empowered the consciousness-raising of socially marginalized individuals and exposed how differences in class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, and national origin can influence an individual’s outlook upon the world. During the 1980s at the height of academic postmodernism, however, these differences were emphatically politically charged, divisive, and even detrimental. Following the “Diversity Movement” of the 1990s and New Millennium, artists have resisted erasing difference, yet their endeavors toward multicultural pluralism have also provided much better analyses in what unites humans, rather than what divides them.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s post-9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, for example, deploys postmodern experimentation by hybridizing *Bildungsroman*, epistolary, and graphic novel formats to explore the role of collective mourning and recuperation, while Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* emphasizes connective threads in globalized diasporic religions with an irresistible desire for faith. Although postmodern literary experimentation still persists in moving toward more visually-oriented exercises, New Millennium authors often convey a desire for hope and sincerity countered by lingering expressions of doubt. This is evident in the quirky tenderness of Miranda July’s short stories, the absurd beauty of Haruki Murakami’s novels, the transcendent balance between humor and melancholy in Sarah Ruhl’s plays, and the idiosyncratic cinema of Wes Anderson, Michel Gondry, and Spike Jonze. Rather than dismiss postmodern ideals, the emergent generation incorporates them while supplying much more optimistic overtones that not only convey a skepticism toward truth and originality but also a drive to seek them anyway. A restoration of love, wonder, and intimacy has displaced the sense of dystopic hopelessness and radical politics often evoked by late twentieth century fiction and art, as young artists begin to champion the return of a unifying system of spirituality and ethics to counteract the alienating endeavors of their predecessors.

Progress is only detectable through retrospection, and since we are now seemingly entering a new cultural period tied to the after-effects of the twentieth century, it is pertinent to analyze Postmodernism as a historical period in its own right. Although grand narratives have justifiably been eliminated, this thesis nevertheless views Postmodernism from a narrative format of mankind’s ideological development by examining the historical crises and emergent perceptions that led to its philosophical establishment as represented in American art and literature. Characterized as an era of ambiguity, uncertainty, and invigorated political action, I have chosen seminal artists and authors to convey their perceptions of the time period at the height of its theoretical practice engaging in an influx of new media, popular culture, disease, and political disputation. Although these perceptions are vehemently Leftist in their political
leanings—arguably to an imperialistic extent—I will contend that the difference between conservative and liberal values during the so-called “culture wars” of the contemporary era is fundamentally a difference in definitions of morality. The perception of political corruption and moral decay that characterize the discourse from both sides of the spectrum certainly highlights this notion. While some artists and authors seek to offer redemptive alternatives, others disparage and ridicule the institutional systems entirely. Noting these inconsistencies, I aim to be pluralistic in my endeavors and to expose the most estranged ideologies that complicate the sense of a univocal voice of community.

In this thesis, Jean-Michel Basquiat questions race relations after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; Keith Haring, Tony Kushner, and Dennis Cooper present counter-ideologies on the concept of a gay community; and Margaret Atwood, Kathy Acker, and Karen Finley examine issues of feminism in an emergent era of restrictive gender politics. Avant-garde street artists, photographers, and performance artists also interrogate the epistemology of seeing and being to engage audiences in further politicized analyses of identity and other late twentieth century concerns. Altogether, each artist and author examines the fluctuating system of patriarchy and the most prevalent perceptions regarding it at the end of the twentieth century, especially problematized by antagonistic reactions from its benefactors in the novels of Chuck Palahniuk and Bret Easton Ellis. These perceptions merely relay the ethos of the era.

Following the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as subterranean agitations began to unfurl regarding traditional institutions such as religion, the state, the family, and the law, the most decentered subject to fragment within postmodernity was indeed the system of patriarchy—denounced in early postmodern academic practices by a vitriolic excision of “Dead White Males” from the canon. Since masculinity predominantly relies upon historical institutions and economic structures, the contemporary masculinity crisis has largely been attributed to transitions in global economic and gender orders, in which men have tended to react aggressively and defensively or exhibit discomforting anxieties against the impacts of postmodernity. R.W. Connell posits a trifold paradigm for defining masculinity through power relations, production relations, and relations of cathexis. In his analysis of the contemporary crisis in masculinity, Connell attests that power relations have ruptured due to “a historic collapse of the legitimacy of patriarchal power, and a global movement for the emancipation of women;” production relations are in disarray due to “vast postwar growth in married women’s employment in rich countries, and the even vaster incorporation of women’s labour into the money economy in poor countries;” and relations of cathexis have been destabilized due to the promotion of “lesbian and gay sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual order” (85) [italics added for emphasis].

It is important to note that concepts regarding gender and sexuality have always been unstable, and other crises in masculinity have blossomed in previous eras. In Manhood in America, sociologist Michael Kimmel claims the previous American masculinity crisis occurred at the turn of the twentieth century when the women’s suffrage movement reinvigorated the cult of the outdoorsman. Likewise, Klaus
Theweleit proposes in *Male Fantasies* that European fascism and its savage, sexualized politics emerged in response to the German defeat in the Great War and its economic consequences, as well as the aftermath of the suffrage movement and the emergence of gay rights organizations in the Weimar Republic. Collectively, each crisis shares in common a shift toward more hyper-masculinized portrayals of men with burgeoning violent behaviors occurring after immense historical shifts or developments. This thesis focuses upon representations of the crisis of masculinity in American art and literature following the 1980s, in order to examine the insight that they provide into the chaotic state of masculinity at the end of the twentieth century. The concept of crisis does not signify a corrosion of patriarchy but rather a reorganization of the societal system. Gender theorist Fintan Walsh writes, . . . crisis is not an end in itself but a period of disorder that precedes and precipitates a longer period of productivity, restructuring, and redevelopment, which may even lead to the reestablishment of the temporarily agitated norm. In fact, crisis is to be seen as a constitutive element of all social, political, and economic systems. . . . (8)

My goal is not to solve the crisis of postmodern masculinity within this thesis, since to do so would only be speculative; however, I do believe the initial intensity of the crisis has begun to wane as younger generational values emerge. While completing this study during the presidency of Barack Obama, for the first time in history more Americans favor legalizing gay marriage than oppose it\(^1\), as it begins to shift from a deployment of sexuality to a deployment of alliance, and advancements for women to hold positions of power and authority have endured. Overall it is important to understand that historical progress is often slow and gradual— if it appears at all— and fears of change are natural. History operates as a discontinuous pendulum, constantly shifting and presenting itself with intervals and gaps. It is never linear, as Enlightenment systems of thought often perceived it to be, nor should it be considered cyclical since this thought process often undermines a sense of hope in human potentiality. The push-pull continuum of politics that ostensibly drives history is presented in this thesis with radically alternative American viewpoints, each primarily expressing growing fears that the New Right and its fundamentalist ideology would eradicate the legitimacy of a secular pluralist American democracy. This merely relays the zeitgeist of the era, as growing anxieties regarding the interplay between politics and religion produced reactionary efforts against neoconservatism, leading artists to engage audiences in issues and topics not generally discussed in polite society or the public sphere. My purpose is not to ghettoize the alterity of these individuals who, while attempting to dispel extremism, at times ironically appear extremist. On the contrary, I hope to situate their artistic themes and tendencies within a collective historicist framework, applying the theory that the artists were educated in and influenced by, in order to understand the purpose for their artistic manifestations. In this regard, I hope to return some sense of authority back to the artists, in order to portray the intellectual establishment of Postmodernism alongside the developing paranoia of the late twentieth century. At the apex of the Postmodern era and enveloped by
analyses of identity politics and fluctuations toward a pluralist conundrum, these artists primarily profess the anxieties of the age regarding shifts in patriarchy and governmental policy.

CHAPTER 1

“THE MELTING POT WHERE NOTHING MELTED”:
MARGINALIZED MASCU LINITIES AND THE CONTINGENCY OF SOCIETAL PROGRESS

The youthful idealism of the sixties revolution has restructured America’s progressive expectations. Its initial radicalism may have been unsuccessful, but its impact on the arts and academia in the late twentieth century is undeniable. By championing difference, multiplicity, and nonconformity, the proponents of the liberation movements set forth to expose and eliminate long-established social inequalities that entangled American society. Yet they were often blocked by a heightened awareness of philosophical and historical indeterminacy setting foot. While the Beatles’ “Let It Be” placated their efforts at the end of the sixties, the failures of their desired future nevertheless raised questions regarding what aspects from the past could be salvageable and what hope, if any, for the future would be available. This deep cynicism in the fate of America and the trajectory of history is explicitly reflected in post-1960s American art and literature. In her analysis of American fiction since 1960, Kathryn Hume builds upon the previous scholarship of Fredrick R. Karl, Tony Tanner, and Marc Chénetier, by proposing that contemporary American fiction can be classified as the “Generation of the Lost Dream.” She suggests that the American Dream has been eviscerated by continuous economic hardships and regressive tax policies, by deeply divisive politics that continue to repress the democratizing goals of multicultural pluralism, by a deep social malaise that haunts the pride in American nationalism following the Vietnam War, and by a growing awareness of the plight of marginalized individuals brought on by media influences. Hume divides her analysis of nearly one hundred novels into eight primary themes that encapsulate post-1960 American literature including “ . . . immigration, lost innocence, lost civilization, spiritual quest, democracy’s fragility, America as evil, anarchy, and the need for community” (3). Likewise, as the personal became political, American art after 1960 expressed similar concerns and often employed new measures of immediacy to confront late twentieth century audiences and portray the apprehensiveness of postmodernity.
Among the most primary concerns for artists, by which I collectively mean both artists and authors, are the cultural logics of late capitalism and problems with intimate relationships stemming from new media exposures and the growth of the AIDS epidemic. Multiple characters in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* address all of Hume’s themes, but it remains much more hopeful about American progress than the other novels to be analyzed later on. Chapter two analyzes Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*, and Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk*, which collectively express disillusionment with the “reality” portrayed by consumerist media exposure and an inability to connect with others on interpersonal levels. Ellis connects meaningless sex and violence with American popular culture, materialism, and late capitalism; Palahniuk portrays a desire to overthrow traditional institutions altogether from the position of his economically downtrodden male protagonists; and Cooper explores the developments of postmodernity from a gay consciousness that resists public inclusion and ignores the trials of AIDS. Chapter three discusses Margaret Atwood’s and Kathy Acker’s exploration of American patriarchy, tracing it from its oppressive theocratic colonial roots to dystopic futures inspired by Reaganite ideologies. Atwood’s *Republic of Gilead* reverses all of the democratic developments of the liberation movements and steeps America into a totalitarian state of Old Testament orthodoxy; Acker’s vision of New York replaces humanity with materialistic wild dogs fueled by the Evil Enchanters, Ronald Reagan and Andrea Dworkin who propagate unequal power relations.

The art in this thesis remains less explicitly American in its focus, but it does primarily seek to critique and rectify symbolic annihilation, or the absence of adequate portrayals in regards to race, gender, and sexual identity that signify social existence in mainstream society. By the end of the 1980s, media capitalism shifted toward marketing differences, exploiting margins, and absorbing negativity for profitable gains. However, difference has not always been a marketable feature, and prior to this evolution, the artists in this thesis subverted the extant stereotypes and limited portrayals that often circulated in late capitalism. Under the presumption that these discursive forces have the ability to define and confine identity in society at large, these artists overturn this consensus with a politicized edge.

The basic structure of late capitalism promotes consumption, not production, as the primary drive for society. As such it undermines early modes of capitalism, which envisioned production as the proponent of societal progress. The impact of the televised war in Vietnam on the American consciousness especially altered perceptions of American policies. Such images shattered consumerist security and complacency by bringing into America’s living rooms the consequences of what were often regarded to be imperialist measures in “Third World” countries. Nixon’s Watergate scandal that followed further exacerbated a deep cynicism in the values of American government, which had certainly escalated during the tumultuous 1960s after a series of political assassinations including those of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. Collectively Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra scandal in Reagan’s presidency eliminated the ability for American presidents to condone the “good
intentions” of the government’s ambitions within America and abroad. In turn, the abundance of conspiracy theories explaining everything from the Kennedy assassination to the 9/11 “Truth Movement” characterize the general disillusionment and malaise of the postmodern era.

While the televised war in Vietnam showcased America’s sovereignty and disregard for humankind overseas to the American public (as conveyed by the atrocities committed against civilians and the impact of journalistic photography on public opinion), the AIDS epidemic explicitly brought this issue home on the domestic front. Since the epidemic primarily affected homosexuals and disenfranchised inner-city minorities in its initial outbreak, AIDS became the first disease to carry a civil rights agenda with it, and while neoconservative politicians sought to stymie funding to help end the disease, artists explored new measures to distribute information about the issue.

Arguably the most critically acclaimed play of the era, Tony Kushner’s drama *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* positions AIDS and the plight of homosexuals as the primary issues confronting America in the late twentieth century. Harold Bloom even included *Angels* as the most contemporary selection in his “Western canon,” and Joseph Roach suggests that the closest analogue to the drama is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, with its “tremendous popularity before the Civil War, its epic length, and its skill in addressing the most controversial issues of the time in deeply equivocal ways” (qtd. in Savran 207). Although *Angels* is deeply ambivalent toward historical progress, in the end it nevertheless champions progress through embracing multiculturalism and reconstructing American institutions. Within the art world, the goals of the avant-garde provide similar ideals by rejecting late capitalist conformity and instead upholding an immersion of art and the everyday to counteract stereotypical simulacra in society. Throughout this chapter, I position the avant-garde goals of Street Art together with the contingency of American progress expressed in Kushner’s *Angels in America*, for each seeks to alter minority representations in the dominant sphere, to convey issues evident within their own communities, and to struggle against the grain of white heteronormative patriarchal powers. Overall, by analyzing the historical perceptions that are expressed in the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Tony Kushner, I demonstrate how marginalized masculinities initially responded to the crisis of postmodern masculinity as they began to enter the public sphere.

In the “System of Objects,” Jean Baudrillard, one of the most prolific theorists of postmodernism, expands upon late capitalism by proposing, “[i]f we consume the product as product, we consume its meaning through advertising” (13). Advertising projects messages of self-fulfillment and happiness allegedly acquirable by purchasing a product, yet it also simultaneously conflates concepts of individuality and *en masse* conformity within the consumer-object relationship. In examining the message of advertising, Baudrillard writes, Advertising tells us, at the same time: ‘Buy this, for it is like nothing else!’ (‘The meat of the elite, the cigarette of the happy few!’ etc.); but also: ‘Buy this because everyone else is using it!’ And this is in no way contradictory. (15)
Thus, an individual may feel unique for purchasing a product, yet also compliant and even beneficial to the economic system of society for doing so. In postwar America, being a good consumer became a patriotic virtue, and the instant commodification of everything from fast food to kitsch interior decoration has often been explained as a safeguarding strategy to gloss over memories of the Great Depression and its stark physical deprivations (Jameson 97).

As kitsch and popular culture established a homogenizing universal literacy among the masses, high art institutes remained suspect of the prevalence of societal consumption and a perceived intellectual demise that it has produced overall. In his breakthrough essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” art critic Clement Greenberg interpreted the consumerist kitsch culture as a “dumbing down” of society, which only the rapidly developing Modernist avant-garde movements could combat. In defense of the avant-garde, Greenberg writes, “... the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence” (3). Greenberg further promoted the avant-garde, or “art for art’s sake” and “pure poetry,” as an emotional, sensuous tidal wave of free expression that defied a conscious context or definitive meaning in its subject matter. His theories were fully manifested into the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Although Greenberg’s definition of the avant-garde exclusively relates to Modernist art and its defense of aesthetic taste standards, Postmodernist art relies upon a collapse of high and low art values. While these are certainly contradictory modes of expression, I argue that postmodern art and literature, especially due to their democratizing political rhetoric and explorations of the late twentieth century, operate under a similar motivation to redefine and ratify aesthetics in order to propel artistic ambition and audience perceptions even further. Moreover, the majority of young artists and novelists emerging out of the age of television have already grown up within an intertwined milieu of popular culture, film, advertising, and fiction so that these forces remain engrained into their psyches. Their ability to sift through the multifarious codes of cultural semiotics and the surreal language and implications of media capitalism demonstrates an intelligent understanding and application of contemporary life. Therefore, postmodern art and literature merely relay the philosophical ideologies of the time period, just as all literature and art throughout history has always done.

Perhaps the most definable characteristic of twentieth-century art has been its rapid succession of art movements, in which theory has consistently preceded artistic creation. Unlike nineteenth and early twentieth century art that always privileged the inner turmoil of the artist and personal subjectivity over mass opinion, the continuously redefining narrative of late twentieth century art has likely developed in response to a consumer society that always desires the latest and newest model of a product. Baudrillard proposes that the degradation of an autonomous ego has seemingly characterized postmodern society at large, or as he writes: “‘Free to be oneself” in fact means: free to project one’s desires onto produced goods. ‘Free to enjoy life’ means: free to regress and be irrational, and thus adapt to a certain social organization of production” (16). The social
saturation of media and its consumerist drive is parodied in the Pop Art scene of the 1960s, which displaced the Promethean convention that an artist is a purely original creator with godlike authority bringing knowledge and meaning to the world. In its place, Pop Art offered a perspective of art that upheld machine-driven precision, reproduction, and seriality in its artistic execution to denote the commodity relations that drive capitalist society. The young American art scene following Pop Art—especially influenced by Andy Warhol’s experimentations in silkscreen and photocopy techniques, film, photography, and performance—would reflect a multiplicity of viewpoints to challenge the passivity of consumer society during immense social and political travesties occurring within America and abroad.

In Allan Lloyd-Smith’s analysis of late twentieth century American fiction and British art, he argues that abjection and jouissance derived from transgression have become the normative traits to combat late capitalism. Lloyd-Smith writes, If the realm of the sign insists upon a cleaned-up, happy and healthy world of the ‘real,’ in which all oppositions can be mediated or negotiated away, and in which the merely human is seen as powerless, determined from the outside by immense state and economic power, and from the inside by the psychological imperative of brand names, insistence on the designer body, and the manipulation of desire, the situation of the human is becoming increasingly that of ‘abjection.’ (192) Abjection will be explored more fully within the following chapter in psychoanalytic terms, yet it is definable here as a contemporary trend of willful alienation by artists and authors of their audiences in order to defy the clean construction of a colonized culture, thereby forcing audiences to view brutal realities that the sign eclipses. Abject art deploys postmodern sensibilities in exploring extreme taboos or delving into fits of lawlessness for liberating purposes against cultural authorities. Lloyd-Smith’s analysis primarily examines the novels of Bret Easton Ellis, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon; his discussion of art includes the works of Andres Serrano, Damion Hirst, and Tracy Emin. Moreover, the goals of the In-Yer-Face Theatre Movement also comply, as do the contemporary practices in extreme performance art. Of course, the resistance by artists to the colonization of culture is not a new phenomenon, nor is the more explicit exploration of sexuality that coincides with it. The Industrial Revolution rallied opposition in the form of Romanticism, in which artists privileged nature and individual subjectivity over the growing dominance of a machine-driven society; in like manner Walt Whitman and D.H. Lawrence celebrated the body and sexuality over the orderly industrial era.

Contrary to Romantic individualism, however, anti-humanism has become the normative artistic condition of late capitalism, in which an individual remains overwhelmed and debilitated against the media forces that constantly surround him or her. As technologies of information and simulation became even more prevalent with product placement entering all realms of existence (even potentially entering an individual’s dream state as satirized in Don DeLillo’s White Noise when the protagonist’s daughter murmurs “Toyota Celica” in her sleep), postmodernist artists delight in exercises of unhinged meaning and ambiguity to counteract the finite representations of “reality” depicted in media
and advertising. They also engage with mediums of late capitalism, simultaneously working with and against the sign, often conveying either nihilistic rhetoric at the fate of spectacle society in the most extreme cases or politicized transgression to provoke a response in audiences against the surface hum of simulacra. In American literature, Blank Fiction displays a more pessimistic understanding of society within media capitalism, whereas avant-garde endeavors such as street art offer more politicized motivations by combining immediacy, subversion, and a direct relationship between an artist and audience to prompt societal reaction.

Street art also emerged as a logical advancement of Pop Art’s democratic principles to combine high and low art values with vernacular accessibility. While Warhol presented meaningless consumer subjects on high art canvases and forced the elite to question the presentation of popular culture as art, street artists began to present profound political and social ideals with the lowest form of artistic materials and in the most meaningless sites in comparison to museums and galleries. Jenny Holzer, for example, reclaimed vapid ad-speak by billboard space and LED signs for the public sphere by placing contemplative “truisms” or aphorisms written from multiple subjectivities, while the Guerilla Girls and Gran Fury, two collaborative art projects, utilized street art to combat classism, sexism, racism, and homophobia in both the art world and mainstream society. Overall, though, street art remains immensely concerned with the social values of art within an increasingly materialistic and polarizing era.

In Paul Ardenne’s and Michel Vale’s analysis of the art market following the 1980s, they surmise that the aesthetic value of an artwork is now largely defined by its monetary value. Competitive free-marketism and the rapid accumulation of wealth among the nouveau riche due to Reaganomics and the “yupification” of consciences have instilled a pseudo-stock exchange within art galleries today. Perhaps the most disconcerting new measure of the art world is the cyclical system in which buyers will often purchase artworks only to subsequently resell the artworks in separate galleries to accumulate turnover profit² (Ardenne and Vale 116). Artists striving against commodification include performance artists and to a certain degree street artists. Although some street art has become commodified and accepted by the art world today, street art and graffiti nevertheless continue to function in the tradition of the avant-garde by interweaving art and the everyday and by rejecting established institutional orders of taste to transgress artistic boundaries. Moreover, street art is one of the first major art movements to provide an impartial public voice to female artists among their contemporaries, and due to inner-city origins, it has also functioned as a conduit to liberation for socially marginalized minorities.
The practice of graffiti, or “tagging,” has bestowed a sense of permanence on underrepresented minorities by virtue of tag duplications throughout a city, which also furnishes a sense of community and fame akin to celebrity autographs among fellow taggers. The fame associated with graffiti art relies upon the use of semiotic copyright logos, or “tags,” which become the identifier for an artist’s work. By utilizing the advertising power of cultural semiotics, graffiti artists of the late capitalism period revel in the seductive allure of logos. Their work demonstrates an understanding that the ubiquity of a symbol purports meaning, and images effectively gain significance and cultural importance through repetition before vapidity from overexposure ultimately sets in. In *Artforum’s* seminal essay on street art, Rene Ricard observes, “Graffiti refutes the idea of anonymous art where we know everything about a work except who made it; who made it is the whole Tag” (36).

Therefore, the identity of the artist receives primacy to the artwork; however, it does so by objectifying identity into a marketable symbol, which has ultimately become the goal of celebrity culture within late capitalism, as public figures become commodified “brands” themselves. Both Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, two of the most acclaimed graffiti artists who emerged as protégés of Andy Warhol, perfected singular graffiti trademarks that amassed widespread recognition before securing wealthy patrons to fund materials for their gallery debuts. Furthermore, the oeuvres of Basquiat and Haring represent similar concepts in how each artist views the contingency of societal progression in a post-Civil Rights and post-Gay Liberation era. In Lucy Lippard’s analysis of contemporary post-civil rights era artwork, she writes,

Irony, humor, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences—inverse, reverse, perverse. (qtd. in Schur 643)
While Lippard’s analysis exclusively relates to racial minorities, the same conclusion can be posited to emergent feminist and queer artists. In regards to Street Art, both Basquiat and Haring extensively deploy these tactics to offer up emblematic critiques on the limitations of societal representations for black and gay men in late twentieth century America.

Basquiat’s artwork presents a decidedly cyclical view of American racism and its significant influence on the construction of black identity. Basquiat’s logo SAMO©, an acronym for “Same Old Shit” and a play on the racial slur Sambo, became popular throughout New York City. Portentous language-oriented tags such as “SAMO© as an end to mindwash religion, nowhere politics, and bogus philosophy,” “SAMO© as an alternative 2 playing art with the ‘radical chic’ sect on Daddy’s$funds,” and “SAMO© as an expression of spiritual love,” clearly condemned social institutions and commented upon the fate of humanity (Hoban 26-28). Although his SAMO© aphorisms portray dissidence and dissatisfaction, Basquiat’s logo primarily operates as a satirical critique of copyrights— even copyrighting his copyrights at times— by which Basquiat slyly criticizes the commodification of artistic and African-American identities within the dominant American culture.
Laurie Rodgrigues proposes that Basquiat’s engagement with commodified American Africanism in his Neo-Expressionist high art debut, a movement in the 1980s that is characterized by a return to abstract expressionistic tendencies with modes of figurative painting, suggests a “willful self-alienation” and thereby relates to the contemporary state of abjection and disillusionment with the symbolic order of society (230). Overall Basquiat’s artwork reflects the confusion surrounding black identity following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, yet Basquiat refuses to privilege either ideology or represent a dignified portrait of black humanity. Instead, he merely portrays the constructions of black identity by media representations and fills his canvases with questions regarding the veracity of representation and history. His images retrace black experience from the colonial era to the late twentieth century and offer seemingly no difference in societal perceptions of race relations. By reappropriating print and visual vocabularies, though, Basquiat challenges the extant stereotypical images of African-Americans and forces audiences to contemplate the myths of black experience that confine black identity within mainstream society.
In “Hollywood Africans,” for example, Basquiat depicts the limited character roles that constrain African-American men and accentuates them with racialized dialogue such as “SUGAR CANE,” “TOBACCO,” and “WHAT IS BWANA?” At the very bottom of the painting, the harsh yellow paint gives way to a green corner that emphasizes the images above it with “GANGSTERISM” written directly below the white underlining mark, thereby implying that the connotations of African Americans as “gangsters” exist both within Hollywood and outside of it. Furthermore, by writing “HOLLYWOOD AFRICANS FROM THE NINETEEN FORTIES,” Basquiat begins to strike out the decade to suggest that Hollywood still uses racial stereotypes.

In Richard Schur’s analysis of post-Civil Rights artwork, he asserts that Basquiat’s oeuvre operates much differently than previous African-American artists:

- African American artists prior to Basquiat tended to downplay how they participated in market economies and how their art became a commodity.
- Basquiat acknowledged this brute fact of capitalism and then littered his artwork with copyright and trademark symbols, making explicit what had been hidden and unspeakable. (643)

Therefore, Basquiat’s copyrights of pre-existing print and visual vocabularies serve to question the legitimacy and authorship of such stereotypical associations, as well as the continuous ubiquity of their representations in mainstream society. Basquiat’s repudiation of racism is not solely directed, though, as depicted within “Irony of a Negro Policeman.” In this painting (pictured on the following page), Basquiat depicts a symbiotic conception of racism within the guise of an African American policeman. Richard Schur proposes that within urban environments, . . . the policeman is viewed as a monster, by both the white community, which never fully healed itself of the sickness of racism, and by the black community, which frequently views African American officers as protecting the privileges and property of white folks. (644)

Basquiat, therefore, depicts the “NEGRO POLCEMN” (a phonetic play on “please man”) as a monster, and he scribbles white paint across the figure. By inflecting both white and black paint into the figure and by doubling the word “IRONY” in the painting, Basquiat suggests the ironic nature in both black and white viewpoints regarding African-American policemen, thereby implying that both races can be equally responsible for
furthering racism. In this regard, irony within Basquiat’s post-Civil rights artwork serves as a social catalyst to promote change through self-reflexivity and confrontations with previous and continuous prejudices in society.

Keith Haring’s deployment of irony also serves as a social catalyst, and while his work also deals with race relations, Haring’s primary concern is the interplay of gay male sexuality within the post-Gay Liberation age of AIDS. Basquiat’s practice of recycling print and visual vocabularies to showcase the cyclical system of prejudice, however, is altered by Haring who fuses his canvases with symbols of the past, present, and future to question matters of regression and progression in the contemporary era. Basquiat’s commodified stereotypes are also denounced by Haring’s hybridized stick figures that combine both multicultural and gay subcultures in order to deter an essentialized polis of selfhood and thereby promote a universalizing connectivity within all of humankind. Haring achieves this measure through his minimalistic hieroglyphs of unclothed men engaging in hip hop choreography, break dancing, and electric boogie.

Alongside graffiti art, hip hop became an amalgamation of connective cultural identity integrated by political influences from the Black Arts Movement and Slam Poetry, (break)dance influences from Latino American cultures, and musical influences from the Jamaican sound system that promoted DJing and rapping (Brunson 6). Arguably, hip-hop has become the most multi-ethnic and globalized cultural capital today, connecting people from all national, religious, and social backgrounds. During the birth of hip-hop, however, it remained an art form exclusively for urban black and Latino cultures. Although critics often scorned Haring for appropriating black and Latino practices as a white middle-class man, Haring’s relationship with the new music and dance sensibilities were inspired by frequenting the dance clubs Phoenix and the Paradise Garage in New York City, as well as his well-documented personal affinity for racial minorities in his journals.

Haring’s street art figures function as a form of queer xerography, according to Scott Herring, or “a critical and eroticized practice of copying— that forced a heterosexual ‘public’ and a standardizing urban gay male culture to confront what they ‘know’ about sexual alterity in the city” (332). The urban homosexual enclave, or clone culture, that ruled gay publications and counterpublic spaces prior to the AIDS epidemic relied upon ideals of perfective copying, whereby white working-class males with exemplary muscular bodies became labeled as the unassailable masculine persona for gay
urbanites. The emphasis on uniformity and sameness translated into a systematic clone attire and physicality defined by “tight Levi blue jeans, even tighter t-shirts or tank tops, and construction boots complemented by a mustache or beard” (332). Furthermore, the hypermasculine proclivities of the white clone culture condoned promiscuity and anonymity within sexual encounters, and they prized African-Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos as “primitive Others” with the perception that they represented a “danger and rougher masculinity” (335). Haring defied clone culture in his earlier experimentations with stenciling by spray-painting “CLONES GO HOME!” onto the sidewalks that divided the East and West Village in New York City, as well as producing handouts reading “Gay Men Against Beards!” to deter the gay signifier within the East Village. Yet by depicting a racially and culturally impure figure amidst scenes of interlacing bodies in his artwork, Haring further dissolved notions of a privileged gay male identity and supported a postmodern hybridized identity overall. Although Haring dispels homophobia and prejudice in his artwork, his images of gay male sexuality and his perceptions of societal progress remain immensely convoluted. While Basquiat’s combination of text, image, and copyright signifiers integrate his canvases with racial heritage and its cultural depictions to act as a mirror to society, Haring juxtaposes binary oppositions on his canvases including: innocence/experience, spirit/flesh, beauty/decay, pleasure/pain, and life/death. In doing so, Haring depicts a lost hope for gay men in the age of AIDS and the chaotic bewilderment that defined late twentieth century society. The spectacle of post-Gay Liberation sexuality depicted in his artwork often fluctuates between scenes of ecstatic joy and gratuitous violence. Haring’s racially and culturally impure figures not only break dance and electric boogie with each other, but they also collide, strike, penetrate, and embrace one another lovingly. Angels descend from Heaven to combat UFOs, artificial technological monsters overwhelm natural life as represented by birth and childhood, and the powers of state and religion eliminate all spiritual, sexual, and emotional autonomy. Overall, Haring’s artworks exist as narratives of moods that defy definitive meanings by portraying labyrinthine exercises in human connection and disconnection.

Contrary to Basquiat’s bleak SAMO© logo though, Haring’s most popular logo, the “Radiant Child,” presents an image of absolute purity and innocence. In his Journals, Haring proclaims the appeal of children by writing, “Children are the bearers of life in its simplest and most joyous form. Children are [racially] color-blind and still free of all of the complications, greed, and hatred that will slowly be instilled in them through life” (132). Although he exhibits a bleak conception of humanity, Haring’s admiration for childhood innocence, as well as his cartoonish design style, confers preeminence to his more grotesque depictions of adult interactions.
In an absurdist era overwhelmed by dissimilar bits of information constantly colliding in the media, Haring’s art presents the contradictory and hypocritical modes of human existence in postmodern life. Understandably due to his own AIDS diagnosis in the Reagan years, the perception of America by Haring is depicted in an untitled 1985 painting as a phallocentric, greedy, and militaristic society that preys upon civilians marked by X’s to signify death or inferiority. Throughout his AIDS artwork, Haring often engages in a spiritual quest attempting to understand the tyrannical aspect of Christianity during an era of 1980s televangelism, Reaganism, and deep religious uncertainty regarding the arbitrary and unruly emergence of the AIDS virus. Because the AIDS epidemic looms in the background of the majority of the art and literature created during this period and certainly inspired negative outlooks upon American politics, some historical information is necessary in order to understand how dire the situation was during the late twentieth century. The first reported cases of AIDS appeared in 1981, and since the victims were all active homosexuals, the disease was referred to as GRID, or “gay-related immunodeficiency.” As more cases began to emerge, scientists coined the name the “4H disease,” since it appeared to single out homosexuals, hemophiliacs, Haitians, and heroin users. By the end of 1982, once research determined that the virus is transmitted through blood contact and sexual intercourse regardless of race or sexual orientation, the virus earned its conclusive title AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). The initial stigma that the disease only affected minority communities cemented itself within public discourse though and aroused latent resentments against its victims. In Susan Sontag’s analysis of illness and its metaphors, she examines the applications of military language and its inevitable associations within Western society. Twentieth-century Western culture has declared a “war on poverty,” a “war on cancer,” and a “war on drugs;” while, the twenty-first century has witnessed a “war on terror,” “war on religious liberty,” and “war on marriage.” Under these implications, however, war-making only produces an invisible, potentially inaccessible enemy to defeat, thereby provoking an insoluble ideological crisis. This myopic absolutism is especially detrimental when applied to diseases as Sontag writes, In all-out war, expenditure is all-out, unprudent—war being defined as an emergency in which no sacrifice is excessive. But the wars against diseases are
not just calls for more zeal, and more money to be spent on research. The metaphor implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien ‘other,’ as enemies are in modern war; and the move from demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt. (99)

Overall the AIDS epidemic would express the irreparable limitations of military metaphors by raising the question: If disease is accepted as an alien “other,” then how are societal Others envisioned if they contract the disease?

Within her examination of metaphors surrounding the AIDS virus, Sontag determines that early public discourse often conveyed science-fiction associations by labeling the virus as an alien bodily invader, perhaps due to the influence of Star Wars, both the film franchise and Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, and the emergence of popular sci-fi video games such as Space Invaders (106). This also may explain the prevalence of UFO’s in Haring’s artwork. While science-fiction language elucidated the foreign uncertainty surrounding the disease, the “African hypothesis” origin of the virus furthered this notion and reinvigorated stereotypes that the liberation movements had previously sought to eliminate. The “African hypothesis” resurrected notions of a primitive past with connotations of animality and sexual immorality, which in effect, imposed a sense of blame upon the afflicted victims for their actions through the lens of “Third World” otherness. The self-indulgent hedonism attributed to the victims by the public thereby labeled the victims as social pariahs, and the era’s Reaganite conservatism only magnified public condemnation of the afflicted.

Evangelical conservatives viewed the disease as vindication of their own personal biases and began citing biblical prophecy to explain the disease as God’s curse on the newfound freedoms of the sexual revolution. Headed by televangelist Jerry Falwell, the politically organized Moral Majority launched an attack on homosexuality as the primary cause of the epidemic’s outbreak. On a memorable ABC television production in 1983 “AIDS: The Anatomy of a Crisis,” Falwell professed that homosexuality was a “perverted lifestyle” driven by “sub-animal behavior.” Furthermore, he warned, If the Reagan administration does not put its full weight against this, what is now a gay plague in this country, I feel that a year from now President Ronald Reagan, personally, will be blamed for allowing this awful disease to break out among the innocent American public. (qtd. Shilts 347)

Falwell’s rhetoric reflected the general consensus among televangelists regarding homosexuals and AIDS victims during the early years of the epidemic, and the “innocent American public” expressed similar disdain. In a 1985 Los Angeles Times poll, 51 percent of surveyed adults supported criminalizing sex for AIDS patients, another 51 percent supported quarantining AIDS sufferers altogether, 45 percent favored testing all job applicants for AIDS, and 42 percent encouraged banning gay bars entirely. From 1982 to 1985, hate crimes against homosexuals tripled nationally, and they especially escalated in staggering proportions within generally tolerant cities like New York and Los Angeles (Engel 45). Alongside the God’s-curse theory and “African Hypothesis,” black and homosexual minority
groups and activists developed their own conspiracy that AIDS was a government action to wipe out their communities, often citing the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment in which the US government denied treatment to black men suffering from syphilis in order to examine the progress of the disease. Overall, mass confusion and anxiety regarding the AIDS epidemic overshadowed an entire decade. Public discourse combined previous experiences with infectious diseases and conflated the virus as an airborne, food-borne, blood-based, and sexually transmitted disease. In New York City, novelist David Leavitt would recall the mid-1980s as “a time when the streets were filled with an almost palpable sense of mourning and panic” (qtd. in Kaiser 283). Randy Shilts’ And The Band Played On provided an invaluable journalistic source on the early years of the epidemic. As one of the first reports to humanize and personalize the disease, Shilts recounted the battles between the Reagan administration and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) during AIDS’ initial outbreak. In 1981 as the epidemic began spreading rapidly, Reagan proposed cutting Carter’s recommended CDC funding from $327 million to $161 million (Shilts 55). At the same time, Reagan also requested an immediate increase of $7 billion in defense spending, which escalated to a $25 billion request by the next fiscal year (Kaiser 285). By 1988, Reagan accumulated the largest peacetime defense buildup in American history, reaching twenty-eight percent of the federal budget without any inclination toward war (West 344). The president’s proclivity for privileging a military-industrial complex over domestic concerns accelerated the public health crisis. Throughout the decade, medical officials consistently combatted Congress and the Reagan administration to secure more funding for preventative measures. The funding trials for AIDS research were especially heightened due to the God’s-curse theory, which was upheld by conservative physicians and politicians who argued that too much money was going into AIDS research already and that funding should be applied elsewhere (Shilts 295). Although Reagan himself privately expressed forlorn concern for AIDS sufferers, his cabinet politicized a moralizing ideology against the epidemic that fueled his administration’s policies. With the rise of televangelism and his new media popularity, Falwell replaced Billy Graham as the unofficial chaplain of the White House, and the new wave of 1980s televangelists received unprecedented access to the White House (Johnson 196-197). The promotion of the God’s-curse theory by Falwell and his contemporaries was absorbed by Reagan’s cabinet and publicly supported by leaders such as Gary Bauer, Reagan’s chief advisor on domestic policy, and Patrick Buchanan, Reagan’s Press Secretary, who in a Los Angeles Times op-ed during the epidemic wrote, “The poor homosexuals—they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is extracting an awful retribution” (qtd. in Kaiser 322). The only member of Reagan’s cabinet who expressed concern over the dangerous rhetoric imposed by the socially conservative spectrum was Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. Koop was awarded a position within Reagan’s cabinet due to his leading role in the pro-life movement and his staunch religious fundamentalism; however, Koop undermined his political base as he became more educated on the overall scope and public risks of the epidemic. Koop’s forewarnings would not fully be accepted by the Reagan
administration, though, until 1985 when the death of Rock Hudson sparked a new era of the AIDS epidemic driven by more humanizing discourse with the influence of celebrity culture. As Shilts concludes in *And the Band Played On*, archetypal juxtapositions of identity politics and public personas altered the popular opinion about the disease. Shilts writes, It took a square-jawed heterosexually perceived actor like Rock Hudson to make AIDS something people could talk about. It took an ultra-conservative fundamentalist who looked like an Old Testament prophet [Koop] to credibly call for all of America to take the epidemic seriously at last. (588) Rock Hudson’s Hollywood status as a “beefcake” and romantic leading man, alongside his perceived private life as a heterosexual playboy, was immediately overturned due to public news of his homosexuality and AIDS diagnosis. As a result, Hudson provided a new image of homosexuality by undermining the effeminate, “sissy” stereotype that characterized the hegemony of American culture’s outlook on homosexuality, a perception that had likewise come under attack by the hypermasculine gay clone culture in urban environments. Hudson’s death also instilled a new awareness that the virus could afflict the rich and the famous as well as urban or minority communities. Alongside the death of Rock Hudson, the rise of AIDS infections among hemophiliacs by blood transfusions in 1985 further altered opinions of the epidemic. Ryan White, the first HIV-positive hemophiliac teenager to become a public figure due to his expulsion from school as a result of his diagnosis, impacted public opinion as advocacy for AIDS research began to manifest from groups other than gay rights organizations.

As a rift in popular religious values and erroneous public discourse began to circulate throughout the eighties, President Reagan remained publicly silent throughout the epidemic until September 1985, three months after the death of his friend Rock Hudson and after the known diagnosis of over 12,000 Americans. At a press conference when asked about casual-contact transmission among students as a result of the Ryan White controversy, Reagan responded that “… medicine has not come forth unequivocally and said, ‘This [casual contact] we know for a fact, that it is safe.’ And until they do, I think we just have to do the best we can with this problem” (qtd. in Webber). Medical experts had ruled out casual contact as an infectious agent for AIDS, however, during the first year of its outbreak. Reagan’s rebuttal of this logic only furthered hysteria among the American public.

Therefore, during these divisive years of immense uncertainty and lack of governmental aid, art, literature, and theatre became the primary forums to respond to the health crisis. Since the AIDS epidemic lacks a definitive beginning or end, however, AIDS artworks and narratives expressed the tragic immediacy of the present. Tony Kushner’s epic *Angels in America* portrays the epidemic in the mid-1980s, and it presents a vision of America balanced between a cataclysmic end and a potentially redemptive future. Rejecting the anti-humanist tendencies of most postmodern art and literature, Kushner applies a humanist ideology in his self-proclaimed “Theatre of the Fabulous.” The plot of the play primarily revolves around a group of homosexual men in New York City. As Prior is diagnosed with AIDS, his boyfriend of four-and-a-half years, Louis, abandons him for Joe, a
closeted Reaganite Mormon. Joe is married to Harper, an anxious, Valium-addicted housewife who drifts into states of fantasy to cope with her unhappy marriage and her suspicions of her husband’s homosexuality. Prior’s best friend and previous lover, Belize, serves as a nurse and must care for Roy Cohn, a virulent closeted homosexual lawyer dying of AIDS who is also Joe’s political mentor. As Cohn faces his impending death, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg returns to haunt him since he aided in procuring her execution during the McCarthy trials. When Joe reveals his homosexuality to his mother Hannah, she travels from Salt Lake City to New York in order to save her son and his marriage. Throughout the drama, the characters’ lives consistently collide with each other as they all interact through physical, spiritual, and dream-like realms. And by the end of Part One, an Angel appears to Prior declaring him a prophet and imploring that humans must stop moving and restrain from progress.

Kushner applies Walter Benjamin’s discontinuous vision of history, in which Prior’s affliction becomes the “Virus of TIME,” not only the AIDS epidemic but also the excruciating stasis of the present era. Written during the first months of World War II, Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” rejects a linear transitional model of history and instead envisions history as Jetztzeit, a “time filled by the presence of the now” in which “time stands still and has come to a stop” (qtd. in Savran 210). Benjamin’s historical theory is centered upon his analysis of Paul Klee’s “Angel Novus” (1920):

A Klee painting named “Angel Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (qtd. in Savran 210)

Benjamin proposes that the unbearable condition of the Now is always burdened with the catastrophic rubble of the past piled upon the present and complicated by an irresistible desire for more progress. To understand the contradictions of the present, Benjamin proposes that history must be viewed from the position of the vanquished rather than the victor, upholding the marginalized over the mainstream. Kushner displays this dilemma in his expansive portrayal of America that recalls the hazardous migrations of immigrants and religious sects, the racism continuously endured by African-American descendants of antebellum slaves, and the revival of McCarthyism in the mobilizing prejudice and political rhetoric of Reagan’s cabinet during the AIDS epidemic. While ambivalent about the process of history, Kushner’s epic nevertheless upholds multicultural progress and change as the solutions for America in the new millennium.
Benjamin’s unification of historical materialism and theology are reflected in the drama through the portrayal of Heaven and Prior’s rejections of its principles. Heaven is depicted as a simulacrum of “San Francisco after the Great 1906 Quake” with a “deserted, derelict feel to it, rubble is strewn everywhere” (Perestroika V:2), fossilized in a state of stasis on the day that God abandoned Heaven. The Angel proclaims to Prior in their first physical encounter, “In creating You, Our Father-Lover unleashed / Sleeping Creation’s Potential for Change. / In YOU the Virus of TIME began!” and s/he fumes, “YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST STOP MOVING!” (Perestroika II:1). The Council Room in Heaven is scattered with objects from the Age of Enlightenment including “. . . astronomical, astrological, mathematical and nautical objects of measurement and calculation . . . ” with a “bulky radio, a 1940s model in very poor repair. . . ” at the center of the table relaying the first reports of the Chernobyl disaster (Perestroika V:5). Heaven thus becomes a nostalgic commemorative site for human endeavors that have led to scientific progress marked by destruction and despair. Generally the site of utopia, Heaven in Kushner’s epic conversely becomes a dystopia problematized by the advents of human innovation. Even the Angel’s entrance crashing through his ceiling with triumphant music is mediated through Prior’s campy exclamation “Very Steven Spielberg” to suggest the lack of phantasmic forces in an era of filtered cultural representations and post-Enlightenment innovations (Millennium Approaches III:7). Following a series of transcendent inexplicable experiences though, Prior rejects his status as a prophet of stasis by proclaiming that it is counterintuitive to human nature, . . . We can’t just stop. We’re not rocks— progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It’s animate, it’s what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it’s still desire for. Even if we go faster than we should. We can’t wait. And wait for what? God . . . He isn’t coming back. (Perestroika V:5) The Angels and absent God appear to be useless in Kushner’s narrative, only foreseeing more tragedy for the future to pile upon the trajectory of history. Angels in America’s complex structure merges the political and the personal, the empirical and the conceptual, the historical and the mythical. While Kushner engages with contemporary Absurdist theatre in critiquing the absence/presence of God alongside Beckett, Ionesco, and Stoppard, Kushner’s humanist vision in Part Two: Perestroika most primarily adheres to formats of Shakespearean comedy to resolve his play’s socio-political dilemmas in relation to his concept of the trajectory of American history. Northrop Frye’s analysis of comedy links the genre to the “mythos of spring” and argues that Shakespearean comedy “illustrates, as clearly as any mythos we have, the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from ‘reality,’ but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate” (184). Comedy generally portrays a transition from one form of society to another marked by paternal opponents to a hero’s wishes, and Frye discerns that in instances in which a father is absent, as the Father/Creator is in Angels, then “someone who partakes of the father’s closer relation to established society: that is, a rival with less youth and more money” becomes the stand-in (164-165).
Since *Angels in America* primarily expresses the desire for equal rights and protection for homosexuals in the age of AIDS, Roy Cohn becomes the blocking character, and he is condemned throughout the play by the younger generation of homosexuals— with the exception of Joe— for defying his sexual identity as an ontological status and using the Law against other homosexuals. Cohn defines himself as a “heterosexual man . . . who fucks around with guys” since he has “clout” and presumes that “Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout” (*Millennium Approaches* I:9). By equating sexuality with power rather than identity, Cohn’s viewpoint recalls the ideology of his own surrogate fathers J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy and harkens back to a 1950s mindset in which being homosexual was perceived as being un-American. By positioning Cohn’s archaic ideology together with his status as the most Reaganite individual in the drama, Kushner portrays Reaganism as a form of Neo-McCarthyism that deters the principles of a pluralist American democracy. In opposition to Cohn’s rhetoric, Kushner propels progress through theologically communitarian and oppositional legal associations.

As an African-American former drag queen that privileges caretaking over Cohn’s Social Darwinism, Belize describes himself as Cohn’s negation, and although he despises Cohn, Belize nevertheless aids him by providing pertinent information on AZT with the remark, “Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another” (*Perestroika* I:5). Through ongoing conversations with Cohn and his liberal foil Louis Ironson, Belize bridges the gap between both equally fallible and excessive political ideologies, and he procures a sense of harmony through theological insight. On Cohn’s deathbed, Belize requests Louis pray Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, in order to provide peace to the Cohn’s spirit. Although Louis initially resents the entreaty, Belize states, He [Cohn] was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe . . . [sic] A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn’t that what the Kaddish asks for? (*Perestroika* V:3) Belize’s deployment of communitarian theological virtues makes him the most humane character in the drama, and in Part One, Belize envisions that the ruination of the present will soon be blanketed white with further theological principles of “Softness, compliance, forgiveness, grace” (*Millennium Approaches* III:2). Although Cohn is forgiven, a rejection of his past also occurs in the drama as Louis miraculously and involuntarily begins speaking the Kaddish in Hebrew with the help of Ethel Rosenberg, and they each end their recitation with “You sonofabitch” (*Perestroika* V:3). Therefore, Kushner proposes that an acknowledgement and perhaps even forgiveness of the past must occur; however, momentum and progress away from the past’s social injustices must follow suit. The play’s epilogue resolves the socio-political investments of Kushner’s drama as determined by Frye’s comedic structure whereby “[t]he tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated” (165). At the Bethesda Fountain, a commemorative site for the naval dead of the Civil War, the new societal family structure is comprised of Prior, Louis, Belize, and Hannah.
Cohn is deceased, although forgiven, and his oppositional characteristics appear to have been reconciled. The authorial introduction of Part Two further confirms this by noting that the real Roy Cohn died in August of 1986, whereas the play’s fictional account of Cohn’s death is set in February on the cusp of spring and new life. As Cohn’s protégé, Joe abides by his Reaganite tendencies, yet the faults in his individualist proclivities are also exposed in a scene between him and his lover Louis:

Joe: You have a good heart and you think the good thing is to be guilty and kind always but it’s not always kind to be gentle and soft, there’s a genuine violence softness and weakness visit on people. Sometimes self-interested is the most generous thing you can be.

You ought to think about that.

Louis: I will. Think about it.

Joe: You ought to think about . . . [sic] what you’re doing to me. No, I mean . . . [sic] What you need. Think about what you need. (Perestroika III:4)

Joe appears to accept his homosexuality within the play, yet his neoconservative tendencies and desire for maintaining a heterosexual marriage are not fully reconciled, and this ambivalence is not welcomed in the new world order of the play’s epilogue. Instead, as a blocking character, he appears to be within a state of conversion, especially following the end of his relationship with Harper as she suggests more movement for him: “Get lost, Joe. Go exploring” (Perestroika V:8). Although not necessarily a blocking figure, Harper is also absent from the Fountain, yet her journey to the real and truly progressive San Francisco—described by Prior as a place of unspeakable beauty in contrast to Heaven (Perestroika V:2)—suggests her search for another community and new family.

The new society at the Bethesda Fountain represents an atmosphere of dynamic, fluid identities that champion progress, migration, and liberal pluralism. Both Prior and Hannah are connected by their libidinal, queer experiences with the Angel. Depicted as “Hermaphroditically Equipped” with “eight vaginas” and a “Bouquet of Phalli,” the Angel sporadically copulates with Prior and Hannah to produce “Plasma Orgasmata,” defined as a “protomatter, which fuels the Engine of Creation” (Perestroika II:2). The Angel effectively destabilizes their sexualities and provides a divine experience for new identification. Prior achieves a “Released Female Essence” in his exchange with the Angel; whereas contrary to her friend Sister Ella Chapter’s warning to not leave Salt Lake City, “the home of saints, the godliest place on earth” (Millennium Approaches II:10), and face the alleged evils of New York City, Hannah begins a rapturous reevaluation in the urban locus for change. Belize functions as the moral center and most diverse figure in the play, and he is also the first character to refute the Angel’s irrational message of Stasis by declaring to Prior, “But that’s not how the world works, Prior. It only spins forward” and noting his own ancestry “. . . don’t migrate, don’t mingle, that’s . . . [sic] malevolent, some of us didn’t exactly choose to migrate, know what I’m saying . . . [sic]” (Perestroika II:2). Lastly Louis’ inclusion at the Fountain further encourages the principle of forgiveness, since it follows the Kaddish for Cohn and Prior’s forgiveness of Louis for his desertion;
moreover, since he is depicted expressing more political disputation within the epilogue, discursive desires for continuous progressive potentials are upheld. In his final statements, Prior positions the plight of homosexuals as the crux for progress in contemporary society by declaring to the theater audience, We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.
And I bless you: More Life.

The Great Work begins. (Perestroika: Epilogue)

In this regard, Kushner abides by the final conclusion of Frye’s comedic format, in which “[t]he resolution of comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience’s side of the stage . . .” (164). The prevalent concerns of the legal processes for homosexuals are exposed within the drama by Louis who attacks Joe for participating in the court case Stephens versus United States, “an important bit of legal fag-bashing” that reiterated that homosexuals “are not entitled to equal protection under the law” (Perestroika IV:8). Prior’s address to the audience thus enforces humanist ideals of innate goodness within humankind and condones audience participation by means of social justice. Through utilizing the law and American democratic processes, Kushner proposes that change can soon be met for homosexuals. Rather than reject institutions of society, Kushner wishes to see them restructured, which has become the primary drive for the contemporary gay rights movement as perceptions about homosexuals have largely been altered and LGBT issues remain a facet of public discourse following the AIDS crisis.

Allen Frantzen’s analysis of the play’s epilogue and overall message concludes that,

Like Mormons, Jews, and other racial groups, gay people too are oppressed, without a homeland, and on the move. But, unlike those groups, gays are, first of all, a political people, not bound by nation or race. They have no common descent; there is no link between their sexual identity, which the play sees as their central affiliation, and either their biological or their cultural ancestry. So seen, gays are a perfect prophetic vehicle for Kushner’s newly multicultural America.

(qtd. in Pearl 775)

In this regard, Kushner’s Angels in America shares an affinity with Keith Haring’s postmodern hybridized stick figures that combine multicultural and gay affiliations to promote a new cultural landscape for America. In correlation with the irony, subversion, and humor instilled within post-Civil Rights and post-Gay Liberation art, Kushner’s epic also combines similar devices to alter mainstream opinions. As a homosexual living with AIDS, Prior’s status as a religious prophet may be considered ironic and subversive, but it also suggests a connection between homosexuals and religious martyrs as devoutly faithful humans who are persecuted for their own ideologies. The collapse of gender binaries and libidinal explorations within the Angel’s portrayal is also a perverse reversal of expectations, especially within neoconservative and patriarchal religious rhetoric, yet it further supports rejecting stringent fundamentalist assumptions geared toward political persuasions.
As religion and politics, the two pillar institutions of society, continue to disperse the same fears of change, post-Civil Rights and post-Gay Liberation art questions whether society even needs rigid structures and definitions in the first place. Basquiat’s artwork showcases the irreparable harm from the past’s definitions of black identity and their continued presence within contemporary society, and Haring’s artwork underlines the fusion with the past, present, and future that always haunts the time of the Now within any era of history. Although the past is certainly inescapable, Kushner’s epic proposes that in order for society to change, legal and religious institutions must first be altered. He emphasizes this notion by envisioning a multicultural America built upon new unprejudiced applications of legal and theological principles to counteract the detrimental fundamentalist rhetoric of Reagan, Falwell, and other contemporaries. Based upon their design styles and political rhetoric, Basquiat, Haring, and Kushner collectively ask: Can we celebrate change and ambiguity? Or does it inevitably lead to chaos? Yet since change in these representations correlates with life-affirming endeavors like creativity, sexuality, and spirituality, change can only be defined as life itself, and therefore it remains an unavoidable tract as the world continues to spin forward.
CHAPTER 2

POMOPHOBIA AND QUEER BACKLASH:
UNRAVELING PATRIARCHY IN POSTMODERNITY

While Basquiat, Haring, and Kushner offer insights and redemptive alternatives to the crisis of postmodern masculinity, other artists depict the crisis by presenting masculinity at its most bestial level edged with nihilism. Thomas Byers has coined the phrase “pomophobia,” or the fear of postmodernity, to describe the contemporary masculinity crisis whereby the “. . . convergence of fears of late capitalism, fears of feminism, fears of any swerving from the path of ‘straight’ sexuality” constitute contemporary male anxieties (7). As men react against these developments and attempt to abide by a normative standard for male behavior, the contingencies of their masculinity constructions often occur through unstable and violent modes of operation. This suggests the dysfunction of normative masculinity’s codes and conventions, which are often dependent upon institutions, traditions, and socialization practices. As postmodernity reorganizes these social structures, a perceived loss of power and privilege among men has manifested. This ethos is indicative of all historical crises of masculinity, and it denotes issues of male identity that primarily express fears of emasculation overall or resistance to progressive social changes.

R.W. Connell suggests a pluralist approach to understanding masculinity, as opposed to sex-role theory, which embraces the belief in essentialist differences at the core of men and women. He notes the limitations of sex-role ideology, most notably evident in its relative blindness to the circulating power that exists not only between men and women but also among male relations. Masculinity thus relies upon a framework of hegemony that is enacted by sites of domination/subordination, authorization/marginalization, and complicity. Connell also argues that race, class, and sexuality primarily trump gender in the formation of identity and individual subjectivity. While the previous chapter focused on marginalized and subordinated masculinities entering the public sphere whose artworks were largely dependent upon their race, class, and sexuality, this chapter focuses upon decentered male protagonists who benefit from the system of patriarchy and oppose the advancements of postmodernity. It also presents counter-views from queer subjectivities that seek to destabilize heteronormative masculinity and critique its overarching authority over cultural expression.

Postmodern artists expose this moment of historical crisis with anarchic independence, as they grapple with the past and present in their own ways. Since history oscillates between periods of stability and periods of disorder brought on by ruptures of philosophical indeterminacy, the closest parallel to Postmodernism is Romanticism. Both movements express an eclectic orientation to the past and champion the spontaneous, the irrational, and the personal; both also disassociate
themselves from cultural colonization and traditional artistic expressions. The similarities between male pomophobic narratives in postmodern literature and the Gothic novel, a subgenre of the Romantic period, are interrelated later by their views on the Law-of-the-Father and fears of boundary transgressions. As for Art History, the artists analyzed throughout this chapter primarily grapple with the new forces of media culture and their effects on society. In an age of media frenzy, political disputation, AIDS paranoia, and immense social changes, each novelist and artist registers these points of crisis for men and for society at large.

**Pomophobia, Disillusionment with Patriarchy, and Castration Anxiety**

Chuck Palahniuk’s first novel *Fight Club* is a scathing indictment of the depersonalization and “feminization” of men at the end of the twentieth century due to the effects of late capitalism. The narrator, Jack, consistently identifies himself by his possessions, proclaiming after his condominium explodes, I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinet were me. The plants were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up. (110-111)

The desire for consumer objects has even pacified sexual desire, as Jack deduces, “The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (43). This domesticated masculinity gives rise to a primitive urge within Jack to break out against society and free himself from enslavement to the sign. Jack constructs Tyler Durden as his alter-ego and doppelgänger to alleviate his numb sense of existence. As his alter-ego, Tyler represents Jack’s ideal self, a confident and dominating man defiant to authority. His doppelgänger, Tyler, likewise represents Jack’s personified phallic id exercising totalitarian measures in facilitating violence and (self-)destruction. Tyler is also defined in opposition to late capitalism, since he is entirely devoid of consumer markers, appearing nude in his first encounter with Jack (32-33) and living in a dilapidated home with a leaky roof and rusty nails scattered all over the floor (56-57). Jack/Tyler create Fight Club, an underground arena where men bruise, scar, and wound each other in order to reach a more primal sense of self. Fight Club, however, eventually evolves into Project Mayhem, a paramilitary terrorist organization intent on destroying society and culture at large. Although Tyler is a product of Jack’s unconscious, the purpose for Tyler’s manifestation illustrates a textbook case of castration anxiety.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of unconscious desires positions irrational behavior into the cathexis of a sexualized desire for one’s parents, whereby a male must repress his pre-Oedipal desires for the maternal Other and identity himself with his father in order to achieve an individual ego. For men, the Oedipus complex facilitates the negotiation of gender identification and selfhood. Rooted in linguistics and structuralism, Lacan developed Freudian psychoanalysis further by theorizing three phases for subjectivity. The first stage “Imaginary” posits a pre-linguistic order for the infant situated within an interconnected and unified world of the mother. The Mirror Phase must occur thereafter, in which a subject recognizes itself as an individual. Finally through language development and
resolution of the Oedipus complex, an individual can achieve total subjectivity and enter the “Symbolic,” which is constituted by the Law-of-the-Father and the regulation of meaning production, communication, and institutional constructs of law and cultural order. R.W. Connell, in his application of Lacanian theory and its relationship to masculinity, surmises that

. . . [M]asculinity is not an empirical fact (as in classical psychoanalysis), still less an eternal archetype (as in Jung). It is, rather, the occupant of a place in symbolic and social relations. Oedipal repression creates a system of symbolic order in which the possessor of the phallus (a symbol, to be clearly distinguished from any empirical penis) is central. (19-20)

In Lacanian terms, the application of psychoanalysis therefore must extend to structured social relations fraught with dynamic contradictions regarding a subject’s complex desires and personality. *Fight Club* proposes immense discrepancies in the development of male identity though, for it exhibits disillusionment with both paternity and the symbolic order. Tyler’s nihilistic intentions aimed at obliterating history, culture, and God altogether, thereby privilege a return to a primitive premodern world to combat postmodernity. In creating *Fight Club*, Jack/Tyler declares, “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk 50). This lack of stable father figures leads men to create a field of homosocial bonding defined by primal aggression, albeit filtered through media representations as determined when Jack “. . . swung [his] fist in a roundhouse at Tyler’s jaw like in every cowboy movie we’d ever seen . . .” and Tyler strikes Jack back “pow, just like a cartoon boxing glove on a spring on Saturday morning cartoons” (52-53). Along with a desensitized existence symptomatic of late capitalism, unstable paternal authority and the absence of dynamic male role models appear at the center of these young men’s despondencies. When Jack asks Tyler what he was battling at Fight Club, Tyler answers his father, which by the inexorable logic that Tyler is Jack, means that Jack is fighting his own father (53). However, Jack also positions Tyler as his surrogate father figure later on directly after discussing his real father’s abandonment.

When describing the interactions between Tyler and his love interest Marla, Jack compares them to his parents, since he never sees them in the same room together, and he even wonders if they are the same person (Palahniuk 65-66). Later when Jack realizes Tyler is a product of his unconscious creation, he declares, “I know why Tyler occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with her” (198). This suggests that Jack creates Tyler due to an unresolved Oedipal complex stemming from his real father’s abandonment, in which Tyler fulfills Jack’s Oedipal desire for Marla. However, Jack’s sexual inhibition, a result of castration anxiety during the Freudian phallic stage of development, is further complicated during his first encounter with Marla when he situates himself in a scene of voluntary emasculation.

At Remaining Men Together, a support group for men diagnosed with cancer, Jack is able to release his feminized feelings by crying and cradling his inner child. The experience subdues his insomnia and proves euphoric; Jack declares,
“Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt” (Palahniuk 22). Jack’s primary affiliate at the support group Bob, who later joins Fight Club and Project Mayhem, is emasculated due to his literal castration from testicular cancer. He is described as having “too much estrogen” and “bitch tits.” As they embrace each other to cry in one another’s arms, Jack remarks upon his own alluded castration, “Bob loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too” (17). Marla’s entrance into the group disrupts Jack’s ability to cry or connect emotionally with the other men, and he resents her for it, even though she is fabricating the same illness to be there that he is. Moreover, since Marla is viewed as a threat within both Remaining Men Together and Project Mayhem, the presence of women among male bonding signifies a rupture in the order of male socialization regardless of the activities.

Jack’s difficulty in navigating concrete gender categories in the absence of paternal figures is expressed in the emotional release he achieves from the diametrically opposed experiences of emasculation in Remaining Men Together and the virile phallic energy of Fight Club and Project Mayhem. Of course, this construct questions the stability of masculine identity altogether and demonstrates Lacan’s perception of gender as a poorly constructed phenomenon. Jack/Tyler and his followers project themselves simultaneously as both victims of and aggressors to the developments of late capitalism and feminism, thereby defying cultural commodification and women’s integration into men’s realms. In doing so, however, the homosocial exclusivity of male interactions underscores the dramaturgical tasks that lead to the social construction of masculinity through hypermasculine idealizations and associations. Eduardo Mendieta proposes that *Fight Club* follows social recapitulation theory, whereby ontogeny retraces phylogeny, in that “...a quest for viable masculinity ends up re-enacting the very rituals that have eviscerated masculinity in the first place: misogyny, militarism, bullying, terrorism, and gratuitous violence” (397). This concept is evident in the basic plot of the narrative; the men in *Fight Club* are excessively destructive toward each other and society. Since the narrator is a dual persona, however, his destructive tendencies are aimed at both inner and outer identifications. Jack/Tyler and the other men not only express the limits of conforming to a John Wayne loner-in-control masculine ideology by building a community of men together, but they also showcase the disruptive tendencies in singular associations for how men should act or behave.

A significant factor in altered perceptions of male identity within the postfeminist, neoliberal consumer culture of late capitalism is the portrayal of men’s bodies in the marketplace. John Berger’s classic dictum: “... men act and women appear” (47) has been decried by contemporary art, fashion, media, and advertising. Today both men and women may act or appear depending upon any given circumstance. Susan Bordo traces this cultural development to Calvin Klein’s 1970s advertisements featuring lean, fit men, which exemplified a dual marketing approach of bisexual appeal to both female and gay male clienteles (179-186). Following Klein’s inspiration, depictions of masculinity that circulate within the marketplace often represent men as either confident spectacles of Herculean strength or detached and emasculated cosmetic beauties. The men of *Fight Club*...
exercise their primitive definitions of masculinity in underground clubs. Through masochistic communal wounding, they subvert the marketplace’s contradictory idealized projections of masculinity and reclaim self-agency over the body. This practice also reverses the sexual objectification of the gaze under media-influenced guises and initiates willful self-abjection against commodification or societal acceptance. An examination of the power structure of the subject/object relationship of the gaze in Robert Mapplethorpe’s and Cindy Sherman’s artwork further illustrates this concept as it relates to late twentieth century photography.

The Gaze: Objectifying the Other, Obscenity, and Abjection
Marketing developments of late capitalism have initiated startling advancements for Western ways of seeing and recording the gaze. Theories of the gaze set forth by John Berger, Michel Foucault, and others have determined that the gaze is dependent upon visual control intertwined with power structures of society. In essence, authorities that dominate visual representations generally exercise some control over those without representative power. Throughout Western history, the gaze has primarily been refracted through a patriarchal prism constituted by a hierarchy of gender, race, and class. Individuals who did not fit into the white heteronormative male paradigm often had to conform to prevalent imagery or risk being marginalized and ignored. The revolutionary endeavors of the post-1960s liberation movements sought to eliminate this hindrance with an explosion of art solely dissecting identity politics.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, artists tended to build a large, cohesive coalition by minimizing distinctions among group members while conveying linking themes for each of their communities. African-American artists focused upon the shared history of slavery and their African lineage. Female artists analyzed maternity, domesticity, female sexuality, and the oppressive history of patriarchy. Homosexual artists explored their sexuality and the codes of masculinity and femininity. Altogether, these groups sought to delve into the scraps of the past and eliminate misrepresentations or misconceptions that had been recorded about their shared identities. However, these essentialist standards of communal identities created immense problems. Artists and authors making visual and verbal claims about a group can never speak on everyone’s behalf, and rifts in communal ideologies are unavoidable. Diversity always lies within commonality. Therefore, attempts to reclaim the gaze for new representations always become muddled by the individual artist’s worldview.

Psychoanalytic criticism provides a useful lens for understanding society. Although psychoanalytic theory is ahistorical, shifting representations of the gaze can be historically situated based upon new imagery in any given era. While this may appear contradictory, the connective thread that the gaze nevertheless has across history is its innate sense of voyeurism and objectification. Looking is never neutral, and historicized perceptions of visual representations provide significant insight into the artist, the society, and the viewer.
In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the gaze is often considered a fundamental feature in developing individual agency since it corresponds with the Mirror stage and constitution of the ego. Lacan accounts for the gaze as the awareness in a subject of viewing others and being viewed itself. The gaze, however, remains definable within its mutually dependent relationship to an object or other. The diagram on the following page exhibits Lacan’s theories of the gaze, in which the image-screen indicates an intermediary stage constituted by societal conventions, whereby the relationship between the subject and object may be filtered, recorded, and given meaning within the symbolic order. Hal Foster, in his application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to postmodern art declares, “. . . Lacan imagines the gaze not only as maleficent but as violent, a force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed first” (109-110), and perhaps no other art medium has exhibited the unassailable powers of the gaze as conclusively as photography. The camera has truly become the retina to the mind’s eye.

Throughout art history, compositional elements of balance, color, line, and shape, have often been deployed in perfective measures to pacify the gaze, as exemplified in Neoclassical painting or the symmetrical Byzantine altar pieces intended to evoke religious meditation for the viewer. Postmodern art, however, often revels in the complexities of the gaze and magnifies the scope of its pernicious desires. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag details the implicit objectification rooted within the gaze of photographers. Sontag proposes that . . . there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (14)

This sense of objectification, however, may be exactly what certain artists strive toward. The possession of the Other under the gaze appears to be an intrinsic artistic ambition of both Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, although they achieve different representations in their photography.

Mapplethorpe’s photography best captures the epoch of the sexual revolution prior to the AIDS epidemic by expressing enthusiasm and curiosity about sexual liberation with all of its guiltless, uninhibited opportunities. Following avant-garde conventions, Mapplethorpe’s early artwork deliberately appropriated previously printed commercial materials and restructured them to define his own way of seeing. These depictions, such as “Leatherman II” (1970) and “Julius of California” (1971), present selective scenes of individual body parts, which is a popular practice in pornography that denies the subjectivity of an
individual and merely presents objects for sexual gratification. While this practice indicates Mapplethorpe’s erotic gaze (especially highlighting the genital region and obscuring the model’s face within “Julius”), both his appropriation of previous imagery and his spotlight on certain anatomical fragments suggest that Mapplethorpe views the photographic subject and the photograph itself as objects for his own pornographic possession.

Mapplethorpe’s depictions of male and female bodies in his later work may objectify his models by more often focusing his gaze upon their genitals or athletic bodies than their faces, yet his photography also dissolves gender conventions by portraying men and women in equal scenes of action and passivity. For example in “Self-Portrait” (1974) Mapplethorpe portrays himself as a leaning figure caught by the viewer’s gaze, whereas in androgynous images of Patti Smith or in photos that champion the bodybuilding prowess of Lisa Lyon, Mapplethorpe portrays dominating, assertive women who challenge the viewer’s assumptions of femininity. Throughout his oeuvre, bodies often negotiate power dynamics, exhibiting either passive objectification or total authority and self-agency, and at times even contentment at being exhibited.
Altogether, Mapplethorpe’s photography remains immensely concerned with deconstructing social conventions and fantasies regarding race, gender, and sexuality; with a photographic eye for perfection, he is able to balance out his subversive black-and-white imagery with classical compositional elegance. By applying classical principles to his art, Mapplethorpe elevates his photography to the realm of high art. It is important to note, however, that his motifs—flowers, still-lifes, portraits, and nudes—have essentially always been classical subjects. These formalist themes perpetuate an ambivalent reaction for viewers by appeasing the gaze with absolute aesthetic perfection while displaying scenes of homoeroticism and sublimated fetishistic desires.
In contrast to Mapplethorpe’s formalist taming of the gaze, Cindy Sherman agitates and befuddles the gaze in the jagged compositions of her photographs, producing anxiety and unease to disorient the viewer’s perception of the subject portrayed. While Mapplethorpe’s possession of the Other in his photography is often of young men (and primarily black men tinged with racist associations), Sherman’s photography connotes violence against women. Her work also coincides with Basquiat’s refusal to portray dignified representations of African Americans, since Sherman rejects poignant representations of women in the trajectory of art history. The sheer ambiguity of her art, however, solicits multiple interpretations regarding her portrayals of women. Michelle Meagher notes that feminist interpretations of Sherman’s work often hinge upon the question of whether Sherman’s work either “re-represents and challenges the codes of femininity” or “reiterates and reinscribes those codes” (19). In essence, does Sherman’s artwork offer a satirical critique of female objectification under the gaze or does it alternatively inspire the possession of the female Other within the gaze?

In her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), Sherman portrays herself as stereotypical women from film noirs, b-movie melodramas, and European art-house cinema. The women lack the dynamic confidence of Mapplethorpe’s female subjects and instead become vapid sex objects invaded by the gaze, as evident in *Untitled Film Stills* #6 and #30. In other stills, women are depicted as housewives with implications of conflict or domestic abuse, as seen in #10 and #12. Even her portrayals of career girls, waifs, and femme fatales, evoke an
inherent sense of dread. Sherman achieves this not only by implying the viewer’s and the camera’s gaze, but also by hinting at the presence of someone else in the room or outside of the frame. However, since Sherman averts her eyes from the camera and therefore the viewer, the impending sense of danger that permeates the unspoken narratives of the photographs is positioned within the gaze of the spectator.
Peter Schjedldahl’s analysis of the Film Stills highlights this re-positioning of the subject-gaze and follows the convention that Sherman’s work reiterates feminine stereotypes for the viewer by writing, I find these pictures sentimentally, charmingly and sometimes fiercely erotic: I’m in love again with every look at the insecure blonde in the night-time city… I am responding to Sherman’s knack, shared with many movie actresses, of projecting female vulnerability, thereby triggering urges to ravish and/or protect. (qtd. in Meagher 21)

Schjedldahl’s interpretation, most likely commenting upon Untitled Film Still #54, showcases the vantage point of certain male viewers and corresponds with Laura Mulvey’s theories of the male gaze in cinema. Mulvey, in accordance with John Berger’s art criticism, prescribes the male as the spectator within the majority of art history and cinema and in writing upon the role of women Mulvey determines, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (62). Sherman’s next photographic series, Centerfolds or Horizontals (1981), exposes this concept even further and subverts the ravishing aims of the male gaze within pornography.

In this series, Sherman depicts herself held captive in the grips of introspective anguish, and the vulnerability of her female subjects is reinforced by the high-angle vantage point of a surveillance camera looking down upon the women’s bodies, which critics have often suggested imply rape narratives. Sherman was commissioned by Artforum to create the photo spread; yet due to its sexist associations, the magazine rejected displaying the material. Feminist critics,
though, were more apt to associate the imagery with a reversal of stereotypes and reprisal against the male gaze. Laura Mulvey construes the photographs from the *Untitled Film Stills* and *Centerfolds* as an explication of ideal femininity and the masquerade that femininity conceals, thereby enforcing the indecency of the male gaze as well as the uncertainties implicit in female subjectivity underneath male review (Meagher 24).

Although Sherman’s photography loans itself easily to feminist theories of the male gaze, Sherman consistently maintains in interviews that her work is a- or even anti-theoretical in its aims. She further resists definition by refusing to title her photographs and her photographic series; in fact, Sherman only titled the *Untitled Film Stills* and critics have subsequently labeled all other series. Sherman moreover delights in ambiguity by playing with ways in which a camera may morph reality and expose the performative aspects of identity altogether. While Hollywood cinema, pornography, and capitalist spectacle are often portrayed from the vantage point of men, the theory of a gendered gaze is ultimately too generalizing in its applications and thus suspect to review. Mulvey’s essentialist concept of the male gaze refuses considerations of how individual subjects with different national, ethnic, sexual orientations, or even people from different historical eras, may approach viewing an object or other. The differences in recording the gaze between Mapplethorpe’s idealization of classical beauty and Sherman’s ambivalent display of voyeuristic excess reinforces this conclusion by displaying how each artist utilizes the objectifying eye of the camera to reach different conclusions. Mapplethorpe’s classical standards follow the studio tradition of artist and muse, and his backgrounds often delineate his studio settings. In contrast, Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* are frozen filmic moments of indefinite locations with dislocating vantage points. Sherman’s oeuvre primarily exists in the realms of popular culture, parody, pastiche, and
horror. In comparing the works of Mapplethorpe and Sherman though, both artists intuitively stage their subjects, rather than practicing documentary photography. Furthermore, they each photograph themselves performing both male and female identities in their self-portraits, thereby showcasing the dramaturgical traits of gender expectations. For this practice as well as the deviations from acceptable artistic representations in regards to sexuality, both Mapplethorpe and Sherman have often been indicted for delving into the realms of obscenity and abjection with their photography.

Since obscenity is always a relative term based upon an individual viewer’s perception, it is a difficult concept to fully master. Hal Foster positions obscenity within the Lacanian gaze model at the site of both the scene of representation and the image-screen, yet the symbolic order itself that regulates meaning through the Law-of-the-Father within the image-screen ultimately determines what may be considered “obscene” based upon generalizing standards (113). The most virulent attacks on Mapplethorpe’s artwork often deal with its exposition of abject sexual practices, which seemingly threaten the heteronormative familial order that structures society. While Mapplethorpe may delight in displaying these practices amidst his other subjects, his artistic aim does not appear to be as malevolent as conservative critics have often labeled it to be. In a 1981 interview for example, Mapplethorpe lamented being pigeonholed as a transgressive queer artist in relation with the entire collection of his photography by declaring,

I thought . . . [sic] that people could see that here’s the flower. It’s perfectly composed, perfectly lit, [or here’s] a beautiful portrait of a society lady, whatever, you know, a celebrity. Then you see a cock and it’s a different subject, same treatment, same vision, which is what it’s all about– my eyes as opposed to someone else’s. And I thought that it would make people see things differently. But what happened is that they took the cocks and fused them onto the others instead of the other way around. They forgot that the other pictures were even there. (qtd. in Meyer 205)

Thus Mapplethorpe’s artistic ambition is to equalize portrayals of sexuality with more acceptable subjects in order to elevate, or at least critique, their status in the perceptions of his viewers. His compositions achieve this standardizing goal by emphasizing form and aesthetics over content, making all of his subjects appear similarly cold and static without any sense of passion or depth. Edmund White proclaims that because of this artistic aspect Mapplethorpe’s imagery is rather non-erotic, and he even likens his sadomasochistic portraits to “. . . the banal pride of the deep-sea fisherman posing beside the day’s stupendous catch” (298).

In this regard, the reception and label of obscenity on Mapplethorpe’s artwork exposes more about the viewer and his/her perceptions designated by the symbolic order than it does about the artist or the compositional depictions of his subjects. The basis for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) trials of the 1990s led by Senator Jesse Helms and the New Right further proved this notion by exploiting Mapplethorpe’s artwork, and ultimately determining for the public that nudity is considered most obscene if it involves a man or especially men together.
Cindy Sherman’s *Sex Pictures* (1992) revealed more about the concept of obscenity for the NEA trials through the use of mannequins. Unlike Mapplethorpe’s sexual representations, Sherman’s pornographic series is entirely artificial, yet it still has the power to shock and unnerve viewers with its interplay of absurdity and vulgarity. The fully contrived mannequins objectify sex entirely just as conventional pornography does; yet the mannequins do not engage in sex acts. Instead, they merely display their sexual organs, which are often hyperbolized for comedic effect. In *Untitled #264* for example, Sherman harkens back to a longstanding artistic tradition of eroticizing female subjects for male viewers, most notably Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). Sherman completely de-eroticizes her subject, however, by obscuring the figure’s face and over-accentuating the genitals; in fact, she literally removes the torso to do so, which produces an unsettling and comedic tone in the photograph.
In her notes, Sherman expresses the intentions of her *Sex Pictures* as follows:

Shouldn’t be merely about sex *per se* as shock element. The shock (or terror) should come from what the sexual elements are really standing for—death, power, aggression, beauty, sadness, etc. (qtd. in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* 164)

In this regard, both Mapplethorpe and Sherman seem determined to shock viewers with their photographic gaze for different effects. Mapplethorpe wishes to elevate abject sexuality into the classical realm of high art, while Sherman wishes to subvert the audience’s expectations on eroticism and sexuality altogether to expose its underpinnings.

Hal Foster’s analysis of obscene art proposes that utilizing the abject has two functions:

The first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow— to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation— to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right. (115-116)

Cindy Sherman’s later work appears intent on abiding by the first proposition since her *Disaster* series (1986-1987) and *Sex Pictures* fragment the body entirely, making it an amorphous, indefinable being that overturns conventional wisdom, whereas Mapplethorpe (and Ron Athey’s artwork to be explored later on) exhibits the latter tendency by merely displaying abject sexual and social practices to viewers without probing their origins.

Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories of the abject provide more guidance in understanding the nature of both the art and literature throughout this chapter, as well as the concept of identity crisis. Kristeva writes that

. . . far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it, this kind of literature [horror] . . . represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses. Hence its nocturnal power . . . Hence its continual compromising . . . Hence also its being seen as taking the place of the sacred. (208)

Kristeva distinguishes three forms of abjection which all rely upon concepts of purity and impurity defined by food, bodily waste, and signs of sexual difference that facilitate psychic shocks of horror or repulsion. Her psychoanalytic theories have especially been important for feminist and queer scholars to map the dynamics of oppression. Since Kristeva re-inscribes the maternal body as the central axis for subjectivity formation, she thereby contests Freudian or Lacanian models that privilege patriarchy and compulsive heterosexual identity as the definitive outcomes for subjectivity and sociality of the self. Kristeva achieves this through her psycho-linguistic reinterpretation of the tenets of Lacanian theory, in which she argues that

[t]hrough frustrations and prohibitions, this [maternal] authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of the proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and
exerted. It is a ‘binary logic,’ a primal mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say that, while being the precondition of language, it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of linguistic signs nor of the symbolic order they found. Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take place. (72) Kristeva therefore proposes that subjectivity emerges within the fluid, fused realms of the maternal body through which a discursive process of identification and disidentification facilitates subjectivity. Kristeva’s definition of the abject as the inscription of bodily signification propels this theory by proposing that a subject attains autonomy through defining itself against the soft vulnerability and fluidity of the maternal body, rather than merely the maternal Other herself. Kristeva defines the abject as follows: “The abject has only one quality of the object— that of being opposed to I . . . what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1-2). She continues on the relation between abjection and culture by writing, “On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (2). Abjection thus initiates a disruption of identity, system, and order, yet it also exists to define these constructs in the first place.

The abject essentially functions as a memory-trace of the Real, which is constitutive of Kristeva’s Semiotic, and thus, threatening to the ego and cultural order overall since it exists within the unconscious. The Real cannot be symbolized by language, just as the Semiotic cannot, and Lacan likens it to an emotional eruption indicative of jouissance. As a component of the Real, the abject thus portends itself as a phantasmic substance that defines the fragile boundaries of primal repression between the internal and external self expressed by the transference from the maternal body to paternal law. According to Kristeva, identity is neither fixed nor stable, but rather a dynamic and contradictory constructed concept with the stress of the symbolic order imposed upon it. This is particularly important for understanding the digressions of masculinity in *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, and *Frisk*.

Kristeva also proposes that abjection is a necessary foray for postmodern art by writing,

“In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task— a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct— amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression. (18) However, the questions remain: If artists expose the abject, which exists in defiance to culture, can the abject still exist thereafter, or does it displace abjection elsewhere? Moreover, is there any redemptive value in examining the abject, and why has the trend toward abject art manifested in the contemporary era?

**Approaching the Traumatic Real: Gothic Conventions in Pomophobia**
In order to explore these questions and understand how abjection and the pommophobic crisis of masculinity function together, it is best to connect Gothic conventions with the postmodern representations that follow. The Gothic novel with its bewildering supernatural elements arose at the end of the eighteenth century to defy the empirical worldview of the Enlightenment. In correlation with abject art, the Gothic novel also sets itself in opposition to conventional beauty, aesthetics, ethics, and social standards. According to Fred Botting, the Gothic emerged in era of “industrialization, urbanization, shifts in sexual and domestic organization, and scientific discovery,” making its thematic concerns and expressions especially pertinent for postmodernity (3).

Anne William’s analysis of the Gothic explores the discontents with symbolization evoked within male Gothic narratives, in which Gothic conventions primarily focus upon waning male authority and horrors impelled by potential boundary transgressions. Williams connects the Gothic and Romanticism and proposes that both exist as poetic traditions to demonstrate the limitations of language within the Symbolic order. In examining the Gothic, Williams writes, . . . Gothic texts consistently reveal the uneasy compromise made (or imposed) by the Law of the Father on the material conditions of meaning… The paradoxes inherent in a theory of écriture are precisely those manifest in Gothic conventions of plot and narrative technique, for language both mediates the unspeakable ‘other’ and shows the impossibility of that mediation. Thus the familiar Gothic trappings of darkness, the supernatural, the haunted castle, and so on, all express, in their various ways, the tension between the Symbolic and the inexpressible other—‘the female,’ the ‘maternal,’ and the ‘Semiotic.’ (66)

Generally the instability of patriarchy and patrilineal heritage initiate a wary attraction to the Other in male Gothic conventions. For instance in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*—the first Gothic novel, which expresses a strong affinity for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—the prohibition of incest cements the foundation for family and social life. Confrontation with incestuous possibilities, however, inflames the narrative with madness and disintegration, as Manfred, the Prince of Otranto, is compelled to produce an heir with his deceased son’s previous fiancé Isabella. Throughout Williams’ Gothic analyses, she discerns that language within Gothic narratives always appears paradoxical and multifarious, seemingly intent upon corroding the boundaries between the Symbolic and the Semiotic, and thereby between the conscious and the unconscious.

In correlation with the Gothic, Postmodern literature and art also remain immensely fascinated with the limitations of language and representation, similarly evoking a slippage of meaning within the Symbolic order. In Fredric Jameson’s theories of the “waning of affect” in postmodern culture, he proposes that “. . . a whole new type of emotional ground tone…” occurs in late capitalism, which he refers to as “intensities” that, he suggests, can best be grasped by returning to older theories of the sublime (6). Jameson’s theories coincide with Baudrillard’s presumptions that late capitalism is morphing humans into more object-like passive victims, which graffiti art and celebrity culture asserts by making identity into a marketable symbol, but Jameson envisions that late capitalism may also be explored as a schizoid experience. Due to the sheer
depthlessness promoted by an overwhelming onslaught of simulacra in postmodern society, Jameson describes the loss of historicity alongside the submersion in new technology as a schizophrenic experience, in which the subject may be exposed to “ . . . heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect” that can produce “ . . . in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity” (27-28). This insurgence of overwhelming simulacra has led to a sublime experience, in contrast to the Modernist self being defined by alienation (Jameson cites Munch’s The Scream for consideration). The Postmodern self is defined by fragmentation due to a globalized capitalist structure, a rupture in identity politics, and the amalgamation of public and private spheres of life.

Since the sublime is loosely definable and it overwhelms the self, Kristeva links abjection with the sublime as interrelated phenomena writing, “The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech that brings them into being” (11). Edmund Burke’s classic theory of the sublime remains essentialist in gender conventions, since he explicitly associates the sublime with masculinity and beauty with femininity; however, since pomophobia occurs as a hypermasculine exercise in maintaining order, Burke’s theories are especially useful for examining the sublime in late capitalism and its relationship to the postmodern masculinity crisis.

In Burke’s analysis, the sublime is connected to the masculine entities of God the Father from Christian theology, power, wrath, justice, and wisdom, yet the sources that evoke the sublime such as infinity and uncertainty are all demarcations of Kristeva’s Semiotic where language cannot exist. Williams exposes the sexual politics of Burke’s sublime by noting, “The ‘sublime’ is, perhaps, a ‘sublimation’ of the culturally female. Paradoxically, the ‘maternal’ qualities of darkness, infinity, irregularity enter the Symbolic . . . disguised as a manifestation of the ‘fatherly’ of ideal power and greatness (78). Williams also notes another discrepancy in Burke’s masculinized theories of the sublime.

Although Burke defines the sublime as a masculine force, the sublime effectively “feminizes” the subject who becomes overwhelmed by it. Burke’s response to experiencing the sublime is timidity and a threatened sense of existence brought on by horror and awe (78). Thus, the feminine is indicated as an inexplicable threat to the normative male subject. In this regard, the sublime effect of late capitalism’s fragmentation of selfhood is slanted toward a postfeminist, neoliberal ideological axis. The media’s new potentials for male objectification has feminized and crippled men as demonstrated in the pomophobic crisis in Fight Club.

Both Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho and Dennis Cooper’s Frisk portray further delineations of pomophobic males with hypermasculine proclivities toward meaningless violence, yet while Fight Club explores discontentment with patriarchy and the initiation of a masochistic Gothic death drive, American Psycho and Frisk deploy Gothic conventions to examine the uneasy borderlines of linguistic expression and desire. Both narratives become disjointed and disrupted throughout, fraught with vampiric and supernatural
imagery, and driven by the troubling desires of delusional, unreliable narrators detailing the extremities of taboo and perversity. In *American Psycho*, however, the protagonist Patrick Bateman wishes to conform to the standards of consumer society and fulfill the rhetoric of the emergent Yuppie generation, whereas in *Frisk*, the protagonist Dennis prefers to remain on the fringe of society as a queer outlaw transgressing societal norms and expectations. While each novel conveys scenes of extreme violence often with passive, flattened affect, the narrative “truths” in both *American Psycho* and *Frisk* are continuously deconstructed and destabilized for the reader within a game of free-floating signifiers and inflections of multiple subjectivities, causing the violence to primarily act as a chimera, explicated but potentially not committed.

Patrick Bateman appears as the most pomophobic subject in contemporary literature, and his identity is entirely anti-humanist in its construction, identifiable only through a fictionalized world of real external forces situated exclusively within the 1980s. The frenzied creation of Batmean’s identity relies upon the latest, most chic consumer products, and he exists as a specimen of rampant consumerism. The narrative itself is littered with overwhelming lists of brand names and product placements that elicit a sense of boredom and bland repetitiveness for the reader. This stylistic device is also deployed within scenes of pervasive violence and pornographic content, thereby flattening the intensities of the narrative with the same vacuity of late capitalism. The motif of mistaken identity that permeates the entire novel, in which each character becomes interchangeable and indistinguishable from all others, further attests to the deindividualization upheld within consumer society.

Elizabeth Young’s seminal analysis of the novel notes the impossibility of analyzing Batman due to his unreliable narration and identity construction by discerning, Patrick is a cipher; a sign in language and it is in language that he disintegrates, slips out of our grasp . . . He is a textual impossibility, written out, elided until there is no ‘Patrick’ other than the sign or signifier that sets in motion the process that must destroy him and thus at the end the book must go back to its beginnings and start again. (119)

Even Bateman himself attests to his own evaded existence stating, “ . . . there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory . . . I simply am not there [sic] (376-377). Bateman also expresses that he is a “ghost,” or “something unreal, something not quite tangible” (71). Mark Storey adds to Young’s analysis by explaining that Bateman’s subjectivity exists as a perpetuation of normative masculinity within an “ . . . uneasy collage of the different spheres of masculine language that create him,” such as the patriarchal language systems of violence, pornography, the media, fashion, and commerce all intended to seduce consumers and viewers (59). In effect, Bateman’s contradictory identity flounders in the text as the repressed unconscious of a patriarchal culture. With the narrative driven by monotonous surface action and vapid ad-speak, the monstrous Bateman becomes the primary character for the reader to latch on to, especially as he begins slaying all characters with any sense of depth, difference, or insight into his mindset.
Following these murders, every character aside from Bateman effectively becomes a cloned copy of a copy, or stereotypical simulacrum. Bateman’s dictum for murder may be explained in his first violent act, in which after stabbing an African-American homeless man Bateman declares, “I don’t have anything in common with you” (131). While critics have often focused upon the virulent misogyny in the text, and indeed the most atrocious acts are committed against females, Bateman remains a democratic murderer throughout the novel. He objectifies and obliterates all “Others,” anyone who is not a wealthy young white presumably heterosexual man like he is. Although it is important to note the overwhelming impact of late capitalism that generates the elusive narrative existence of Bateman, it is equally important to analyze characters who propel and threaten Bateman’s existence in the textual realm of masculine language.

Tim Price becomes Bateman’s identifiable role model and guide early on in the novel. Bateman declares, “Timothy is the only interesting person I know” (22), and Price designates Bateman’s role in the competitive world of corporate masculinity. Price, whose very name denotes value, advises Bateman and the other men at the firm Pierce & Pierce on fashion and relationship advice, becoming the primary advocate for consumer male beauty and misogynistic ideals. Bateman’s envious desire for Tim Price’s approval is especially highlighted within the competitive displays of business cards, in which Tim Price favors Van Patten’s card to Bateman’s. The homosocial bonding of men in this scene is characterized by phallocentric and homoerotic language. Bateman’s card is described as a “bone” color, and Bateman gazes at the “tasteful thickness” of Price’s card directly after Price “pulls his [card] out of an inside coat pocket.” “Even I have to admit it’s magnificent,” Bateman declares. (44-45). In the opening chapter, Bateman also suggests that his girlfriend Evelyn date Tim Price in an exchange that highlights Bateman’s attraction toward Price, as well as the deindividualization that pervades the narrative: “Why don’t you just go for Price?” “Oh god, Patrick’ she says, her eyes shut. Why Price? Price?” And she says this in a way that makes me think she has had sex with him. “He’s rich,” I say. “Everybody’s rich,” she says, concentrating on the TV screen. “He’s good-looking,” I tell her. “Everybody’s good-looking, Patrick,” she says remotely. “He has a great body,” I say. “Everybody has a great body now,” she says. (23) Even though Tim Price embodies everyone else according to Evelyn, he is somehow special and different from Bateman’s perspective. Although Tim Price becomes an implied homoerotic attachment for Bateman, he is subsequently expelled from the patriarchal language of the text in the following Tunnel sequence after the business card exchange. At the club Tunnel, Price expresses remorse at the vile repulsion and hollowed existence of his Yuppie lifestyle, and he declares that he is leaving the club, which causes Bateman to react oddly with perplexed sadness and embarrassment. In
maddening despair, Price leaps over the railings into the Tunnel and vanishes into the darkness of the club (61-62). He thus enters the materialized Semiotic chasm and is erased from the text (the Tunnel is boarded up and closed in the next scene). Yet Price returns at the end of the novel when Bateman discerns, “And, for the sake of form, Tim Price resurfaces, or at least I’m pretty sure he does” (383). This reinforces the unreliability of Bateman’s narration, as well as the cyclical infernal world of *American Psycho*, which opens with the sentence “ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE . . .” and closes with “. . . THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.” No one can escape from the confines of the text. No one can be redeemed. Nothing is certain. Following the initial disappearance of Tim Price though, Bateman loses his source of identification and his psyche slowly begins to disintegrate. His homoerotic attachment to Price also devolves into homophobia toward Luis, a bisexual coworker at Pierce & Pierce.

Luis Carruthers is the only male character at Pierce & Pierce who is portrayed with sincere, tender emotion, yet aside from late capitalistic excess, Luis also appears as the only character to intimidate Bateman throughout the narrative. His threat to Bateman is primarily due to his gentle lovelorn advances, which exhibit farcical and vexing scenes of homosexual desire that terrify Bateman. Bateman describes a chance encounter with Luis, “Like a smash cut from a horror movie—a jump zoom—Luis Carruthers appears, suddenly, without warning, from behind his column, slinking and jumping at the same time, if that’s possible” (292). In another scene, Bateman hallucinates, “…I look over at Luis in one brief, flashing moment: his head looks like a talking vagina and it scares the bejesus out of me . . .” (108). Bateman’s positioning of horror with homophobia is not coincidental.

Judith Butler applies Kriesteva’s theories of abjection onto homophobia in *Bodies That Matter* arguing, “the threat of a collapse of the masculine into the abjected feminine threatens to dissolve the heterosexual desire. It carries the fear of occupying a site of homosexual abjection” (205). Butler positions heterosexuality and homosexuality as mutually dependent concepts, whereby one cannot exist without the other, and through which heterosexuality is constituted as the more desirable principle in contrast to homosexuality. Butler defines this concept as the “heterosexual matrix,” or “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (*Gender Trouble* 151). Homophobia exists as a division between the Symbolic and the abject, in which the anxieties toward the homosexual Other demarcate the borders of the Symbolic. Since the homosexual Other produces repulsion constitutive of fear in the heterosexual subject, Butler envisions this psychic phenomenon as a fear of collapsing socially acceptable desires or behaviors, dissolving the distinctions between the subject and object, the self and other. The instability of heterosexual identity evoked within scenes of sexual panic expresses the blatant insecurity of normative male identity and the rigorous exclusionary practices of feminine associations in male behavior.

Within postmodernity, the public acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle has begun to eliminate previous legal and religious defiance. The backlash against gay rights demonstrates a pomophobic crisis in maintaining
patriarchal order, and Bateman’s characterization is hyperbolized with issues toward homosexuality, albeit in a contradictory guise due to his vain feminized behaviors. While viewing a gay pride parade, for example, Bateman remarks, I stood in front of Paul Smith and watched with a certain traumatized fascination, my mind reeling with the concept that a human being, a man, could feel pride over sodomizing another man, but when I began to receive fey cat-calls from aging, overmuscled beachboys with walruslike mustaches in between the lines “There’s a place for us, Somewhere a place for us,” I sprinted over to Sixth Avenue, decided to be late for the office and took a cab back to my apartment where I put on a new suit (by Cerruti 1881), gave myself a pedicure and tortured a small dog I had bought earlier this week in a pet store on Lexington. (139) This passage underlines the fact that Batman only perceives of human beings as men—a fact that is exacerbated in his vicious attacks on women later on declaring, “... I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing...” (345) — and homosexuals are considered lesser men, or lesser human beings to Bateman. His fixation on sexual acts of homosexuality, similar to the public outcry against Mapplethorpe’s photography, ultimately exposes more about the fantasies and anxieties within a heterosexual culture’s views of homosexuality and the regulatory practices of the Law-of-the-Father in bodily signification. Moreover, the gay pride parade stuns and feminizes Bateman by making him feel objectified, which paradoxically produces cosmetic and violent acts in his behavior.

Although the legitimacy of his actions or correspondences may be uncertain, Bateman’s existence as the absolute extremity of hegemonic masculinity and a hyper-caricature of male sexuality showcases the collapsing center of patriarchy within postmodernity. Along with the men in Fight Club, Bateman remains influenced by consumerism and media portrayals in founding his masculine identity and interactions with others, but Bateman achieves consolation in consumer conformity whereas the men in Fight Club reject these ideals. American Psycho also portrays violence differently than Fight Club. In Fight Club, violence becomes the antidote to the men’s numb sense of existence, whereas in American Psycho, violence becomes merely another component of numbness. The desensitization of media culture regarding sex and violence is satirized within Ellis’ novel through dense, exhaustive prose that becomes cinematic in its descriptions, such as a threesome described by Bateman as a “hard-core montage” that parallels the pornography he admits to watching throughout the novel (303). Moreover, Bateman structures his life and experiences as if they are snippets of a film, consistently noting cinematic techniques while observing others and utilizing jump-cuts in narrative descriptions and authorial voices. He even rents several horror films including The Toolbox Murders and DePalma’s Body Double thirty-seven times to mimic their actions within his own murderous activities.

The influence of cinema and pornography on violent acts also pervades the narrative of Dennis Cooper’s Frisk, a homosexual murder-novel published the same year as Ellis’ American Psycho. The protagonist Dennis and his queer counterparts are not concerned with being emasculated by late capitalism or
feminism, rather they fear the assimilation of their proclaimed deviant identities into the mainstream culture of a politically correct postmodern society. In this regard, the fear of losing marginalization and inheriting a centralized collective gay identity in the contemporary gay rights movement produces a pomo phobic crisis in certain queer subjectivities. (These gay men are portrayed as the absolute antithesis to the young men in Kushner’s Angels in America). Cooper himself follows the tradition of Jean Genet and William S. Burroughs and views the outsider status of homosexuals from a positive perspective declaring, “. . . it’s stupid to think you’re ever going to be allowed into the main structure of anything. So there is a kind of freedom there . . .” (qtd. in Nicolini). The men champion their alleged freedoms by engaging in risky, promiscuous sexual behaviors in clubs with faux prehistoric settings like the Flintstones, and the narrator even scoffs at safe-sex practices in a post-AIDS era.

In accordance with Gothic conventions, characters often appear as stereotypes—the tyrant, the Byronic hero, the persecuted maiden, the madwoman—and Cooper’s Frisk denotes the stereotype of the deviant homosexual serial killer engrained in the nightmares of contemporary audiences by the likes of John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer. Cooper’s prose operates differently than Ellis’ text, though, with its grimy and smudgy expressions full of ellipses, blurbs, and etc.’s, to limit the articulation of the text. Linguistic expression in Frisk thus becomes relatively incommunicable in comparison to American Psycho’s painstaking surface detail that overshadows the textual expression. Both novels however explore the same territory in portraying masculinity ridden by sexual anxieties and intent upon explicating the most carnal, bestial urges to destroy the Other.

Along with the photography of Mapplethorpe and Sherman, Cooper explores implications of image fetishism in Frisk that produce inexpressible fantasies and forbidden repressions. The narrative follows the protagonist Dennis as he explores the development of his homosexual identity amidst hedonistic drug use and sexual freedom. Dennis becomes fascinated by a series of five snuff photographs of a murdered young man with an obliterated anus that causes Dennis to comment, “At its center’s a pit, or a small tunnel entrance, too out-of-focus to actually explore with one’s eyes, but too mysterious not to want to try” (4). Thus, the body itself becomes the Gothic cathexis of darkness and mystery. This anxiety is also echoed in American Psycho as Tim Price proclaims, “There’s this theory out now that if you can catch the AIDS virus through having sex with someone who is infected then you can also catch anything, whether it’s a virus per se or not—Alzheimer’s, muscular dystrophy, hemophilia, leukemia, anorexia, diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, for Christ sakes—you can get dyslexia from pussy— . (5)

In the sixties and seventies, the counterculture’s experience with new psychedelic drugs perpetuated a sense of “bodylessness,” corroding the mind/body dichotomy alongside “free love” and careless, polyamorous sexuality. The impact of AIDS on the Sexual Revolution grounded the body back into the forefront of sexuality, yet with the new concept that sex could now be deadly, coupled with the widespread accessibility of filmic pornography in the new video market, sexual
auto-eroticism and narcissism began to replace the previous decade’s episteme. In pomophobic narratives, the tantalizing appeal of pornography and new uncertainties about the boundaries of the body due to the impact of AIDS produce corporeal fantasies for Dennis and Patrick Bateman to annihilate the body and know the depths of its reality.

The photographs of the young man that compel Dennis’s desires in *Frisk* ultimately turn out to be fabricated. Dennis meets the model Henry at a party later on and attempts to articulate the power of the photograph over him: “Spoken aloud, the descriptions seemed much more pretentious, ridiculous, amoral... something, than they’d ever been in the secret, uncritical world of my fantasies” (30). Only through “Torn,” Dennis’s facile “artsy murder-mystery,” and his “confessional” letters to previous lovers can Dennis convey the extremities of his murder fantasies. Patrick Bateman expresses similar difficulties in verbalizing his murderous desires in the chapter “Video Store then D’Agostino’s.” As Bateman becomes overwhelmed and over-stimulated by the amount of videos to choose from, producing a sublime “minor anxiety attack” in him, he relays to the clerk, “‘I like the part in *Body Double* where the woman... gets drilled by the... power driller in the movie... the best...’” (113, ellipses in original). His clumsy verbal description sputters here, but through Bateman’s exhaustive violent ordeals inexplicably narrated to the reader in the present tense, he achieves articulation of his violent impulses. Since Paul Owen and other murders are proven illogical in the narrative, Bateman is presumably writing down his violent desires, in a similar fashion to the way he relays his music reviews to the reader. Collectively both novels convey the tensions of symbolization in linguistic expression of animal impulses springing forth from the unconscious; the reality of their fantasies can be explicated only through writing.

At the end of *Frisk*, following Dennis’s fabricated letter to Julian detailing his status as a serial killer in Holland, Dennis confuses, [B]asically I realized at some point that I couldn’t and wouldn’t kill anyone, no matter how persuasive the fantasy. And theorizing about it, wondering why, never helped at all. Writing it down was and still is exciting in a pornographic way. But I couldn’t see how it would fit into anything as legitimate as a novel. (123)

The interplay between fiction, fantasy, and reality in late capitalist spectacle society has become so pervasive and seductive that it muddles postmodern narratives with intense incoherence and uncertainty. This potential preference for virtual reality is highlighted within Dennis’ relationship to pornography since he compares gratifying sexual encounters to ones witnessed on the screen. For example as he pays the pornographic actor Pierre for sex, Dennis discusses the dissatisfaction with meeting Pierre in person addressing the reader, “This is just a quick note to say that while he’s beautiful and everything, though slightly disappointing in person like everyone always is when you know them from reproduction...” (61). Film may also disillusion subjects from real experiences, as determined later when Dennis describes a violent sexual encounter with the punk Samson, “... the scene was so unsophisticated, unlike my mental image of violence, which is more like a film. I’m sure I’ve idealized brutality, murder, dismemberment, etc.” (78). The reality of an actual experience, therefore,
becomes a disappointment in contrast to mediated or recorded fantasies, and the body and sexual intimacy are desublimated in both *American Psycho* and *Frisk* as a result of the impact of media and AIDS paranoia upon the narrators’ slippery subjectivities.

In pomophobic narratives, therefore, a Warholian icy chill of emptiness and vapidity replaces Gothic conventions of hysteria and emotionalism occurring amidst unforeseeable horrors in postmodernity. Altogether the men in *Fight Club*, *American Psycho*, and *Frisk* suggest the dehumanization of individuals under the power of media and late capitalism, whereby the fundamental mode of connection becomes the total destruction of the Other in narratives enveloped by ironic, nonchalant chaos. This exercise in authoritative power appears constitutive of the pomophobic crisis, in which as Mark Storey discerns, “When the center collapses (and collapse it does, as normative masculinity knows), the edges become the center” (68). These narratives are delivered from collapsing positions on the edge, in which the corrosion of the family, religion, morality, and law are hyperbolized in an absurd power play of internal and external conflict. Familial boundary transgressions are depicted in the quasi-Oedipal plot of *Fight Club* and implications of brother-brother incestuous desire in *Frisk*, while *American Psycho* details collapsing boundaries between masculinity and femininity, as well as between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Distinctions between the public and private are additionally eliminated in *Frisk* and *American Psycho* as each protagonist confuses the borderlines between nature and culture, the self and society.

Pomophobia at its most extreme materialization in these novels exposes how confrontations with masochism, abjection, and perceived victimization all underscore the destabilizing, yet paradoxical, force of the feminine in the practice of normative male identity and its constructions. This suggests that masculine acts of power and domination stem from anxieties in failing to measure up to the impossible demands of manhood, in which fears of being dominated produce violent surges in male behavior. Ultimately each protagonist’s reactionary revolt against societal progress implies tenacity for maintaining hegemonic order, in which normative masculinity is not founded upon ontological authority but rather by disassociation from feminine affiliations in the male subject and resistance to societal change.

**Extreme Performance Art and the Ethics of Abjection**

Let me return to the original question of the emergence of abject art and primitive displays of absolute power and dominance in postmodern art and literature. How do we explain the cause of this emergent manifestation, and how does it function in a historical trajectory? Since the Gothic novel emerged in defiance to the empirical world view of the Age of Enlightenment alongside new social developments that mirror contemporary concerns, it is logical to assume that the return to these artistic activities in pomphobic postmodern literature proposes another collapse in an orderly world view, more specifically to use Kristeva’s implication, the collapse of the Other. Kristeva equates the Lacanian model of the Other to femininity, yet in a new multicultural landscape of
developing equal opportunities for racial and social minorities as well, the aim of social justice proposes an immense ideological struggle altogether in the definition of what may now be constituted a marginalized Other. In fact, postmodernity itself in regard to philosophy, arts, and culture essentially highlights the failures of Enlightenment principles by championing diversity and pluralism and by seeking to collapse binary oppositions altogether. Both Gothic and Postmodern literature question the stability of a fixed identity and showcase ruptures in identity due to new developments in social institutions. Because the novels analyzed in this chapter reproduce the flattened affect of media culture to convey supremely violent drives aimed at stifling postmodern progress, they remain relatively amoral and produce an ethical dilemma for contemporary readers. Likewise, the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman may expose the erotic objectification of the Other in measures that defy political correctness, but their power nevertheless rests in their exercise of jouissance, an indefinable pulsation between sublimation and abjection. The ambivalent reactions of outrage, shame, denial, or even desire that may arise in the reader or viewer of any of these materials may be problematic, as the controversy surrounding these novels and artworks certainly demonstrates. Their thematic practices of multivalency and complexity, however, denote the uncertainty of the postmodern era’s transitions and question their new possibilities.

In a hyper-real culture without a conclusive space for political change, and in which resistant counter-cultures such as the Hippie and Punk movements merely become avant-garde consumer cultures once their practices are viewed as chic and commodifiable, postmodern artists and authors often aspire toward satirically critiquing and unveiling a reality that eludes simulacra or late capitalist complacency. The nihilistic novels and ambiguous photography analyzed previously in this chapter may not offer a wholly ethical solution or redemptive value for determining how audiences may recover a closeness and human intimacy eliminated by the telephone, television, and sexual anxieties, but through an analysis of extreme performance art, I hope to deduce how certain encounters with these practices have intended benefits for audiences. Performance art first emerged in the 1960s, reaching its apex during the Vietnam era. This avant-garde practice utilized the human body as the artistic medium and merged the everyday bodily experience with art. The televised war and its familiar, repetitive violence has often been deemed responsible for not only tarnishing American nationalism in the post-war era by producing sentiment against US endeavors, but also for fostering a numbing experience toward violent representations in the media via pervasive portrayals. Many performance artists viewed the body as the final frontier for challenging audiences’ media complacency, by exploring the limitations and anxieties of the body made visceral through an inherent performer-audience relationship. The immediacy of the performer’s body and his or her experiences may directly be mapped onto the spectator’s body by empathetic identification. For this reason, latent violence and nudity often foregrounds practices of extreme performance art to instill transformative potentials for desensitized audiences in the postmodern era.
Performance artists such as Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Vitto Acconci, Bob Flanagan, and Marina Abramovic and her partner Ulay have projected dangerous rituals upon the body, primarily through self-mutilation and scarification practices. These practices showcase the fragility of the body and have been deployed to address issues such as war, disease, technology, sexuality, and censorship. Most notable among these artists in connection to the previous novels analyzed is Chris Burden’s work and its relationship to media, violence, and late capitalism. For example, in *Trans-fixed* (1974) the artist acknowledged consumer powerlessness by crucifying himself onto the back of a Volkswagen. In another performance, *Velvet Water* (1974), Burden dealt with mediated violence by submerging his face into a sink of water and projecting his near drowning onto stage monitors for audiences to view. Burden remained visually concealed behind a row of lockers so that the audience could hear his chokes and gasps but only view the events on the television screens in order to question the borderlines between reality and hyper-reality in audience perceptions.

Since the AIDS epidemic has become a focal point for bodily integrity in sexual relations and since bodily fluids can now signify disease and death, performance artists in the post-AIDS era have often explored the socio-political body politic of oppression by staging subversive reprisals to reclaim self-agency over the body against both the illness and the public’s dogmatic discourse. Ron Athey’s autobiographical performance art is most notable in this era for his theatricalizing queerness, abject expositions, and revision of religious doctrine. As an HIV positive gay man, Athey displays sadomasochistic experiences of cutting, piercing, beating, figurative castration, hanging, and bloodletting during his performances, while conveying autobiographical testimonies and mapping religious significance onto his identity and behaviors. He essentially connects his homosexuality to religious martyrdom and suggests that like religious prophets, he, too, has been persecuted for his own belief system. Due to his HIV status, Athey also challenges perceptions of the disease and questions the amount of control one truly has over one’s body under the entwined power of medical and political constraints. In this regard, Athey’s self-wounds reflect not only his inner torment and pain, but they also resignify the abuses placed upon him at the hands of others and society overall.

*Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993), Athey’s most famous performance harshly critiqued by the National Endowment for the Arts trial, merges Christian iconography and Dionysian ritual to portray a sublimating correlation between piety and eroticism, and pleasure and pain. For an example of Athey’s performances and his placement in art history, please view this clip from the BBC program *The South Bank Show: Body Art*:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBc1vul9JUI.  
Athey’s performance narrative traces the development from his traumatic childhood to his adult identity and explores the religious fanaticism of his youth growing up within a Pentecostal collective believing that he was a holy child. Athey expresses disappointment when his prophecies remained unfulfilled as a child; following his religious disillusionment and the development of his marginalized identity, Athey seeks to build a tribal community for redemptive suffering and healing that not only
deploys but also critiques religious communal values. Athey achieves this notion by re-staging religious practices while dissolving patriarchal notions of Christianity and flooding the stage with androgynous, abject others amidst rapturous scenes of identity confusion and ecstasy. By upholding the disenfranchised and marginalized, Athey questions the legitimacy of Christian values of compassion and tolerance in the age of AIDS.

Much like Mapplethorpe’s queer photography, Athey appears intent on exploring and dissolving boundaries regarding race, gender, and sexuality, and likewise as attested in the previous video, Athey’s work has significance in recalling and reapplying previous religious representations from art history. Athey overturns collective religious wisdom and values, however, for postmodern effect to question the politics of religion within an era of disease and globalization. In Four Scenes, for example, the Virgin Mary is depicted as a cross-dressing black man, and within his performance Deliverance (1994), Athey further blurs gender boundaries to parody and critique binary notions of masculinity and femininity. Athey’s self-wounds project a duality in gender, whereby with his penis exposed Athey demonstrates his maleness, yet he is also simultaneously shown bleeding and penetrated to suggest feminine associations. Later in this performance, Athey recreates himself as a Christ-like figure undergoing rebirth through redemptive processes of suffering that lead to his metaphoric femininity taking preeminence. A woman in a military costume enacts figurative castration of Athey by stapling his scrotum over his penis, in which Athey cries, “Was it necessary that I be castrated in order to receive this healing?” (qtd. in Walsh 122). An operatic castrato performer can be heard thereafter, and scenes that follow showcase self-flagellation rituals that often arise during plague eras. Athey pays homage therefore to previous religious rites and imbues them with contemporary concerns, while he also questions and subverts the sexual politics that underscore each action to undermine patriarchal excess.

Athey, according to Karl Toepfer’s analysis of the textuality of nudity in postmodern performance art, participates in “ritual nudity,” tying it to the abject by proposing that the body may regain its mythic innocence by externalizing its internal functions (79). Toepfer maintains that in performative practices of ritual nudity, Nudity is incomplete until the body secretes what the flesh hides; but what comes out of the body always in some sense desecrates the body and expresses the ominous fragility of human physiology before a turbulent ‘inner’ darkness. (80) In this respect, Athey’s artwork signifies and embodies Kristeva’s philosophy of abjection. Kristeva also asserts that only religion and art can purify the abject, for in both endeavors blood has sacred and profane potentiality for audiences (17). Athey applies this reasoning through his bloodletting practices that have especially profound visceral power over audiences due to his own HIV status. For this reason, Athey’s nudity achieves a de-eroticization of the body, just as AIDS has done; however, it also aestheticizes his body as the stage of religious fervor that provokes sublime, transcendental experiences for the performers and viewers. Mary Richards suggests extreme performance art has redemptive values for audiences by writing,
Bleeding bodies create intimacy and immediacy through the psychic shocks offered by the presence of flowing blood, and in a contemporary performance context this can be a powerful means of generating connection with a public jaded by exposure to mainstream mediatized violence. (111)

The bloody wounds of performance art, therefore, may not only provoke horror, anger, or repulsion, but they may also generate feelings of compassion and empathy. Amelia Jones also maintains that due to Athey’s postmodern destabilizations of race, gender, and sexuality, he effectively dehabituates the body and achieves “a general sense of socially bonded suffering,” thereby achieving universality within his artwork (qtd. in Walsh 130). Athey accomplishes this by dissecting the codes of identity politics and by reducing identity and the body into its base human functions, its needs for connection, and its bodily desires, thereby accessing a profound intersubjectivity within his theatrical performances.

Jacki Apple further expresses the beneficial intentions of extreme performance artists by writing,

. . . their desire [is] not to tear or destroy our ailing institutions but to heal them.

Beyond art as process is the idea of art as a means to make community rather than commodity. Imbedded in that is the need to discover and make connections between a culturally and spiritually dissociated past and our present social and political realities. (qtd. in Carlson 164)

By utilizing the body as a canvas, performance artists challenge the ways humans conform in and with their own bodies, and with the intensity and intimacy of these displays, the reality of the human form may be showcased with all of its complexities. Furthermore, these practices also profess dissatisfaction with the postmodern era’s notion of textual and imagistic “reality.” The drive for artists to portray trauma and abjection expresses a discontentment with image saturation in the fantasy world of consumerism and its projected happiness. In exposing these practices to the harsh realities of contemporary life, these artists motion toward their sense of universal social justice. In an absurdist era constituted by disease, a broken social contract, and failing institutions, avant-garde artists expose the crisis of contemporary existence for purposeful effect. As Hal Foster explains,

. . . the goal of the avant-garde is not to break with the symbolic order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled), but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of breakdown but of breakthrough, the new possibilities that such a crisis opens up. (115)

Thus, postmodern art, albeit relatively shocking and disconcerting, provides a catalyst for new endeavors to alter opinions. By connecting the past with the present and elucidating the dangers and injustices of continuous prejudices, these artists project a trajectory for eventual, hopeful change. Herein lies the power of art to generate cultural debate, to build communities, and to represent the diversity, yet universality, of the human experience.
CHAPTER 3

“FEMALE SEXUALITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN DENIAL OR VIRGINITY”: THE FEMINIST PORNOGRAPHY DEBATE

As postmodern artists and authors grappled with anxieties regarding the cultural effects of new technology and media forces, critics and theorists debated similar concerns throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Although critics inveighed against all aspects of popular culture ranging from slasher films to rap music, the most hotly contested topic in the late twentieth century became the widespread accessibility of pornography and its alleged effects on human behavior. Cultural feminists demonized pornography as the primary factor for the postmodern masculinity crisis, since it purportedly combined anti-feminist rhetoric, female objectification, and male brutality. Although the male narratives of Palahniuk, Ellis, and Cooper highlight television, film, and pornography as central inspirations for intense displays of masculine prowess, the female artists to follow question the legitimacy of a link between media and human behavior.

Since women have predominantly been suppressed and historically represented as objects of male desire in dominant male texts or artworks and confined by a shameful Madonna-Whore double-standard in portraying female sexual agency, the female artists in this chapter critique the status quo. They reject the Dworkinian anti-pornography feminism of the 1980s and expose the limitations on sexual freedom and intellectual liberty imposed by such standards. Margaret Atwood portrays a dystopian future in The Handmaid’s Tale (1985) that fulfills the rhetoric of 1980s cultural feminism, Reaganism, and religious fundamentalism, while the performance art of Karen Finley and Kathy Acker’s novel Don Quixote (1986) upend social conventions of “civilized” females to denaturalize the designated sexist psychology of eroticism throughout art and literary history. Altogether Atwood, Finley, and Acker express a similar sensibility in which intimate emotional and sexual needs remain unfulfilled by essentialist gender confinements in patriarchal cultures. Their collective response indicates that only through challenging and reconceptualizing gender constraints can liberation truly begin.

Pornography can best be defined in very neutral terms as any description or image intended or used to arouse sexual desire. Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem argue that pornography may be differentiated from erotica, in that erotica constitutes sexual love, or “eros,” whereas pornography, arising from the Greek root for prostitute “porne,” denotes dehumanized carnal sexuality (Willis 162). This differentiation, however, proposes an immense discrepancy, since both erotica and pornography—if a difference does exist—nevertheless achieve the same usages from audiences. Moreover, these presumptive differences essentially
highlight how different class and taste ideologies constitute one’s perceptions of sexuality by instilling a gate-keeping function for privileged portrayals that presume other perceptions do not or should not exist. The fact remains that pornography exists as an absolute fantasy of unregulated desire; its innumerable meanings and applications depend upon each consumer. In fact, for all intents and purposes, the literature of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and even the Bible may be considered pornographic. Due to this logic, generalizing standards about eroticism can never fully be applied within critical evaluations, and pornography resists interpretation.

Although eroticism has been an underlying creative force in the developments of all new technological innovations from Stone Age sculptures to cyberspace, radical second-wave feminists sought to eliminate pornography from the culture at large during the 1980s, citing that it has dangerous repercussions to inspire violent acts against women. “Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice,” proposed Robin Morgan (qtd. in Friedman 222). The penis effectively became pathologized as a weapon in early camps of feminism, leading Andrea Dworkin to write in Pornography, “Violence is male; the male is the penis; violence is the penis or the sperm ejaculated from it. What the penis can do it must do forcibly for a man to be a man” (55). Steven Seidman, in his comprehensive study on sexual politics in contemporary America, links Robin Morgan and Andrea Dworkin to a range of cultural feminists including Catherine MacKinnon, Kathleen Barry, Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, and Adrienne Rich, who collectively postulate femininity in opposition to male dominance. In their accounts, womanhood exists as passivity, subservience, and victimization all based upon sexual intercourse (104). Male violence is intrinsically biological in these accounts, and pornography allegedly attests to that as Dworkin discerns, “Pornography reveals that male sexual pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting; that sexual fun and pleasure in the . . . male imagination are inseparable from . . . brutality” (69). In defense of pornography, sex-positive feminists repudiated these concepts as detrimental viewpoints that mistakenly equated sexism with sexuality and further eradicated endeavors toward equality based upon constrictive gender politics that stifled educating, empowering, and liberating potentials for women within pornography.

Ann Barr Snitow’s analysis of Harelequin romances, a form of erotic pleasure largely written by female authors for mass-market female consumption, provides more insight into the nature of female eroticism. Snitow discerns that Harlequin romances rely upon traditional male and female roles that eroticize male aggression and female passivity. She writes that female Harelequin readers find “[i]n pornography, the joys of passivity, of helpless abandon, or response without responsibility . . . all endlessly repeated, savored, minutely described” (183). The mass appeal of these novels reiterate female sexual fantasies that may not be popular among certain feminists but that nevertheless remain engrained within society, exposing the curious interplay between nature and culture that always influences sexuality. Additionally, Camille Paglia argues in her analysis of filmic pornography that “[m]ost pornography shows women in as many dominant as subordinate postures, with the latter usually steamily consensual” (65). Paglia
disdains anti-pornography claims for primarily focusing upon selective, inflammatory examples of pornography and neglecting to note eroticism consumed by women (such as Harlequin romances), the emergence of pornography made for and by women, and the extensive market of gay and lesbian pornography that certainly debunks the limiting argument that pornography relies upon the subordination of women from pro-censorship feminists. Moreover, all scientific studies on sexuality have undermined the theories of Dworkinite feminism and found no correlation between pornographic exposure and sexual assault. David M. Friedman even curiously notes, “In Japan, where violent porn is easily accessible, rape is nearly nonexistent” (222). For these reasons, sexuality exists as a much more mysterious and curious phenomenon than gender politics are able to ascribe to it.

In a compelling argument, rather than focusing on pornographic material and its alleged effects on viewers, Judith Butler applies Foucault’s “reverse discourse” in “The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess” to expose how pro-censorship, anti-pornography legislation set forth by Senator Jesse Helms and Andrea Dworkin conversely recirculates the very aims they wish to renounce. The Jesse Helms’ legislation for the National Endowment for the Arts trials to forbid federal art funding of “obscene” materials prohibits funds used to:

promote, disseminate [!] or produce obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts; or, material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion. (qtd. in Butler 191, italicized portions were deleted prior to the bill being passed)

Butler discerns that Helms’ proposal, primarily attacking Mapplethorpe, utilizes “including but not limited to” as a “presumption that the obscene and the pornographic have a way of getting out of hand,” which Helms presupposes by linking sadomasochism, homoeroticism—not homosexuality, but rather the slippery ethos of it—and child molestation in order to convey the practices of the “homosexual menace,” or Helms’ fundamentalist fantasy of what homosexuality consists of (195). Butler’s analysis of Dworkin’s writing argues that Dworkin’s interpretation of pornography paradoxically reiterates images of domination and violence while supposedly restricting her authorial identity as female into a mute category of passive injury. Butler writes on the contradictory nature of Dworkin’s philosophy,

The logic of epistemological determinism that stabilizes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ within a frame of unilateral oppression is subject to a logical reversal which calls that frame into question: if the pornographic representation is someone else’s fantasy, that of ‘men’—broadly and ambiguously constructed—and if ‘the woman viewer’ is the injured object of that fantasy-turned-action, then women are by her [Dworkin’s] definition never agents of pornographic fantasy. (193)

This problematizes feminism since it erases female autonomy as a subject in sexual relations, in turn objectifying them just as Dworkin presumes that pornography does, and presuming that passivity cannot be a pleasurable or even
natural position. It also projects a disconcerting view of victimhood that simultaneously debases women and demeans men by failing to promote any consciousness-raising or sense of empowerment that feminism should always strive toward and by suggesting that men are incapable of love or intimacy. Moreover, both Helms and Dworkin construe pornography or erotic art as having only one singular interpretation or identification, in which the ideal viewer is always a heterosexual male, never a female nor a homosexual. The legislative interpretations of Helms and Dworkin thus legitimate the acts that they both wish to restrain, since both ideologues posit their concepts as the quintessential elements of sexual expression and definition. Ultimately, however, these interpretations only reveal the limiting sexual presumptions stemming from both critics. Steven Seidman offers perhaps the best solution to understanding the embattled sexual discourse from the culture wars by proposing that the fundamental difference in both viewpoints relies less upon concepts of sexual expression versus repression and more upon a division in perceptions of the meaning and morality of sexuality (xii). Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* explores the very meaning of morality in contemporary sexual ethics by bridging the gap between 1970s sexual libertarianism and the growth of 1980s cultural feminism. Its link to the Religious Right with narrative flashbacks to a utopic past and a dystopic present is delivered from the perspective of a previously free but now subordinated female narrator. In the novel, the Republic of Gilead is formed in America as a reactionary militarized religious regime of Old Testament orthodoxy to combat the developments of postmodernity, in which women and other “undesirables” are stripped of their civil liberties and socio-economic statuses in society. Reminiscent of South African apartheid endeavors, African-Americans, referred to as the “Children of Ham,” are excommunicated and relocated to the “National Homelands” of the Midwest, and Jews are given the option of converting to Christianity or emigrating to Israel. Women, whose financial assets are frozen, are subsequently rounded up and divided into hierarchal statuses based upon class and reproductive capacity. Sexuality becomes strictly confined to reproductive efforts due to declining birth rates and the AIDS epidemic in the pre-Gilead era. Procreation is only condoned between the Commanders of the Faithful, the ruling class in established patriarchal households, and Handmaids, fertile women whose only purpose is to have sex with Commanders in ceremonial gatherings. Although the Commanders may actually be infertile, due to exposure to biological agents in the environmental disasters of the pre-Gilead era, the sexual burden of reproduction is placed upon the Handmaids. Furthermore, women are not allowed to read in Gilead, and younger girls are not educated in order to deter critical thinking skills. Atwood’s dystopic vision of the Republic of Gilead seemingly fulfills the rhetoric of patriarchal religious fundamentalism and also attempts to achieve the standards set forth by pro-censorship feminism, which Marcia Polly connects together as follows:
Both groups propose that ridding society of sexual words and images will reduce rape, incest, and battery. Right-wing feminists would add sexual harassment to the list; religious fundamentalists would add interracial sex, homosexuality, AIDS and feminism. (qtd. in Strossen 117) While the Republic of Gilead attempts to embody these principles with totalitarian measures, even with the prohibition of pornography, it ultimately fails to harness sexuality entirely.

Fiona Tolan notes the interplay between male and female control in Gilead and views Atwood’s novel as a critique of second-wave feminism in which she concludes, By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with current descriptions of Gilead’s totalitarianism, each informs the other so that The Handmaid’s Tale depicts a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist demands. (19) Although the totalitarian system of Gilead remains patriarchal in its architecture, women primarily police female sexuality and become the enforcers of male desire. The Aunts indoctrinate Handmaids and other women into the new social stratification, in which women wear color-coded uniforms based upon their labor and function in Gilead. Gilead effectively becomes a communal living organization for women that mirrors 1970s feminist utopianism, and the narrator Offred, whose patronymic name denotes her status as a commander’s possession (Of-Fred), even declares in retrospect to her radical feminist mother, “You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one” (127).

Both Offred’s mother, an anti-pornography feminist, and Aunt Lydia, a fundamental Christian and the most Dworkinite matriarch in Gilead, are connected in the narrative by their beliefs about pornography. In a flashback, Offred recalls a communal burning of pornographic magazines in her childhood with her mother that later parallels the sadistic pornographic film showings at Handmaids’ indoctrinations; both Offred’s mother and Aunt Lydia suggest that eliminating pornography will and has provided women in Gilead protection and freedom from male objectification: “Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then” (118). This ideology is contradicted throughout the narrative, however, as sexuality cannot fully be contained or policed, and women are not entirely protected. Offred’s visit to her doctor ends with his sexual proposition to help her become pregnant. Likewise, Offred’s relationship with the Commander eventually devolves into an affair, which she must concede to for her own safety. This affair is further complicated later on when the Commander’s wife Serena Joy forces Offred to sleep with their chauffeur Nick in additional attempts to conceive a child. Offred thus becomes an object passed around and denied autonomy, or as she declares, “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (136). As her affair with the Commander advances, Offred travels with him to Jezebel’s, a hotel of the pre-Gilead era, now turned into an underground brothel with hedonistic drug and sexual freedoms. The women of Jezebel’s are dressed in the stereotypical garb of male fantasies including cheerleader uniforms, jogging
shorts and sun halters, bikinis, lingerie, see-through negligee, and even Playboy bunny outfits (235). Lesbianism is also encouraged amongst the women for the benefit of male viewing (249). The Commander declares, “It’s like walking into the past,” although Offred refutes this loss of historicity by noting, “A movie about the past is not the same as the past” (235). Atwood ultimately juxtaposes the sexual permissibility in Jezebel’s with the outside world of Gilead where sexual conduct results in death and public humiliation to depict the impossibility of transmuting sexual fantasies.

Susan Sontag notes, “It is the nature of the pornographic imagination to prefer ready-made conventions of characters, setting, and action. Pornography is a theatre of types, never of individuals” (51). This explains the racial mythology surrounding the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and the stereotypical portrayals of femininity praised by certain male critics in Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills, as well as the flattened two-dimensional pornographic scenes in American Psycho and Frisk. In relation to The Handmaid’s Tale, this concept also exposes that although sexuality is stifled in Gilead, the society nevertheless creates outlets for sexuality that replay the same standards that were previously popular. Sexuality is never completely politically correct, and Atwood highlights this impossibility in Jezebel’s, while further discrediting the safety of women in an anti-pornography landscape. Rape and sexual violence have not been suppressed in Gilead, but rather they have merely been institutionalized, even while pornography is no longer accessible.

Atwood further disproves the ideologies of anti-pornography feminists in regards to their essentialist gender understandings by portraying the desire for passionate love and sex in Gilead from the perspective of both male and female characters. The ritualistic Ceremony scenes between Offred, the Commander, and his wife Serena Joy who grips Offred’s hands to be involved with the intercourse by proxy is a tedious and embarrassing task for everyone involved. Offred even notes that Serena Joy always cries the night before each Ceremony (90). However, both the Commander’s and Serena Joy’s views of their duties in the Republic of Gilead are especially contradictory since they are among the primary advocates and architects of Gilead as listed in the novel’s “Historical Notes” (309). While drunk in his room with Offred, the Commander admits the origins of Gilead and connects it to the feminist movement, thus exposing the crisis of postmodern masculinity by proclaiming,

The problem wasn’t only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men… I’m not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they [men] were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage. (210)

Ironically, the Commander deplores the lack of power and conquest associated with masculinity in the pre-Gilead era; however, Gilead itself also eliminates these notions, since sex remains commodified in underground brothels and marriages are arranged. When the Commander asks Offred what Gilead is
lacking, she declares “Love” and the act of “Falling in love,” to which the Commander replies,
Oh yes, he said. I’ve read the magazines, that’s what they were pushing, wasn’t it? But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, falling in love? Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better… Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking… Just a fluke. All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm. (220)
The Commander’s “rational” understanding is undermined, however, by his loveless, troubled marriage to Serena Joy and his lamentation that the ceremonial experiences with his Handmaid remain “impersonal” (162). The Commander’s desire for intimacy is also expressed in his forbidden encounters with Offred, in which they do not copulate, but rather play Scrabble, and he gifts her banned items such as hand lotion and women’s magazines. While Offred remains wary toward the Commander, especially as they become closer to each other, she also consistently expresses sympathy for his sense of sadness and empty lifestyle.

Offred’s explanations of her desires for love and passion throughout the narrative also further critique the rhetoric of cultural feminism and its gender politics. Aunt Lydia’s declaration that “Men are sex machines” (144) and her admonishment of male sexuality at the Handmaids’ indoctrination in which she states, “They [Men] can’t help it . . . God made them that way but He did not make you [women] that way. He made you different” (45) are diminished by Offred’s narrative of longing for romance and sexual passion. Offred declares, “Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied” (104). While her intercourse with the Commander remains occupational and dispassionate, Offred achieves a sense of sensuality and safety with his chauffeur Nick, although she discerns that it is probably a delusion since Serena Joy enforces their affair (269). In a fabricated tale to the reader before explaining their encounter, Offred expresses the vitalizing fantasies of her sexual desires, “ . . . I can’t wait and he’s moving, already, love, it’s been so long, I’m alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending” (261). The relationship with Nick is actually more curt than her fantasy permits, in which both Nick and Offred must go through the motions of an affair, yet Atwood further highlights the need for intimacy in both men and women during this exchange as well when Offred comments upon Nick’s “punk surliness,” “Possibly he feels used. Possibly he wants something from me, some emotion, some acknowledgment that he too is human, is more than just a seedpod” (262). Sexuality has thus been stripped of its passion, its irrationality, and its playfulness in Gilead and devalued into merely a procreative act. In this regard, the absence of eros ironically restructures sexuality in Gilead into the very act anti-pornography feminists claim pornography promotes: an objectifying performance without any expression of love, intent upon one purpose.

While Atwood exposes the inadequacy of pro-censorship feminism and its contradistinctions as well as the instability of male “rationalism” in the construction of patriarchal cultures, other American art and literature of the same era began unveiling similar concerns about female emotional and sexual autonomy in a male-centered society. Performance art became an especially
powerful foray for female artists, since it became one of the first major art movements to include and vindicate female artists during its inception. It also allowed women to use their bodies as canvases, thereby voluntarily objectifying their bodies for artistic significance and reprisal. Both performance artist Karen Finley and novelist Kathy Acker express similar ideologies in obliterating male rationality and gender politics through narrative voices intent upon expressing the confines of femininity in art and literary history by upending social conventions of “civilized” females. Each artist utilizes emotionalism and taboo within narratives of dislocated genders and identities tied together by a feverish, dream-like exploration of systems of power and their influences upon social relations. Collectively Finley and Acker explore the stereotypical portrayals of women, especially within pornography, then subvert them in order to strive toward activating female agency, yet in doing so, they also expose the difficulties of transgressing the object-status of women in a patriarchal culture at large.

Karen Finley’s most prevalent themes in her performances deal with women debased and abused by patriarchal establishments and the ways women are simultaneously defined by their sexuality and demonized for it. In this performance from the series The Constant State of Desire (1988) for example [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sql8MbkMQ5o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sql8MbkMQ5o), Finley presents herself as an idealized feminine figure wearing a white lacy Easter dress before disrobing and presenting herself as a sexual object to the audience’s delight. Finley then begins to subvert the audience’s professed excitement at her nudity by defiling her body with egg yolk and glitter and performing as an “unsocialized” woman, shrieking and howling obscenities and sexual taboos. Finley thereby defies a woman’s expected passivity and politeness and instead celebrates indecency and pornographic speech to deconstruct gender expectations. Her sexual and scatological narrative oscillates between voices of desire and revulsion, as she undoes male fantasies of female pornographic objects, while she also disdains the overall complacency for humankind in the age of AIDS and late capitalist consumption. In C. Carr’s analysis on Finley’s performances, he writes about the perceptions of Finely’s work by audiences and the difficulty in analyzing her monologues,

The fuck-and-shit vocabulary draws shrieks, back-talk, occasional hysteria from the rowdy drunk crowds. But Finley says, ‘I’m really never interested in the sexual point in my work. I’m really interested in the pathos.’ In fact, her monologues are obscenity in its purest form– never just a litany of four-letter expletives but an attempt to express emotions for which there are perhaps no words. An attempt to approach the unspeakable. (121)

Finley’s monologues thus exist as quaking ids to express the absence of emotional and sexual connection in the late twentieth century stemming from restructuring gender orders and the AIDS epidemic. Finley herself declares, “[W]e’re really scared of our own sexuality which is no longer a sexuality of love but a sexuality of violence” (Schechner and Finley 153). Therefore, Finley ties sex and violence together in typical postmodern fashion to expose undercurrents of power and sexism in the culture’s idealized perceptions of eroticism. Yet since Finley replays
and challenges these notions from a female standpoint, her work has often proved problematic for audience members.

Karl Toepfer’s analysis “Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance” positions Finley as the exemplification of “obscene nudity,” constituted by an “extremely violent clash between the body and the speech of the performer” (86). In these performance art practices, Toepfer writes, nudity isn’t obscene unless it transgresses some threshold of shock, but shock is possible only when performance uncovers the power of desire to violate bodies and expose the spectator’s capacity for pleasure in bodily disgust. (86)

Men in Finley’s audiences often react crudely to her degrading practices by exposing themselves to her, shouting expletives, and even throwing lit cigarettes onstage, effectively reiterating the pornographic arenas that her work delves into. However, Finley lashes back at the men by taunting their penis sizes and overpowering them with denigrating black comedy to render them both literally and metaphorically impotent. She effectively enacts masculine positions, deploys masculine pornographic language systems, and attempts to trigger rage and distress by these performances to undercut the stereotypical portrayals and prejudices that circumscribe female identity from male perspectives.

While Finley’s art acts as a powerful affirmation of female sexuality and the desires and anxieties surrounding it, she also seeks to undermine the status of women as objects in art history by presenting herself as a monstrous speaking subject explicating sexual abuse and misogyny that women are victimized by yet unable to speak about within their expected passive positions. To position herself as the most supreme being in the room, Finley performs in a trance-like state and channels the psychic energy of the room. In an interview with Richard Schechner, Finley discusses her performative process as follows:

. . . I’m really interested in being a medium… I put myself into a state, for some reason it’s important, so that things come in and out of me, I’m almost like a vehicle. And so when I’m talking it’s just coming through me. And it’s very exhausting. After I perform I have to vomit, my whole body shakes, I have to be picked up and sit down. It takes me about an hour before I stop shaking. When performing I pick up the energies from the people, I’ve got to completely psych into them because I want them to feel that I am really feeling it. Maybe not even my words, but just that energy. (154)

In this regard, Finley uses intensity and vulgarity not for entertainment purposes but for cathartic and political purposes. She wishes to confront audiences with their own presumptions and inspire offense to make viewers reflect upon the basis of their emotions. Finley, therefore, acts as a channel for society to confront its inhibitions and insecurities about female sexual autonomy, whereby gender and the boundaries of the body collapse in Finley’s exercises to untangle and dispute the very nature of sexual relations and systems of oppression.

Kathy Acker’s fiction also devolves into similar psychotic states of fragmentary narratives that mutate gender and sexual identity, through which Acker explores the madness of foul-mouthed visionaries dejected by patriarchal texts. In Don Quixote, Acker re-writes the chivalric code of courtly love to subvert the female-object position of male desire and explore implications of
females as subjects on quests for love. Acker’s novel presents a volatile concoction of psychosexual autobiography, pornography, plagiarism and pastiche, poststructuralist theory, Marxist historiography, and feminist literary criticism that interweaves not only aspects of Cervantes’ Don Quixote but also inflections of Wedekind’s Earth-Spirit and Pandora’s Box, Shaw’s Pygmalion, Lampedusa’s The Leopard, Bely’s Petersburg, and de Sade’s Juliette. In commenting upon the nature of her authorial measures in textual appropriation, Acker declares, I write by using other written texts, rather than expressing ‘reality’ which is what most novelists do. Our reality now, which occurs so much through the media is other texts. I’m playing the same game as Cervantes. (qtd. in Richard Walsh 148) Acker’s plagiarism thus allows her to connect historical positions with present conditions of female emotional and sexual autonomy alongside the societal pressures that are seemingly always imposed upon women throughout Western history. In doing so, Acker determines that both fiction and reality subjugate women within patriarchal systems of oppression and repression.

Acker’s outlaw heroine, Kathy, changes her name to Don Quixote and begins her quest to attain female heterosexual liberation following an abortion during which, “… she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love” (9). In order to achieve love, the “female-male” or “night-knight” Don Quixote discerns that she must “… right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong…” (9). “Since love is sympathy or communication,” Don Quixote declares, “I need an object which is both subject and object: to love, I must love a soul” (10). Her ideal love must therefore inhabit both dualities of the mind and body with subject and object positions, thus transcending gender binaries and the conscious and unconscious. Along with Finley’s performance art, Acker’s prose similarly delves into feelings of pathos over the communicability of language, yet Don Quixote ultimately fails to elevate herself from her subjugated situation since while attempting to enact a masculine-subject position, Don Quixote is nevertheless confined in male texts that restrict her female identity to an object. According to Don Quixote’s proclamation to her dog-lover and cowboy sidekick Saint Simeon, her formidable quest consistently ends in cyclical failures due to the presumption that: As long as you men cling to your identity of power-monger or of Jesus Christ, as long as you cling to a dualistic reality which is a reality molded by power, women will not exist with you… Objects can’t love back. (28)

Therefore due to an unattainable mutuality in love, Don Quixote dies in part one of the narrative, and Acker inserts the second part of the narrative, a time-traveling escapade exploring sexual love and female volition throughout literary history marked by the heading: “BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN’T HERS” (38).

The second part of Don Quixote written in elusive, plagiarized textual fragments reiterates the female-object position of women throughout literature and the social constraints of male domination over female autonomy, until the third part of the novel begins with a parodic Christ-like rebirth of Don Quixote on
a new mission to defeat the Evil Enchanters and restore love. The Evil Enchanter motif taken from the original *Don Quixote* is applied in Acker’s text to include enemies of female sexual liberty, upon which Don Quixote has set her sights, staging a war with the conservative editors of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Ronald Reagan, Andrea Dworkin, and Religious White Men (101-2, 178). To understand the superstructures of American history as well as the nation’s theocratic tendencies, Don Quixote begins a demystifying explication of America’s alleged liberty and connects America’s Puritanical past with its political present. Margaret Atwood also applies this notion in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, since she mirrors Offred’s characterization dressed as the scarlet woman from Revelations 17 and serving as a mistress in pre- and post-Gilead life to Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. In her history lesson, Don Quixote relays instances of greed from the birth of America alongside tales of corruption in the Nixon White House, and in the end Don Quixote concludes, “The United States is exactly as it was started: religiously intolerant, militaristic, greedy, and dependent on slavery as all democracies have been (124). In order to restore love in America, Don Quixote must therefore defeat the Evil Enchanters who guard materialism that structures society and “... which seeks to reduce all phenomena to this enlightenment ideal of rationalism, or subjugation of the other” (72). In this regard, both Atwood and Acker seek to contradict and defy perceptions of masculine rationalism over female autonomy in their novels. Herein lies the purpose for the irrational textual inclinations that mires Acker’s prose. Her narratives perpetuate and dislocate multiple subjectivities and morph gender and sexual identities to confound the nature of imposed, masculinized rationalism within literary heritage and society at large. Although Don Quixote consistently fails in Acker’s bleak, cynical outlook——her final narrative episode subtitled “THE LAST ADVENTURE: UNTIL THIS BOOK BEGINS AGAIN” further confirms this (175)—, Don Quixote is able to transcend her female-object relationship through libidinal literary experimentation and the novel’s final declaration from God.

Kathy Acker’s experimental postmodern prose emerged from the Black Mountain poetry tradition and Post-Punk Downtown literary scenes, and she claimed to view writing as a liberating process associated with “bodily pleasure” (Sirius). Her artistic ideology appears to have absorbed the poststructural feminist theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva among others who proclaim that underneath the powers of patriarchy and the Law-of-the-Father, women are restricted from self-expression in regards to sexuality, subjectivity, and language and must strive toward unveiling an *écriture feminine*, otherwise known as “writing-the-body.” In regards to the unwieldy structure of her narratives and their forays into pornographic writing, Richard Walsh argues, She [Acker] affirms allegiance to a sensibility unreconciled to society, emphasizing and privileging inarticulateness and a concept of art as prerational expression, as the direct articulation of inner emotions unmediated by logical or aesthetic consideration for the culture that it addresses. (154)

In another interview, Acker maintains that “[t]he act of describing assumes one event can be a different event: meaning dominates or controls existence. But
desire—or art— is” (qtd. in Walsh 154). Acker’s connection of art-making with desire is utilized in her writing to explore sexuality, in which she must destabilize gender, sexual identity, and therefore identity altogether to decry logic, order, or reason and to reach a more primal source of expression. Although Acker seeks to affirm female sexuality in her narratives, *Don Quixote* becomes rooted in sadomasochist power plays due to the weight of patriarchy over female autonomy. The outlaw heroine cries, “Masochism is now rebellion” (158) to allege that women must permit themselves to act as slaves in order to achieve sexual release. Her pornographic writing thus becomes eclipsed in Sadean modes of abuse, trauma, and victimization, and is rather non-erotic in the traditional sense of pornography.

While this appears to undermine female sexual agency and reinforce antipornography rhetoric, Acker reverses the “logic” of patriarchy at the novel’s end following her failed battle with the Religious White Men. In another death-dream that immerses Don Quixote into a state of unconscious, she envisions that she accepts subjugation from her male masters and equates patriarchy with the absolute power of God to which God exclaims, “Shut up. Where, where in hell—from Hell?— did you get your idea that I am Male?” (206). God then relays his/her relationship with Satan to Don Quixote, in which God declares, “He’s a real man whereas I’m a mealy-mouth hypocrite, dishonest” (206). By questioning God’s gender and discrediting his sense of masculinity from Satan’s standards, Acker refutes the conventional Judeo-Christian theology that defines God by power, rationalism, and patriarchy. Acker further rejects an ultimate source of morality or way of truth in God’s final statements as s/he bestows advice upon Don Quixote:

‘God continued condemning Him- or Herself: So now that you know I’m imperfect, night, that you can’t turn to Me: turn to yourself:

“Because with every night’s onset the sun sinks below its horizon, because there are no more new stories, no more tracks, no more memories: there is you, knight.

“Since I am no more, forget Me. Forget morality. Forget about saving the world. Make Me up.” (207)

Even though the women in the novel remain silenced or dead encapsulated in male text, the gender-neutral God is also considered dead; nevertheless, Acker gives him/her a voice. In the absolute conclusion to the narrative, God challenges Don Quixote to make meaning for herself, to thus reject the patriarchal texts of her forbearers and the very weight of patriarchy itself over her female volition, and in so doing to deny the very definition of gender binaries.

Although the outcomes of Offred and Don Quixote remain uncertain in both novels, collectively Atwood, Acker, and the performance art of Karen Finley urge audiences to rethink gender binaries and to uphold liberty over restrictive ideologies, especially in regard to sexual freedom. Atwood rejects gender political assumptions and affirms the need for intimacy from the perspectives of both male and female sexual relations, while Finley and Acker dissect the interplay between nature and culture that impacts perceptions of sexuality. Although each artist determines that sexuality exists in the realm of the unknowable, the illogical, and
thereby defies definition, they nevertheless seek to affirm its very power through the creative processes of art.
CONCLUSION

“The failure of the melting-pot, far from closing the great American democratic experiment, means that it has only just begun. Whatever American nationalism turns out to be, we see already that it will have a color richer and more exciting than our ideals has hitherto encompassed. In a world which has dreamed of internationalism, we find that we have all unawares been building up the first international nation.”

Randolph Bourne, from “Trans-National America”

Written during World War I in an era of intense ethnic antagonisms, Randolph Bourne’s seminal essay “Trans-National America” rejected the myth of assimilation in American culture. The “Great War” itself had been unraveling the fabrics of social structures, instilling its very own crisis in masculinity as the core values of manhood—strength, duty, and courage—were challenged by the actual horrors of warfare. The newly coined postwar syndrome “shellshock” became related to the medical conditions of womanly “hysteria.” These emasculating effects of the war occurred paradoxically just as women were becoming empowered in the workforce, thereby producing hostility among men regarding the loss of orderly social dynamics. Bourne’s treatise examines this period of wavering uncertainty and warns against an insidious force of myopic absolutism setting foot during the early twentieth century, which in Bourne’s opinion denies the progressive fruits of cosmopolitan intellectualism.

Although this historical crisis occurred roughly sixty years before the crisis of postmodern masculinity, it demonstrates distinct historical overlaps in the constructions and productions of masculine identity. As discussed in chapter two, the hegemonic perception of masculinity relies on a rigid definition of itself against the feminine. It maintains this identification by resisting sites of social change that may result in discarding sources of power or influence. The preservation of this masculine condition generally fails, though, as it often exposes gaps in the construction of masculinity that point toward anxieties and insecurities at the core of male identity.

Throughout this thesis, the postmodern artists and authors selected have generally conveyed an understanding of masculinity as a harmful patriarchal prism. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, Ron Athey, and Karen Finley all express various ways that masculine authorities tend to colonize, exclude, or objectify the Other. With anarchic independence, these artists critique the practices of symbolic annihilation and cultural misrepresentation. In my aims to present a multicultural and dialogical paradigm, however, I have demonstrated how texts and artwork (unintentionally) respond to each other. For example, Keith Haring responds to not only a heteronormative culture but also a biased hierarchy within an urban gay subculture, which Robert Mapplethorpe coincidentally participated in. Dennis Cooper’s Frisk also conveys
an alternative perception of gay identity that counteracts Tony Kushner’s equal rights endeavors in *Angels in America*. Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, and Cindy Sherman’s photography engage in the interplay between masculinity, capitalism, and mass media. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote* simultaneously analyze America’s Puritanical patriarchal past and criticize the limitations of cultural feminist writings in the 1980s. Moreover Atwood, Acker, Kushner, and Athey collectively disparage the politics of religion in an age of multiculturalism and globalization.

Altogether, these artists and authors engage in the dominant concerns of the late twentieth century including consumerism, the hyperrealism of simulation, power relations, and the practice of identity politics and its excesses. While some of these concerns may be contemporary, as inspired by both new media and theoretical practices, the overlaps in historical thought produce a better understanding of how art consistently engages with timeless issues of the human condition. History seemingly moves in waves of order and disorder, ostensibly driven by the push-pull continuum of politics. The critical philosophies of structuralism and deconstruction should not be viewed merely as intellectual explorations but also as revelations of our own historical and philosophical indeterminacy. The artists and authors throughout this thesis present ambiguous, and often illogical, exercises that are constitutive of an age attempting to replenish itself by motioning toward the future, while trying to recreate what is salvageable from the scraps of the past. The project of the entire twentieth century, but primarily Postmodernism, is trying to understand the trajectory of history atop an unstable foundation of multicultural exposure.

Will this new age of unraveled social institutions refurbish a paternal norm? My argument is that it will. The old order is never fully erased. The center never collapses entirely. When women received the right to vote, it did not alter the definition of voting; nor will the advancement of gay marriage redefine “marriage,” as some pundits believe. Political and legal changes only reorganize the initial establishment. The integration of a pluralist, multicultural landscape abides by the democratic experiment of America’s constitutional origins; however, the reality that its proceedings will be fully legitimized is still debatable. Multiculturalism arises with different perceptions throughout this thesis. Haring, Kushner, Mapplethorpe, and Athey celebrate and endorse it, while Basquiat critiques its limitations under the current power structure. Ellis’s Patrick Bateman vehemently rejects multiculturalism, Atwood’s Republic of Gilead negates it, Cooper’s subcultural realm dissolves it, and Acker’s dystopic New York City denies the possibility for it to fully fruition. Both Cindy Sherman and Karen Finley conversely perform pluralist identities to suggest a fluid identity may manifest in postmodernity. All of these perspectives present differing levels of optimism or pessimism in terms of how diversity may be accepted in America.

Today the project of multiculturalism is still underfoot, as globalization and new media continue to inspire new perceptions or facilitate old ones. What remains, however, is the lesson that identity crises provide.
Just like the previous masculinity crises, the crisis of postmodern masculinity showcases the fears of change and the tenacity to maintain order, even against insurmountable odds. Postmodern authors and artists tackled the cultural crisis by interrogating the boundaries of social relations. They often deployed irony, humor, subversion, and a tension between reality and fantasy in their art to challenge audience complacency during an era of social strife and distraction. Although their art may not have explicitly altered public policy, the intersections of idealistic and nihilistic ideologies exposed the fraught relations between the individual and society, especially as artists became involved in the waning system of patriarchy and progressive potentiality.
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Chapter 1


Chapter 2


VIDEOS CITED
