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AMERICAN MYTH AND IDEOLOGIES OF STRAIGHT WHITE MASCULINITY IN

MEN'S LITERARY SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Mary J. Parish

May 2018

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Approved April 9, 2018

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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN MYTH AND IDEOLOGIES OF STRAIGHT WHITE MASCULINITY IN

MEN'S LITERARY SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

By

Mary J. Parish

May 2018

Dissertation supervised by Professor Linda A. Kinnahan

This study explores three autobiographical texts written in post-World War II America (1945-1980) that take as their subject a straight white man's reflection on and engagement with the exercise of male power and the forces, both internal and external, that shape the degree to which he is "self-made," i.e., an autonomous agent able to exert his will within a particular life domain (domestically, publicly, or in war). The United States emerged from World War II victorious and positioned to assume the mantle of world leadership, yet even at the apex of the nation's preeminence, the security of straight white masculinity seemed oddly unsettled. The economic, social, and political changes the nation was experiencing offered a succession of challenges to the authority of straight white men, calling into question assumptions about the autonomy and agency that validated their privileged status.

The writers featured in this analysis, Robert Lowell, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien, surveil the uses of power in order to critique, assert, and question the gendered realities and expectations that impact their perceptions and experience of manhood. This dissertation considers each text through the lens of one national mythology—American Individualism, the American Dream, and American Exceptionalism—taking into account the effect of that strand of mythology on the performance of masculinity, including the entitlements these mythologies normalize and the deviancies (the Otherness) they contain and control. Finally, this analysis examines the intersection between genre and the representation of the self as a straight white man, discussing the ways in which the choice of how to present the self, whether through lyric poetry, the personal essay, New Journalistic inquiry, or the memoir, interacts with and magnifies the effects of gender in each text.

DEDICATION

For my father, Lee Parish

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I would like to express heartfelt gratitude to my dissertation director, Dr. Linda A Kinnahan for her brilliance and generosity. Her good will, patience, and enthusiasm for this project kept it and me going through challenging times. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Magali Michael and Dr. Thomas Kinnahan for their wisdom, guidance, and support. I am very fortunate in my friends, and so I thank Martha Berg, Laura Callanan, Maureen Gallagher, Gina Godfrey, Jade Higa, Von Keairns, Allie Reznik, Emily Rutter, and Scilla Wahrhaftig for their grace and good company on the journey. Words cannot express how grateful I am to my family, but I will try. To my indomitable sister, Donna Parish Neiport, I offer Namaste. And to my beloved husband, Chuck Slayton, I thank you for inspiring me every day. I could not have done this without you. Thank you all for believing in me.

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Introduction

If the promise of the American "self-made" masculinity was the possibility of unlimited upward mobility, its dark side was the nightmarish possibility of equally unstoppable downward mobility. American manhood—always more about the fear of falling than the excitement of rising, always more about the agony of defeat, as it were, than the thrill of victory.[1]

—Michael S. Kimmel

To be a self-made man in the United States is to assume a powerful subject position within the national ideology. To do so is to enter the company of men like Andrew Carnegie, Benjamin Franklin, and Ray Kroc, men who have shaped the nation and its culture and whose personal narratives embody the concept of self-determination—the exercise of control over one's destiny. In attaining this status, a man often invests in and is certainly incorporated into three fundamental national myths: American Individualism,[2] the freedom to choose his own path as he relies on himself and his own resources; the American Dream,[3] the freedom to act in order to realize financial security

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[1] *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* 218.

[2] Frederick Jackson Turner in his classic essay "The Significance of the Frontier in America" argued that "to the frontier American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom" (37). Through the industrial revolution and the emergence of America as a dynamic economic world power, the notion that a man should have control over his own life, be able to sets its priorities, and determine its outcomes became deeply enmeshed with American capitalism. It is primarily through this lens that this dissertation shall examine American Individualism in the years 1945-1980.

[3] James Truslow Adams first used the language "American Dream" in his book *The Epic of America¸* published in 1931 at the height of the Great Depression. He defined it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. … It has been a dream of being able to grow to the fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had been developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple being of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves" (404-405). Adams' "dream" was focused primarily on opportunity and freedom *from* the limitations of class restrictions and the possibility of upward mobility, fueled by an overarching cultural investment in equality. For those on the margins of American society, reality has lagged behind this ideal. Indeed, the ideal itself became enmeshed with consumer capitalism in the post-

and social status through personal effort; and American Exceptionalism,[4] playing his part in asserting and reinforcing America's and Americans' special character and role in the world. But to appreciate the mythic icon of the "self-made" man also requires one to recognize what Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* has described as the "function of myths to distort" (121) and, in doing so, "transform history into nature" (129). To make the claim of being a "self-made" man is to elide other influences on a straight white man's apparent self-determination. Although his accomplishments are attributed to and considered evidence of innate qualities of America's superior manhood—e.g., toughness, self-reliance, pluck, ingenuity, self-confidence, optimism, ingenuity, and perseverance—ignored within this narrative of success and achievement is the systemic privilege through which the unpaid or under-paid labor of marginalized "others" is harnessed anonymously to enable the economic, social, and political attainments of these "self-made" men. The discourse of progress that has been so deeply embedded within the American narrative relies on optimism sustained by a belief in the capability and empowerment of the straight white male "I," while actively resisting a more accurate assessment of the means by which status and power are achieved. The ongoing popularity of stories of the self-made man within American popular culture demonstrates the deep-seated appeal of and

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World War II period when the attainment of economic security and social status (and the fear of their loss) became the focus of the "dream."

[4] According to linguist Mark Liberman, evidence from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* supports the phrase's emergence from "Marxist sources" which offers a certain irony given its frequent use to justify American action against the influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The "spirit" of the concept reaches as far back as 1630 and John Winthrop's comparison of this New World to a "shining city on a hill"—drawing upon biblical analogies that aligned the undertakings of the first settlers with that of creating a world based upon Christian principles. For the purposes of this paper, I employ the broader concept used in the post-WWII period that identified America and hence the American men who wielded power in it as possessing special characteristics and gifts that they can and should employ through their action on the world's stage (e.g., over-throwing the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran via a C.I.A. initiated coup and entering the conflict between North and South Vietnam). American society must then grapple with the results of these often not so exceptional actions in terms of international relations as well as the American psyche.

need for the reinforcement of the discourse of self-determination in light of the reality that the trajectory of most straight white men's lived experience bears little resemblance to that of the iconic brotherhood of America's self-made men. Truly ironic is the repurposing of a key theme in Thoreau's social *critique* of mid-19th century America's cultural emphasis on "progress" and materialism in *Walden* as a consumable blurb to celebrate and encourage the continued rise of young graduates on their road to professional accomplishment and economic success (part of the very system he was calling into question): "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours" (314). The depth to which the cultural imperative that "if he can dream it he can do it" is internalized by straight white men is borne out by the anger and aggression expressed at the apparent "loss" of this entitlement in 21st century America.[5]

The positive perception of "self-made" masculinity and the "promise" it offers as noted in the epigraph by Kimmel emerges very early within the national narrative, but the negative implications (the fear of falling) are also present, though more obliquely recognized. Prior even to the founding of the United States of America, Benjamin Franklin begins the first installment of his self-representation with these words[6]:

> Having emrg'd from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and
>
> bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World,

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[5] The "angry white man" became a cultural phenomenon in America in the late 20th century and continues to influence social and political discourse through the present moment. See Kimmel's *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*.

[6] Although now entitled *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the term "autobiography" did not yet exist when Franklin wrote the account of his life. Jay Parini notes that "[a]ccording to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term 'autobiography' was first used by Robert Southey, the English poet, in a review published in 1809" (12).

and having gone so far thro' Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the

conducing Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well

succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them

suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated. (43)

Franklin's narrative of individual industry, purposefulness, and material, political, and

social accomplishment focuses on success as a result of a white man's personal attributes

rather than his circumstances in what became the quintessential American tale.[7] This

narrative also defines success and failure in economic and social terms, categories

associated with status and influence. Though he gestures toward the blessings of the

Almighty and recognizes several incidences of "erratum," i.e., misjudgment or flawed

acts on his own part, Franklin's self-representation overflows with evidence of and

confidence in a white man's ability to determine his own fate—an attitude that remains

pervasive in the national ideology of the United States and buttresses much of its national

mythology. While Franklin is a "great" man in the classic mold, shaping events and

history in ways that had an enormous impact on his world, his characterization of himself

as a self-determining citizen offers the likelihood of a similar outcome for any white man

who mirrors his effort, focus, and gumption—thus universalizing the possibility for

success. By placing such a standard within the reach of any man motivated to follow his

lead, Franklin creates a template for manhood that has maintained its power across time,

endlessly reinscribed within the nation's culture.[8] Indeed, if America is to understand

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[7] I align with Michel Foucault's assertion that though sodomy had been a punishable (though not frequently punished) offence for centuries, it is not until the 19th century that one finds within "psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature … a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality" (*The History of Sexuality* 101). Thus, "straight/gay" was not a cultural category during Franklin's lifetime, and so I do not use that distinction here.

[8] Beginning in the 1840s, "a veritable cult of the Self-Made Man had appeared, as young men devoured popular biographies and inspirational homilies to help future Self-Made Men create themselves" (Kimmel,

itself as an egalitarian society located within a land of abundance and opportunity, this story *must* be perceived to be possible and, in some fashion, true. And, if the individual, as Franklin's text suggests, is in fact self-determining, then the failure to succeed or to remain successful—to "fall" as Kimmel describes it—must be attributed to a flawed manhood, some weakness or fault within a particular man, rather than to a systemic cause outside the individual's control. Intrinsic to the discourse of self-determination then is the belief that it is each man's responsibility to ensure his social and economic success[9]—to follow in the steps of Franklin and attain the status of the self-made man—*because* it is in his power to do so and because this is what American men do. The connection between citizenship and masculinity suggests that "failure" places both national and gender identity in question, raising concerns about the power and status of the nation and its men.

The high standard set for the performance of straight white masculinity and the contradictory interactions between ideologies of gender and nation create cultural tensions and anxieties that under the pressure of social,[10] political, and economic changes

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Manhood in America 19). Since that time biography and autobiography have served as a means of lifting up the virtues and methods of the self-made man, as has literature, film, drama, and, in a particularly American vein, self-help books such as *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) by Norman Vincent Peale and *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) by Dale Carnegie, both of which were highly influential in mid-century America.

[9] In using the masculine form, I specifically reference men only. Not because women are not impacted by the discourse of self-determination, but because in its development and application until the late 20th century, this discourse was androcentric.

[10] Throughout this dissertation, my use of the term "masculinity" does not suggest that there is only one type of masculinity within the broad category of straight white masculinity. My theoretical framework includes the work of sociologist and seminal figure in the world of men's studies, Raewyn Connell, who has researched "patterns of difference among the practice of and relations within masculinity" (*Masculinities* 37). That is to say, for example, that white working class masculinity is likely to be expressed differently or have different nuances relative to white middle class masculinity and that there are "relations of alliance, dominance and subordination" (Connell 37) among and within these masculinities.

erupt periodically into national "crises" of masculinity.[11] Even the continued high

visibility of straight white men's hegemonic power in the public and private spheres does

not assuage concerns about the nation's manhood or prevent new crises from arising.[12]

Yet because the resolution of the crisis is inevitably a manufactured "solution" that

results in the reestablishment or reinforcement of norms of gender, race, and sexuality,

what these crises actually reveal is the wobbly nature of the claims made within the

gender ideology that lifts up the superiority of straight white masculinity. As Kimmel's

cultural history demonstrates, the social perception of manhood in the United States, from

its earliest days, was frequently roiled by fears of masculine deficiencies. The "closing"

of the frontier, surges in immigration, the arrival of women in the workplace, and the

Great Migration all became associated with the diminishment of the vitality and potency

of the nation's straight white men, which was then linked with negative implications for

the security and welfare of the nation. This conflation of masculinity and nation within

the discourse of crisis demonstrates the mutually reinforcing connection between national

identity and masculine identity, as well as the cultural investment in maintaining

traditional expressions of straight white male dominance. According to this discourse of

crisis, the danger created by a lapse in the performance of masculinity exists not simply at

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[11] In his seminal study of American masculinity *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Kimmel speaks at length of the role of crisis both as a response to social change and a means of social control. However, Kimmel is not alone in identifying the impact of social forces on the experience and perception of masculinity. Lee Mitchell in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1998), Anthony Rotundo in *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1994), David Savran in *Taking It Like a Man* (1998), and Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (1983) are important texts in considering perceptions of straight white masculinity within a context of threat or crisis.

[12] An example of such a crisis is the early 20th century concern that boys were being feminized by the excessive influence of women—in the home, in the classroom, and in Sunday school. Kimmel notes that "in 1910 four of every five elementary-school teachers were women, up from three-fourths in 1900 and two-thirds in 1870" (*Manhood in America* 82). The importance of violence in the formation of the masculine self can be seen in a 1904 British report based upon observations of American educational practice that noted: "the boy in America is not being brought up to punch another boy's head; or to stand having his own punched in a healthy and proper manner" (qtd. in *Manhood* 82).

the level of the individual, but beyond that to potentially devastating (though often vaguely articulated) threats to the social fabric and security of community and nation. The responsibility for the safety and dominance of the United States rests on "real" (straight white) men, but the anxiety attached to the reliability of this "reality" suggests a contradiction in the nature of masculinity itself. What is commonly understood as the innate superiority and power of straight white men as characterized by the "essential" qualities of manhood—strength, purpose, and courage, to name but a few—is vulnerable to threats emerging from social forces beyond its control.

Reinforcing the notion of the United States as exceptional and unique, the nation emerged from World War II victorious and positioned to assume the mantle of world leadership. In the years that followed, the America attained a level of economic prosperity and geopolitical influence that would have been unimaginable in the depths of the Great Depression. Yet, even at what could be considered the apex of the United States' preeminence in the years after World War II, the security of straight white masculinity seemed oddly unsettled. While the benefits of this new age of affluence positively impacted many of the nation's citizens,[13] the dominant power structure remained in place as straight white men maintained their hegemonic privilege. One would imagine this confluence of advantage would have led to large increases in satisfaction among these men—and no doubt some were appropriately comfortable and content. However, a variety of sources, including "experts" in the fields of sociology and

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[13] For example, social mobility increased as the union movement lifted working class families into the middle class, and the education provided to white ex-servicemen by the GI Bill and advantageous mortgage rates also provided new opportunities for economic and social gain (May 77, 162).

psychology,[14] social commentators and critics within popular culture, and writers of fiction, poetry, and other literary works demonstrated in diverse ways that throughout this period straight white men saw themselves as disturbingly disempowered despite the fact that, during these years, straight white males continued to dominate the nation's institutions from the family to the boardroom to the nation's leadership. However, the bureaucratization of the work place, the evolution of consumer culture in the post-war economic boom, the social and political activism that challenged the dominant power structure, along with the anxieties induced by the Cold War and the complicated nature of America's new position as "leader of the free world," produced expectations concerning straight white masculinity that these men experienced as frustrating, burdensome, and debilitating. In particular, the economic, social, and political changes the nation was experiencing offered a succession of challenges to straight white men and their participation in the discourse of manly self-determination that played a defining role in validating their privileged status. Re-definitions of straight white men's roles as worker, breadwinner, and consumer placed new constraints on their autonomy; liberation movements that gave voice and power to formerly marginalized groups contested (and sought to limit) straight white men's hegemony; and a series of domestic foreign policy blunders epitomized by the Vietnam War disrupted a national narrative grounded in a belief in the inevitable and, for many, preordained superiority of America and American manhood.

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[14] These experts include David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and *Individualism Reconsidered: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1954); William Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956); Vance Packard in *The Status Seekers* (1959); and C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite* (1956) and *White Collar* (1951).

Through the analysis of straight white men's self-referential writing in the years 1945-1980, this project seeks to understand their experience within the socio-historical timeframe and conceptualize the cultural work their concerns about power and identity perform. Exploration of the tensions and contradictions at work within straight white masculinity—the impulses toward resistance and conformity given voice in these autobiographical texts—reveals complexities often obscured by ideologies and discourses of gender and nation. What is interesting and relevant about these writings is how they express (explicitly and implicitly) the uncertainty and the insecurity associated with being part of the hegemonic cohort even with and/or because of its privileges and entitlements—finding their particular experience of manhood wanting, more the nervous striving of Jack Lemmon than the relaxed dominance of Jack Nicholson. The movement from a general discomfiture with the state of manhood as articulated by social commentators to one that is expressed through personal testimony is significant because it offers the implicit claim of authenticity, the personal imprimatur.

As self-identified straight white male poets and writers such as Robert Lowell, Norman Mailer, and Tim O' Brien respond to the socio-historical forces acting upon them by creating texts that invoke the "self,"[15] they reveal the competing and contradictory discourses of masculinity at work within the culture. Engaging with ideologies of nation and gender, they self-reflexively mine their own lives to create a "self" of interest to the consuming public in the genres of poetry, the personal essay, New Journalism, and the memoir. Distinct from the triumphalist personal "histories" that

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[15] I do not claim to speak "the final word" on the sexuality of these writers. However, their public "self" was identified as heterosexual, and hence my inclusion of them within the category of straight white men.

typified mainstream autobiography during the period,[16] these men explore the darker side of masculinity, as they open up their private "experience" to the public sphere as a means of calling into question the cultural imperatives regulating men's identities and behavior.[17] At the same time, these writers *also* engage in an impulse toward recuperating these dominant norms and values in order to re-position the male subject within the culturally accepted limits of the straight white masculine "self." As these writers push beyond and retreat within the discursive boundaries that function to protect the status and privilege of straight white men, they reveal both an impulse for change beyond their confinements within those boundaries, as well as the means by which those boundaries are maintained discursively in their particular historical moment—that combination of the carrot, the benefits of being an insider, which Raewyn Connell in *Masculinities* describes as "the patriarchal dividend" (79), and the stick, which relegates those who too aggressively transgress the limits to the role of disempowered outsider. Through their self-representations, these writers stage and enact a self or selves, adopting and discarding various models of masculinity as they produce and encounter the voices of "others." In this imaginative space, they demonstrate the means by which ideological systems function discursively to resist challenges to established power structures and the norms of gendered behavior that sustain them.

Masculine Hegemony and Autobiography

Autobiography is a genre that has been particularly effective in establishing and reinforcing the status of straight white men in Western culture—as an affirmation of

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[16] For example, Charles Lindbergh's Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953) or Omar Bradley's *A Soldier's Story* (1951).

[17] Historian Joan W. Scott's concept of "experience," that "[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation" ("Experience" 37) serves as an important aspect of the critical framework shaping this analysis.

privilege (having the time and means to reflect at length upon one's life), an assertion of individuality (confidence in the evidence that this life is unique and worthy of time and attention), and an exercise of control (look no further, herein lies the "truth"). Sidonie Smith describes these texts as "those public narratives men write for each other as they lay claim to an immortal place within the phallic order" (*A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* 26), and these narratives functioned culturally as an effective delivery system for the reinforcement and regulation of straight white masculinity. By emphasizing a hierarchy of value through discourses of exceptionalism and individualism that exalt the narrator's own subject position and elide or discount the participation of the socially marginalized "other," his membership in the dominant power structure and by extension the dominant power structure itself is justified in its assertions of primacy. Of course, the act of creating an oral or written narrative of the self is not limited to straight white men; indeed, it can be found across time, gender, race, sexuality, nation, and culture. But, within the Western tradition, those texts that were most highly valued within cultural institutions, as indicated by their ongoing availability to a reading public, their role as an object of scholarly and critical attention, and their standing as an object of cultural interest and acclaim were almost entirely self-representations authored by straight (when a relevant social category) white men.[18]

Critical discourse about autobiography for most of the 20th century focused almost exclusively on narratives of straight white men as representative of the human experience, i.e., the universal subject.[19] German philologist Georg Misch, no doubt

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[18] There are certainly exceptions to this "rule," e.g., the works of Margery Kemp and Frederick Douglass, but their token presence only highlights the absence of the narratives of "others."
[19] My discussion of the history of autobiographical studies in this section is indebted to the excellent overview found in Smith and Watson 193-233.

influenced by his father-in-law, the German historian Wilhelm Dilthey, who described the genre of autobiography as "the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life comes before us" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 194) initiated the first modern effort in formalizing the understanding of autobiography with his multi-volume work, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, the first volume of which was published in 1907. In doing so, Misch established a framework for understanding autobiography that strongly influenced its study throughout the 20th century. His definition of autobiography emphasized the agency of the (exclusively) male subject exerting his power within the public sphere, establishing these qualifiers as the standard for entry into the genre. He writes, "Among those special relationships in life it is chiefly the self-assertion of the political will and the relation of the author to his work and to the public that show themselves to be normative in the history of autobiography" (14). His work is deeply grounded in the 19th century's "great man" theory of history and progress, and his use of the patriarchal master narrative had a profound impact on critical biographical studies. As late as 1980, William Spengemann, one of the central figures in 20th century American autobiographical studies, wrote, "[t]he influence of attitudes, [Misch's] ideas, and his methods has been tremendous, and one can hardly imagine the time when his analyses of individual texts will no longer serve as models for autobiographical study" (182-83).

During the years 1945-1980, the discourse of autobiography was understood as the province of men—though its androcentric nature largely went without saying. The cultural assumption was that the personal histories that could and should be recorded and shared were those of men. The silences within these texts and the absences within the

autobiographical canon of texts regarding the lives of those who were not straight white men reified their subordinate "place" within the culture. However, in the field of autobiographical criticism not everything remained in *stasis*. New critical approaches began to recognize the "art" of autobiography as something beyond the transcription of events.[20] By mid-century a "shift of attention from *bios* to *autos*—from the life to the self" had occurred, and in that shift came an understanding that "fact" and "truth" were not synonymous and that "truth … in terms of historical fact may well be false" (Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" 21). The understanding of the self behind the text was influenced by developments in the field of psychology over the past half-century, including Freud and Lacan's revisions to the architecture of the "self." The understanding of individual consciousness shifted from the unified self to a fragmented one, a self that struggled with questions of identity and self-determination and whose use of language was not disinterested reporting but very much a product of social, psychological and historical forces that reframed the autobiographical text as a location of "unreliable intentionality" (Hart 489-91). Yet, there remained a sense that the consciousness and intention behind the text had much in common with the "exemplary man" (Gilmore 127) found in Misch's analysis.

Feminist critic Leigh Gilmore attests to the power of this gendered paradigm in her critique of the dominant critical approach that continued to exist after decades of feminist criticism:

> The near absence of women's self-representational texts from the critical
>
> histories that authorize autobiography indicates the extent to which the

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[20] To clarify, this is not a reference to the New Critics, who had little interest in autobiography. As Smith and Watson note, in Wimsatt and Brooks' overview of literature's critical tradition in *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957), autobiographical practice "go[es] unmentioned" (197).

genre that functions as the closest textual version of the political ideology

of individualism is gendered 'male.' The differing codes of masculinity

woven through the discursive body of autobiography's 'representative

man' in his roles as poet, scholar, citizen, politician, and hero can be

described as an autobiographical *effect*. It is an effect driven by the logic

of tautology, where one finds what one has always been looking for….

Autobiography names the repeated invocation of an ideological formation

that comes to seem natural—that is, in the simplest terms, that

autobiography is what men write, and what women write belongs to some

'homelier' and minor traditions. (1)

As Gilmore holds a mirror up to the patriarchal limitations of autobiographical studies,

she articulates the mechanisms by which the connection among maleness, specific

performances or expressions of masculinity, and autobiography continued to be

maintained. Feminist criticism challenged many aspects of autobiographical study,

including the developing autobiographical canon as a hierarchy that was "based on ideals

of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity, and transcendence, which reflected [the

critics'] own values" (Anderson 4). While feminist critics along with post-colonial critics

often focused on expanding the boundaries of autobiographical discourse to include texts

and approaches relevant to those who had been excluded from the autobiographical

"straight white Western boys' club," their work also made available new categories of

investigation to scholars and critics, including considerations of embodiment,

relationality, performance, tradition, and authority that will be constitutive of the critical

framework of this project.

The post-modern, post-structural turn in literary criticism takes a strong interest in deconstructing the essential "I" that played such a significant role in the attention paid within autobiographical studies to the conventions of self-representation. In a radical departure from autobiography as the documentation of a life, Paul de Man in his essay "Autobiography as Defacement" argues that autobiography produces fiction rather than knowledge of the self because the form and the process are dependent on genre and language, which ultimately transforms the "real" self into a mere imitation:

> We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (920)

For de Man, autobiography cannot exist legitimately as a genre because truth cannot be distinguished from fiction (919). In the attempt to craft a "self," the male subject becomes what Gilmore describes as a "zombie" (72)—a grotesque impersonation of the human. To dial this critique back a bit from the land of the undead, the post-structural theorists argue persuasively (and relentlessly) that there is no transcendent "self." The individual is a discursive formation whose identity is constructed and shaped by discourses. Autobiography is such a discourse, and as such it produces, maintains, and reinforces particular identities, and, until quite recently those identities were gendered male.

Autobiographical Acts and Dissonant Discourses

This chapter's epigraph from Michael Kimmel suggesting the vexed nature of the masculine experience provides the point of departure for this project. Given straight white men's dominant subject position relative to that of "others" within American society begs the question "Why so much angst?" One way to consider this phenomenon is through the examination of straight white men's autobiographical texts. As I asserted above, the genre of autobiography has served as an effective delivery system for the reinforcement and regulation of straight white masculinity. For a man to participate in that discursive system is to engage with, at least tangentially, its power to create or reinforce the identity of the writer as a "man of importance." Choosing to do so during a period of significant social change is to attempt to grasp that identity and use it to secure oneself within a tradition that has always served men well. Yet, what comprises an autobiography has always been somewhat malleable, and increasingly so from the post-World War II period forward. After laboring mightily in the "second wave" (Smith and Watson 213) of autobiographical criticism, James Olney admitted in 1972 that "[t]he definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible" (*Metaphors of Self* 38). In *Reading Autobiography,* Smith and Watson make the case that "'autobiography' is an umbrella concept rather than a single genre, and that identifying the diversity of autobiographical acts, both at this contemporary moment and historically, is essential to nuanced reading of texts" (218). Hence, in the examination of American myth and ideologies of straight white masculinity in the years 1945-1980, I have identified four "autobiographical acts" or modes that will provide a robust source for exploration and analysis: the personal essay, poetic autobiography, memoir, and New

Journalism.[21] As in the conventional understanding of "autobiography," these texts invite the reader to perceive the narrator and subject of the text as the writer and the events of the text as connected to his private history. But, by rejecting the most traditional form of autobiography—the cradle to (almost) grave recounting of the life of a public man—they allow themselves the freedom to resist at least some of the genre's expectations while also connecting with its discursive power.

The texts under consideration in this dissertation are all in some fashion ideologically inconsistent and often subversive in terms of their production of identities of gender and nation. Yet, in their performance of these transgressive autobiographical acts, the subjects of these narratives still struggle to break free of the discursive gender limitations that confine them—both attracted and repulsed by their lived effect. The tensions created by these conflicting impulses make these texts both useful and

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[21] Each of these autobiographical forms demonstrates what James Olney has described as "the rich variousness of autobiography … clear evidence of the stubborn reluctance to submit to prescriptive definitions or restrictive generic bounds" ("Some Versions of Memory" 267). The autobiographical poetry under consideration in this project moves beyond the New Critical understanding of lyric poetry as "preeminently the utterance that is meant to be overheard" (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 249). M. L. Rosenthal's decision to entitle his review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* as, "Poetry as Confession" positions these poems as requiring an audience (though he would prefer the priestly limits of the confessional) for the revelation of these "personal confidences, rather shameful that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (154). Smith and Watson argue in *Reading Autobiography* that "lyrics that announce themselves as 'autobiography' … can be distinguished from *lyric* as an umbrella term for many forms of poetic self-inscription" (277), and they identify Lowell's *Life Studies* as an example of a "lyrical life narrative" (277)—a useful term to consider the self-referential poetry under discussion in this project. George Fetherling in *The Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs* (2001), understands autobiography as "too determined to cover the subject's entire life or career and show him or her in the most favourable light," while memoir is "more tightly focused, more daring in construction, and … more penetrating. A memoir can be of one's self or of other people or of a particular decade—or of a particular place" (qtd. in Rak 483). Although memoir is sometimes marginalized within critical autobiographical studies, I believe this definition speaks to its appeal for my project—an approach that allows the subject *not* to put his best foot forward. Finally, New Journalism is a form of narrative literary journalism in which the implied objectivity of the journalist is subverted by the introduction of the writer's thoughts, opinions, and interpretations into the text. While the post-modern understanding of the role of journalist assumes an interested (vs. disinterested) journalistic expression, during the period under consideration, this approach was considered novel (hence the sobriquet "new" journalism). Gay Talese, one of its earliest practitioners, articulates a distinguishing quality of this approach, "The New Journalism, though often reading like fiction is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage though it seeks a larger truth than is possible through a mere compilation of verifiable facts" (qtd. in Hartsock 193).

fascinating in gaining insight into the often pathological ways in which systems of power are maintained. Within these texts, I am specifically interested in exploring the gaps, incoherencies, and inconsistencies that demonstrate the dissonance between the discourses of men's hegemonic dominance and the realities of living within these "regimes of truth," which are themselves buffeted by economic, social, and political forces that resist (or attempt to resist) this dominance. These self-referential responses to conflicting discursive demands reveal the dilemmas straight white men face and the actions they must take to maintain a sense of equilibrium in the face of pressures to conform to the cultural norms they are expected to validate and perpetuate.

Theoretical Framework and Categories of Analysis

In a broad sense, masculinity studies provides a substantive cross-disciplinary context for this dissertation's examination of straight white masculinity and its paradoxes—one that I will use throughout to augment my theoretical framework and literary analysis. In addition, several areas of criticism provide a theoretical framework for my analysis. This project is grounded in a feminist, critical whiteness studies,[22] and post-structuralist perspective. In order to provide a nuanced yet vigorous analysis of the self-referential texts that are included in this study, I apply tools and approaches developed and honed by theorists and critics whose work focuses on interpretations and

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[22] More than twenty years ago, Hazel Carby in "The Multicultural Wars" wrote: "We need to recognize that we live in a society in which systems of dominance and subordination are structured through processes of racialization that continuously interact with all other forces of socialization. Theoretically, we should be arguing that everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialized subject. In this sense, it is important to think about the invention of the category of whiteness as well as that of blackness and, consequently, to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference" (qtd. by Thomas DiPiero in *White Men Aren't* 278). Although it is highly unlikely that the men in this study thought of whiteness as a fundamental part of their identity, an analysis that understands them as racialized subjects within the particular category of whiteness will allow for a more effective engagement with textual self-representations.

understanding of autobiography, subjectivity, performativity, relationality, positionality, and mythology in ways that foreground gender and national identity

In taking a deconstructive approach, my analysis aligns itself with Sidonie Smith's critique of the "self-expressive" school of autobiographical theory, which understands autobiography as more transcription than creation. Smith emphasizes that "[t]here is no essential, original, coherent, autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and 'true'" ("Performativity" 108). All of the writers who are the focus of this dissertation construct a self-referential straight white male self which responds to the profound social changes they were experiencing. In doing so, they provide a means to better understand the ideologies and discourses that shape and maintain gender identity. As Elizabeth Bruss explains, "Because the various symbolic and nonsymbolic institutions of a culture are also related to each other systematically, changes in any of the occupations and preoccupations that constitute a social order will affect autobiography as necessarily (if not quite as dramatically) as social cataclysms" (15-16). In *Taking It Like a Man*, David Savran emphasizes the role of gender in understanding the cultural implications at work in men's lives as he argues that "a gendered identity, on account of its contingency, is of all identifications the one most subject to intensive social pressures, the most anxiety-ridden, the most consistently imbricated in social, political, and economic negotiations, and thus the most sensitive barometer of culture" (8). To explore the means by which these writers engage with the "occupations and preoccupations" of their socio-historical

moment, this study will focus on three categories of analysis: models of identity[23]—

those "selves" adopted (and rejected) by the autobiographical subject in compliance with

and resistance to cultural pressures; the body—the manly body, the body's manliness,

and how the body of the narrated "I"[24] encounters the bodies of others; and "others"—

the voices they are given, the ways they are represented, and the relational space they

occupy within the text.

Because these autobiographical texts claim to be representations of the

"experience" of the narrating "I,"[25] my analysis employs historian Joan W. Scott's

Foucauldian-based definition of experience, which rejects experience as the foundational

basis of analysis and knowledge. Indeed, according to Scott, an accurate understanding of

experience requires,

> focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive
>
> nature of "experience" and on the politics of its construction. *Experience*
>
> *is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of*
>
> *interpretation*. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor
>
> straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political. …
>
> Experience is … not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want
>
> to explain. (37; emphasis added)

In making this claim, Scott builds upon the analysis of Teresa de Lauretis regarding

subjectivity. De Lauretis asserts that, through the process by which subjectivity is

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[23] Smith and Watson discuss "Identities as Historically Specific Models" (39-41).

[24] Smith and Watson define the "narrated 'I'" as "the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader" (73).

[25] Smith and Watson define the "narrating 'I'" as "the persona of the historical person who wants to tell … a story about the self." The narrating "I" is distinct from the "real" or historical I—the "flesh and blood person located in a particular time and place" … who is "unknown and unknowable by readers" (72).

constructed, "one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social, and in a larger perspective historical" (qtd. in Scott 27-28). In other words, my social location as a middle class woman creates certain "experiences" that I credit to some aspect of my own amazing self but which actually originate beyond me and are ultimately the result of historical events. Hence, this approach assumes that subjects are constituted through language and experience happens within the meanings established by discourse, which are historically contingent rather than fixed. [26] As Scott notes, however, although "subjects are constituted discursively … there are conflicts among discourses, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy" (34). Thus, as I approach each of these texts, I recognize that I am not encountering a "truth" the narrator is sharing, but rather engaging with the author discursively through his production of a "self" or, more likely, "selves" that are potentially and, perhaps, inherently dissonant.

Each of these texts contains self-representations of identity that both conform to and conflict with dominant notions of masculinity, thus rejecting essentialist notions of gender identity as biologically driven. Judith Butler's theory of performativity proves useful to interpret these contesting impulses. Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble* that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). Building on Butler's work, Sidonie Smith suggests that, if, as Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble*, "the

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[26] I do not suggest that human beings are "only" language or discourse. I do not deny the materiality or the feelings of the body or the experience of the transcendence of the spirit.

injunction to *be* [a particular kind of subject] produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherence [*sic*] configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated" (qtd. in "Performativity" 110), then the same conundrum faces the autobiographical subject who "finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity … that never align perfectly. Rather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions" ("Performativity" 110). As she interrogates transgressive acts within women's autobiographies, Smith uses Butler's framework to identify the ways in which performativity allows for resistance on the part of the female subject. I adopt this strategy to analyze men's texts, paying attention to the places of tension, incoherencies, gaps, and inconsistencies in which the smooth façade of masculinity is breached and masculinity as performance becomes visible and thus available for scrutiny and interpretation.

Because the presence and role (s) of "others" is a central category of analysis of this dissertation, another strand of my theoretical framework involves the concept of relationality. Although the straight white male narrator's voice dominates, it cannot obliterate the others who exist within his landscape. Elements of the individual's story must sometimes be communicated through the perspectives and actions of others or by representing the subject's interactions with others, and the content and tenor of those exchanges or interactions provides an excellent means to explore the ideological and discursive expressions of status and power within a variety of settings—from the domestic space to the depiction of war. In the early years of feminist criticism of autobiography, relationality was identified as being a defining characteristic of women's

writing because women's lives were uniquely relational whereas men's lives were based upon the unitary and autonomous self who possessed rigid personal boundaries. Both Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin counter this essentialist approach; they have "retheorized the concept of relationality" and identified the multiple levels at which it exists within autobiography (Smith and Watson 216). Miller's essay "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography" and Paul John Eakin's work *How Our Lives Become Stories* are both important to this project. In that work, Eakin explains the tensions at work in reframing autobiography as relational:

> We tend to think of autobiography as a literature of the first person, but the subject of autobiography to which the pronoun 'I' refers is neither singular nor first, and we do well to demystify its claims. Why do we so easily forget that the first person of autobiography is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation? Because autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination. *I* write my story, *I* say who I am, *I* create myself. The myth of autonomy dies hard, and autobiography criticism has not yet fully addressed the extent to which the self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others. (43)

 If the story of the self is also the story of the other(s) with whom the self engages, then the construction of those others and the nature of the connection between them and the subject of the text provide a fertile ground for exploring how discursive boundaries of gender and nation are maintained.

Also important to this project and closely connected to relationality in its usefulness for analyzing straight white men's responses to their socio-historical

circumstances (particularly around issues of status and power) is the concept of positionality—how autobiographical subjects assume and speak through the discourses of identity available to them within a particular historical moment. The consideration of positionality is grounded in Foucault's analysis of "technologies of the self" ("Technologies") and has been utilized in feminist and post-colonial criticism by critics and theorists such as Leigh Gilmore, Homi Bhabha, and Carol Boyce Davies. Much like performativity, these interpretations of the ways in which "narrators negotiate within the constraints of discursive regimes" (Smith and Watson 215) can be read back onto self-representations of straight white men to explore the ways in which these writers engage with the generic demands placed upon them regarding the representation of masculinity—of what can and should be said about a life, what is valued and what is not.

The final theoretical approach to this project places the self-referential writing of straight white men during this period within the context of national identity—the ways in which their identities as straight white men are shaped by their engagement with national myths supporting an ideology of individualism. In 1980, Robert F. Sayre noted that "Whether we like them or not, Franklin, Whitman, Douglass and Henry Adams … have been the leading architects of American character. They have built the Houses in which many of the rest of us have lived" (168). For marginalized groups within the American landscape, this has resulted in exclusion and diminishment within the autobiographical framework, and ideologically this has provided the justification for racism, misogyny, homophobia, violence, and genocide. As Smith and Watson argue,

> [N]ational myths are founded upon the discourses of the "other" and the
> "alien." This logic of alterity becomes the means by which national

borders are established, policed, and breached. The gendered aspects of

this logic are everywhere in evidence in debates about nature and national

identity. (38)

Here Smith and Watson are interested in female post-colonial subjects, but this concept

can be applied equally (though differently) to the analysis of representations of straight

white men for whom national myths have also had a profound effect on gendered self-

understanding and hence self-representation. Roland Barthes, whose theorizing of myth

in *Mythologies* is significant to this project writes, "Myth does not deny things, on the

contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply it purifies them, it makes them

innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is

not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (143).[27] Each of the three

chapters that follow will focus on one national myth: Chapter 2—"American

Individualism"; Chapter 3—"The American Dream"; and Chapter 4—"American

Exceptionalism," and each of them is concerned with the interaction between that myth

and straight white masculinity.[28] Conjuring the classic "American" virtues—

independence, self-sufficiency, ambition, a strong work ethic, self-realization,

confidence, and perseverance (all contained within the discourse of self-determination)—

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[27] Though Barthes himself had little use for autobiography in its position as non-fiction writing, as he makes clear in *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes.

[28] These myths are certainly inter-related and possess robust opportunities for analysis and deconstruction; however their characterization within American culture during this period rest upon certain broad concepts, which I will briefly articulate here. "American Individualism" esteems qualities such as independence, autonomy, and self-reliance, while denigrating dependence, vulnerability, and uncertainty – perpetuating and reinforcing the notion that the common good rested upon the individual's commitment to the self rather than the collective. The "American Dream" is grounded on notions of equality among citizens, asserting the possibility that self-determination is possible through hard work and fortitude. "American Exceptionalism" is a term onto which a variety of political and moral meanings have been projected. Of interest to my discussion is the sense that America is unique because of its founding premise of individual liberty, which also gestures toward a "divine" purpose that conflates power with virtue, i.e., America is powerful because it is somehow "good."

produces the straight white American man. Yet the mythic understanding of the nation and the nation's men and the cultural expectations these myths engender are sorely taxed during this period and the texts considered here reflect that tension, providing a rich vein to analyze the means by which national identity and gender identity act upon one another.

American Mythology and Straight White Masculinity: An Analysis

This study examines three texts written in post-World War II America (1945-1980) that take as their subject a straight white man's reflection on and engagement with the exercise of male power and the forces, both internal and external, that shape the degree to which he is "self-made," i.e., an autonomous agent able to exert his will within a life domain (domestic, public, and war). Each of these writers engages in surveillance not solely of their own power, but also of the men who influence their experience, using their observations to critique, assert, and question the gendered realities and expectations that impact their perceptions of themselves and their experience. This dissertation considers each text through the lens of one national mythology—taking into account the impact of that strand of mythology on the performance of masculinity, including the entitlements these mythologies normalize and the deviancies (the Otherness) they contain and control. Finally, this analysis examines the intersection between genre and the representation of the self as a straight white man, identifying the ways in which genre interacts with and often magnifies the effects of each text.

Chapter 1, "American Individualism and Hegemonic: Father, Son, Other in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*," focuses on Lowell's portrayal of men's ability to fulfill (or not) the expectations of a normative, straight white male identity and the domestic implications of men's failure or success in doing so. Lowell writes in the middle post-war

period, when much cultural energy and attention was given to a "crisis" in masculinity

created by the perception that feminizing impulses within the domestic and professional

spheres. The socio-cultural impulse insisting that men be "other-directed" (8 and

passim),[29] family-centric, and willing to conform to external measures of mature and

well-adjusted manhood seemed a violation of the independence and autonomy essential

to the practice of American Individualism, frequently highlighted as a significant point of

difference between Americans and the Soviets during the Cold War. In both lyric poems

and a personal essay within *Life Studies*, Robert Lowell explores his anger and

resentment in being the son of a man who fails to fulfill his role as the dominant figure

within the household. Lowell's harsh response to his father's inadequacies makes visible

not only gendered expectations and dynamics within the family system, but also the

cultural means used to maintain and buttress the always unstable ideological construction

of straight white masculinity.

Chapter 2, "The Female Body, Masculine Identity, and the American Dream:

Resisting the Totalitarian Menace of Women's Liberation in Norman Mailer's *The*

Prisoner of Sex," explores Norman Mailer's defiant response to Second Wave

Feminism's demand to open up the public sphere to all women, thereby uncoupling

gender from the American Dream. Explicitly proposing the existence of an existential

crisis, i.e., the straight white male hegemonic position is under threat, Mailer marshals an

essentialist argument against women's control over their bodies, predicting dire

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[29] David Riesman speaks to this in his extremely influential analysis of contemporary masculinity, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). In this text, Whyte asserts that, throughout American history, men were expected to be (and actually were) self-directed, attending to and trusting their own internalized sense of what was right in any given situation based upon their own experience. This reliance on the self to negotiate life and determine one's actions has been replaced on looking outward to others, i.e., relying on the approval or guidance of a supervisor to establish goals and priorities, and ultimately judge oneself as an effective man.

consequences should women's liberatory efforts succeed. Having long ago adopted and promulgated a worldview calling for straight white men's free exercise of dominant masculinity and their emancipation from the civilizing pressures of the "totalitarian tissues of American society" (*Advertisements* 339), Mailer's *Prisoner of Sex* serves as a primer for understanding the indispensable role of the feminine Other in constructing and sustaining straight white male identity and power.

Finally, chapter 3 discusses, "The Demystification of American Exceptionalism: Courage and Tim O'Brien's Acts of Witness in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*." Although the term American Exceptionalism was coined in the early 20th century, it encompasses an historic premise, Manifest Destiny, which aligned God's intentions for the well being and progress of the world with the actions taken to establish and maintain the power of the United States. That the first iteration of this divine purpose involved the genocidal usurpation of the land from the native peoples dwelling there established and countenanced a connection between virtue and state-sponsored violence robed within a narrative of the superiority of its (straight white male) citizens—a relationship rarely questioned within the American nationalist discourse. However, the nation's prosecution of the war in Vietnam from 1965-1973 did provide an opportunity for the questioning of this mythology, and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in A Combat Zone* served as one of the first memoirs to open up the experience of the war to those who had not served there. Refusing the narrative of a righteous struggle, O'Brien deliberately positions himself as Other to the national consensus about manhood and war—even as he operates within its paradoxical warrior culture. As such, he offers his witness to the compulsions and failures of the mythology of American Exceptionalism as seen in the toxic consequences

created by the intersection of gendered expectations of dominance and a flawed national

mission.

Chapter 1

American Individualism and Hegemonic Masculinity:

Father, Son, Other in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine representations of masculinity in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) with particular attention to how Lowell portrays men's ability to fulfill (or not) the expectations of a normative American male identity and the implications of men's success or failure in doing so. In *Life Studies*, Lowell's decision to step outside the boundaries of social and literary propriety to reveal details of family dysfunction and his own bouts of mental illness created the poetry world's version of an uproar. Attention to gender expectations and dynamics comprised a substantive portion of Lowell's texts and provide a rich source for the consideration of straight white masculinity within the domestic sphere. My analysis focuses particularly on those qualities that undergird the myth of American Individualism —independence, self-determination, autonomy, and agency—qualities that Lowell seems especially interested in exploring in the studies or sketches he creates of the men in his family, with special attention paid to his father. In "91 Revere Street" and "Life Studies," Lowell surveils his father by presenting a series of scenes and events in which he closely observes his father's failure to perform within the accepted boundaries of straight white masculinity. The manner in which certain scenes are staged (particularly those with Lowell, Sr.[30] at the center) suggests a painstaking

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[30] He was actually Lowell the third, but as all of the previous Robert Traill Spencer Lowells were deceased when *Life Studies* was written, this seems the simplest form of reference. The single name "Lowell" will always refer to the poet.

effort in building the case for his status as deviant Other.[31] The gender policing present in

Lowell's rhetorical effects as he highlights his father's frailties makes visible certain

cultural means by which the unstable ideological construction of straight white

masculinity is buttressed and maintained.[32]

Within the American imagination, the notion that the nation's commitment to

personal freedom and liberty uniquely marks and shapes its citizens is longstanding—a

belief that can be traced throughout the nation's autobiographical tradition.[33] Though

articulated (falsely) within the national discourse as applicable to all, American history

(even in the 21st century) demonstrates that the primary participants and benefactors of

this ethos of individual freedom are straight white men. Indeed, autonomy and self-

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[31] Some critics have found a kind of dark humor and even a qualified warmth in the portrayal of Lowell, Sr., e.g. Richard Tillinghast: "comic and satirical," and "affectionately ambivalent" (62); Peter Filkins:"a great amount of tenderness" (173). Alan Williamson: "complex humorous tone" (qtd. in Milburn 76). Willard Spiegelman: "The combination of acid social satire and psychological accuracy makes for a memoir both humorous and dangerous" (144). Burton Raffel (318) probably comes closest to this dissertation's thesis when as he states, "there is contempt for the ineptness of the father; there is humiliation at having such a figure as a father"—however, Raffel begins this analysis by stating, "There is affection for the inept figure of the father"—evidence of which I find barely a trace unless one thinks of the artistic consideration of the pathetic, failed potential as affection.

[32] In making this argument, I am resisting the claim of esteemed Lowell scholar, Steven Gould Axelrod, who in his 2006 address to the PAMLA stated, "By establishing connections with interior and exterior otherness, [he] initiated a movement toward new subject formations and relations. … [His] deviant masculinity, [his] refusal to reinforce traditional concepts of masculinity, became one way [he] could say 'no' to power" ("Between Modernism and Postmodernism" 4). I very much admire Axelrod's work, but I read Lowell's choice to "disidentify with his 'cheerful and cowed' father" (5) while admiring (to put it lightly) his dominant grandfather, as reinscribing straight white masculine ideology, rather than disrupting it.

[33] Alexis de Tocqueville noted the discursive power of this idea in *Democracy in America* (published in 1835): "[Americans] are separated from all other peoples by a sentiment, pride. For the last fifty years *it has not ceased to be repeated to the inhabitants of the United States* (emphasis added) that they are the only religious, enlightened and free people … so they have an immense opinion of themselves and are not very far from believing that they are a species apart [!] in the human race of mankind" (600, 550). Recognizing de Tocqueville may be a bit over the top in his assertion, his recognition of a prevailing cultural impulse to inculcate the connection between national identity and the individual freedom of white men who were its primary benefactors provides evidence of how deeply it is entrenched within the national narrative.

From a theoretical perspective, Smith and Watson assert in their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* the importance of the role of autobiography in creating a sense of connection and commonality among diverse individuals, calling the genre "a potent vehicle" for communicating "narratives about the basis for [communities'] existence as distinct collectivities" (38).

determination are foundational to the ideology of straight white American masculinity,
which ascribes the superior social and economic positions held by this cohort as resulting
from their actions as independent agents, placing power and control within the individual
rather than emerging from the individual's social location or access to particular
institutions and systemic structures. A significant overlap between the ideologies of
gender and nation proves to be mutually legitimizing and reinforcing—what is good for
straight white men is good for the United States and vice versa—and one can see this
play out in the discursive and mythical forms in which these ideologies are expressed,
e.g., the literary genre of autobiography and the ideals of American Individualism and
American Exceptionalism. Given the significant sociocultural investment in maintaining
stable narratives of autonomy and self-determination, deviations from these social norms
do not do unnoticed within social networks. The inevitable failures of men to perform at
the level of the mythological ideal results in an ongoing need to repair and reestablish
equilibrium within this system of belief when norms are violated. Thomas Couser, an
important scholar in the late twentieth century resurgence of American autobiographical
studies, has noted that the power of autobiography lies in "what it does, rather than what
it is." Beyond being solely the story of a life, this type of text "encodes or reinforces
particular values in ways that may shape culture and history" (129-30). Cultural critic
David Savran takes an even stronger position when he contends that "[l]iterary and
cultural texts … because of their high entertainment value and their success in
engineering consent ('that was real!'), are decisive for the ongoing production of
hegemony" (6).[34] Thus, representations of the masculine self in autobiographical writing

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[34] This dissertation uses Raymond Williams' definition of "hegemony" as "a whole body of practices and
expectations, over the whole of living: … a lived system of meaning and values—constitutive and

provide a means to examine the ideological dynamics of this process of disruption and

recovery of straight white male status, the encoding and reinforcement of straight white

male power.

In thinking about the relationship between the ideology of masculinity and the

mythology of national identity and their connection to autonomy, applying Raewyn

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, developed to explain unequal power

relationships between men and women and among men, proves illustrative. Within this

theory, she identifies multiple patterns of masculinity (i.e., masculinities) organized

within a sociocultural hierarchy of value that defines itself against the feminine. Connell

adopts Antonio Gramsci's model of hegemony as the means of explaining how "socially

dominant masculinities" assert and maintain ascendancy within the social order through

"[c]ultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or

delegitimation of alternatives." Within this hierarchy of value, certain iterations of

masculinity serve as "exemplars" ("Hegemonic Masculinity" 846) and, while remaining

uncommon, become normative and establish the means by which men evaluate

themselves and each other as men.[35] Historian John Tosh aligns with Connell when he

asserts that, although Gramsci provides the framework, patriarchy proves most influential

in terms of hegemonic masculinity's content—providing "an underlying principle of

social stratification … [and] depending on unequal relationships between different

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constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (110).

[35] Connell's theory holds a place of primacy within masculinity studies. In "Connell's Theory of
Masculinity – Its Origins and Influences on the Study of Gender," scholar Nikki Wedgwood notes that
Connell's book *Masculinities* has been "cited over 1300 times in 246 different international journals across
110 fields varying from sociology, women's studies and education to public administration, forestry and
clinical neurology" (329). Although Connell lays out a framework to consider varieties of masculinity, of
particular importance is her recognition that not all men identify with or seek to place themselves within
this framework—expressing values and behaviors that are antithetical to it—a point historian John Tosh
also makes in "Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender." In 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt
took into account certain of the criticisms of the theory and updated it, making some important revisions.

masculinities … as a means of defining boundaries and policing deviants" ("Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender" 44-46). Connell notes that a "patriarchal dividend" accrues to all men to varying degrees within this system because of the marginalizing of women and particular expressions of masculinity, e. g., homosexuality, that impacts social, political, and economic opportunities and relationships at all levels (*Masculinities* 79). Even those men somewhat disadvantaged within the hegemonic system of masculinity, for example by class or race, benefit from maintaining the system as it establishes a basis for their superiority to at least some category or subcategory of personhood. This hierarchical framework sustains a need for judgment, comparison, and competition that pits men against each other (individually and in social groupings) and evaluates them based upon various categories of performance as the hegemonic system functions to establish "place" and provides the basis for feeling secure (or not) with one's status.[36] While the hegemonic system tolerates the reality that most men do not (and likely cannot) attain the idealized standards of the avatars of masculinity at the top of the hierarchy, a point exists at which certain transgressions or failures cannot be absorbed or absolved. Though some of these transgressions pertain to behaviors perceived as indicative of homosexuality, others speak to a more general sense of being feminized by a loss of autonomy or control. The subjective nature of these judgments only exacerbates the potential for anxiety and insecurity among men, increasing the need to establish a

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[36] In "Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender," John Tosh notes that "[t]he word hegemonic suggests a structure of control, a hierarchy which allows us to place masculinities in some kind of pecking order. The term also implies that *control (even oppression) is in some way integral to masculinity*, providing a framework for placing men in relation to women and to those males whose manhood is for some reason denied" (42; emphasis added).

means to secure and protect themselves so as to avoid crossing the boundary that will

result in loss of status and banishment to the category of the failed and deviant Other.[37]

This binary landscape of insider/outsider attempts to maintain equilibrium within

the unstable category of gender by affirming identity through encoding what the self is

not—i.e., I know who I am by knowing who I am not—and mirrors that of national

identity. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson maintain in their introduction to *Women,*

Autobiography, Theory: A Reader,

> [N]ational identity can be a deeply problematic term because national
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> myths are founded on the discourse of the 'other,' the 'alien.' This logic of
>
> alterity becomes the means through which national borders are
>
> established, policed and breached. Readings of autobiographical texts need

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[37] In *Guyland,* sociologist Michael Kimmel offers a heuristic used among a cohort of white men (ages 16-25) to determine what it means to be masculine that focuses on self-determination and control of self and others. Though this research took place in the 2000s, many of the notions at work here would have been understood by Lowell and his readers. Certainly these "rules" paint a general picture of assertive masculinity. But their lack of specificity limits the validity of any particular evaluation of male performance. For the most part, it is highly subjective.

Bros before Hos (The Guy Code)
1. Boys don't cry
2. It's better to be mad than sad
3. Don't get mad get even
4. Take it like a man
5. He who has the most toys when he dies, wins
6. Just do it, or ride and die
7. Size matters
8. I don't stop to ask for directions
9. Nice guys finish last
10. It's all good.

The unifying subtext of all these aphorisms involves the rejection of demonstrations of emotion and admissions of weakness. Kimmel identifies "the single cardinal rule of manhood …. is to offer constant proof that you are not gay" (45, 51), an issue that is, in fact, impossible to "prove" decisively. To expand on Kimmel, weakness and emotion are connected to femininity and ultimately speaks to a misogynistic concern about/fear of being perceived as feminine/feminized.

From the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the definition of "deviant" involves "deviating from social norms and standards," which is how the word is used throughout this dissertation. Relevant to the interest of this text in asserting that these norms are often arbitrary, the following evidence was given in the OED's example of the usage of the term: "1959 B. WOOTTON *Social Sci. & Social Pathol.* x. 314. Elaborate studies of deviant behaviour have been undertaken which *make no attempt to establish the norms from which the subjects are presumed to be deviating"* (emphasis added).

to attend to the complex ways in which narrators engage myths of national

identity. (38)

These borders are not only physical but also exist as internalized ideas and beliefs about how Americans differ from others. This "logic of alterity," grounded in the denial of both its artificial construction as well as the explicit and implicit commonalities that exist with others, is also at work within hegemonic masculinity. The borders of masculinity are maintained and established through gender policing that characterizes as Other those whose performance of key touchstones of gendered behavior such as independence and self-determination fail to meet normative standards. Ironically, the need for these boundaries and their active policing suggests that the dominant group must be protected from the difference (weakness, inferiority, or deviancy) inherent in the Other—a vulnerability undermining notions of that group's essential superiority.

An operating principle within the ideology of masculinity is the assumption (however erroneous) that its expectations are attainable and reasonable: that each man is capable of at the very least an adequate performance of the myriad of activities and attitudes that comprise normative masculinity (though the measure always remains arbitrary and subjective). Failure to do so must be corrected by the individual or called out as aberrant by an observer in a way that maintains this fiction of natural capability. One category of critique labels such transgressions as the result of personal weakness deserving (if not requiring) a negative consequence. In his study of how the categories of the "normal" and the "pathological" developed in the study of health and disease in the 19th century, French philosopher Georges Canguilhelm suggests an explanation that provides a context for such an antagonistic response. He asserts that "[t]o set a norm, to

normalize is to impose a requirement on an existence, on a given whose variety, whose

disparity is offered as more hostile than foreign to the requirements" (emphasis added).[38]

Thus the existence of norms creates expectations and restrictions regarding acceptable

and socially positive behavior as well as a sense of threat from actors engaged in

behaviors outside those constraints—perceiving them as threat toward the norm rather

than merely somehow different. If these gendered social norms are understood and

experienced as essential to attaining and/or maintaining economic, political, and social

power, which indeed they often are, then hostility toward those who resist conforming to

these expectations serves as a defense of the status quo and a means of securing one's

own position within systems and their institutions of power.[39] Assuming an actively

negative intention regarding behaviors outside masculine norms provides an illuminating

position from which to consider men's response to other men's aberrant behavior. When

difference is understood to extend beyond benign disparity to some form of existential

threat (whether valid or not), surveilling borders and identifying deviants become a

method of protecting the culture and its values, requiring the intervention of a protector

or guardian, further asserting and enhancing male power. Even an autobiographical text

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[38] Cited in "The Universalization of Whiteness," by Warren Montag in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (291). Georges Canguilhelm's, *The Normal and the Pathological*, first published in France in 1943, translated into English in 1991, had a significant influence on the thinking of Foucault and Althusser; Foucault provided the introduction to the English version.

[39] In *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin notes two examples of how difference is perceived and responded to that seem relevant in considering how the discourse of "threat" functions. In his analysis of the premise for "savage war" against Indigenous peoples from the earliest settlement of the New World, he finds that belief in "ineluctable political and social differences rooted in some combination of 'blood' and 'culture' make coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than subjugation" (12). Slotkin also cites a description of the working class made in 1877, just prior to the massive waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe, that held them to be aliens "to whom American political and social ideals appeal but faintly, if at all, and who carry in their very blood traditions which give universal suffrage an air of menace to many of the things which civilized men hold most dear" (21). The underlying fear of domination by the Other that pervades these discursive positions places the protection of a distinct identity and status as a primary concern of national ideology and, given the intersection between ideologies of nation and gender, offers a way to understand men's hostility toward masculinities that seem illegitimate or likely to endanger straight white male supremacy.

that is not explicitly nationalistic exhibits evidence of national and gendered ideology as well as the means by which that ideology is used to establish and reinforce a man's status. For American men, high functioning within the culturally mandated standards of autonomy and self-determination receives praise as an expression of "typical" American masculinity, while men who transgress standards risk being judged as abnormal or deviant and, having been so identified, are vulnerable to expressions of contempt,[40] disgust,[41] and various forms of displacement as a means of "social distancing."[42] Such rejection results in the isolation of the deviant Other, defending the status quo, and protecting a vulnerable masculinity from the "contagion" or pathology of failed manhood.[43]

In *Life Studies*, Lowell engages a paradoxical American reality. Roland Barthes asserts that "[m]yth organizes a world without contradictions" (143), and the elevated status of American Individualism within the national narrative creates an expectation that men's self-empowerment is "natural" and thus uncomplicated. Not surprisingly, within

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[40] From a sociological perspective, "[t]he expression of [contempt], typically in the form of derogation and rejection, often results in the social exclusion of the object. The aim is to make it clear that the other person is inferior and worthless, which is a way boosting one's own social position or status" (Fischer and Manstead 460).

[41] Within sociological discourse, a "framing of disgust conceives it as the emotion that is guardian of the borders of both the bodily self and the social self"; as such it "seeks to protect [the self] from degrading or polluting acts" (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 758, 763).

[42] "The second social function of emotions is helping the individual or group to differentiate the self or group from others and to compete with these others for social status or power. We refer to this second function as the 'social distancing function' of emotion. … For example, the social distancing function can be observed in … contempt (seeking to exclude another person) or social fear (seeking distance from another person)" (Fischer and Manstead 457).

[43] "Groups seen as low in status and dissimilar to one's own group … tend to be viewed with disgust and contempt. Disgust in relation to low-status and dissimilar outgroups is also implicated in results showing that disgust sensitivity is positively correlated with negative attitudes to foreigners, outgroups, immigrants, and deviant individuals. To some degree this effect is mediated by fear of infection or contamination," (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 770). Though I recognize that one could make the argument that men who are seen as Other are in fact men, and not a member of a dissimilar group, I take the position, that the language and positioning of these Other men in the text suggest they are at once foreign and hostile, yet very familiar. Thus, a key to the contempt, disgust, and fear the Other induces is the sense that "without careful monitoring, I could become like 'them,' and that would be a disempowering and devaluing experience in terms of my identity.

that same narrative, failures are typically suppressed, since it is just not American to fail.

Cultural historian Scott Sandage in his study of American expectations of success, *Born*

Losers: A History of Failure in America, states that [t]he anonymity of one who fails

makes him truly the American Everyman" (263).[44] Concealing aberrant expressions of

masculinity, i.e., failure, maintains the pretense of a stable, unitary, and superior

masculine identity. Yet, policing the boundaries of masculinity requires that men who fall

short be labeled as failures and, in some fashion, punished. Typically this "disciplinary

response" occurs offstage, privately, within a small cohort (the family, a team, a group of

friends) governed by silence.[45] In autobiography, the author (and subject) of the text

determines what is required to represent his or her own experience, and for Lowell the

failures of his father are essential for sketching out the dimensions of his own life. This

complex dance of engaging with the paradox of failure gives cogent force to feminist

historian Joan Scott's admonition that "[e]xperience is at once always already an

interpretation and in need of interpretation" (37). Given the importance of autonomy and

self-determination to male identity, the manner in which Lowell represents his own and

other men's inadequacies relative to the lack of personal empowerment provides a means

of accessing men's perceptions about male power—its entitlements, its requirements, and

its fragility. Lowell's absorption in the failures of masculine power demonstrates the

imperative behind "the cultural work that white masculinity continually performs in order

to retain its hegemony" (DiPiero 3).

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[44] Thus the power of Arthur Miller's portrayal of Willy Loman and especially Linda Loman's outraged demand, "Attention must be paid!" (*Death of a Salesman*, Act I, Part VIII).

[45] Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson in *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* assert that one aspect of the internalization of masculine norms is the imposition of a "code of silence on boys, requiring them to suffer without speaking of it and to be silent witnesses to the acts of cruelty to others" (92). Kimmel expands upon this stating "[b]oys and men learn to be silent in the face of other men's violence. Silence is one of the ways boys *become* men" (*Guyland* 61; emphasis added).

Lowell comes to this autobiographical space from a place of personal and professional pain and transition, including the deaths of his parents, a severe episode of mental illness, the less than successful critical reception of his third book of poetry, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), and an artistic struggle to find a "voice" that felt more authentic and accessible.[46] The sense of authenticity that *Life Studies* injects into the genre of autobiography relies upon its representation of personal deficits, the limits to masculine power and competence that Lowell struggles to transcend. By exposing his own difficulties, Lowell seems to place himself in the category of Other—but not quite. Along with his consideration of the self who is "less than," Lowell includes an examination of his enfeebled patrilineal legacy and its effects on his life. In this work, the failed father casts a long shadow over the life of the son.[47] The presence of this flawed Other and the judgments Lowell offers about him provide a context for the writer's own failings. Lowell's act of judgment gives him power, in the sense that affirming the validity of the ideological principles of masculinity through the denigration of other men confirms the hegemonic status of the man offering the critique. In a competitive, zero-sum environment, one man's loss of power is another's gain. Within the autobiographical

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[46] In an interview with Ian Hamilton in 1971, Lowell reflected upon a two-week reading tour he undertook in 1957: "At that time, poetry reading was sublimated by the practice of Allen Ginsberg. I was still reading my old New Criticism religious, symbolic poems, many published during the war. I found—it's no criticism—that audiences didn't understand, and *I didn't always understand myself while reading* ("A Conversation with Ian Hamilton" (284; emphasis added). Given that *Life Studies* won the National Book Award and *Heart's Needle* won the Pulitzer in 1960, it would certainly seem that American literary culture was ready for a change.

[47] Lowell never directly implicates his father as the "cause" of his own mental illness, but his representation of the hybridity and feminized qualities of Lowell, Sr. and his forbearers certainly directs the reader in drawing that conclusion. Within the psychological discourse of Lowell's historical moment, childhood experience was held to be responsible for conditions like "manic-depression," disorders that are now primarily understood as physiological. With his emphasis on the patrilineal flaws in his bloodline, Lowell also gestures toward the ancient (but even in the 1950s still somewhat viable notion of mental illness as communicable, a result of a weakness of the mind and transmitted one generation to another via "bad blood." The shame that mental illness incurred in those who suffered from it at midcentury (and even in the 21st century) is easy to underestimate.

space, the writer has control as s/he makes choices about the manner in which characters are portrayed, the subjective judgments passed, and the evidence extended in support of those judgments. In doing so, the writer exposes what Smith and Watson describe as the "ideological 'I.'"[48] Of particular interest in identifying the workings of the "ideological I" is the ways it is revealed through the representation of others and, in particular, marginalized others. In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson define others as those who are not straight white men. However, in this analysis, I expand this category to consider others who are straight white men but whose failures in the performance of masculinity result in their negative appraisal by the author.

Following Rachel Blau DuPlessis' admonition to investigate representations of "male-based power and regimes of gender enforcement" by making them "visible and strange" (*Purple* 10), this chapter explores, through Lowell's representations of himself and other men, how failures of personal autonomy and self-determination create the need for "othering." Men's negative responses to these gendered inadequacies as deserving condemnation suggest that male conformity, submission, and experience of limitations or constraints are understood as deviancies, symptoms of a potentially dangerous and contagious pathology that must be contained and isolated through the strict and vigorous enforcement of gender codes. Occasions of male failure inspire a response that provides insight into the ideological impulses at work—involving the assumption of particular postures, in this case both the depiction of desire for a dominant and controlling masculinity that validates gendered norms (while revealing transgressive masculinity as deviant) and also the problematizing of that desire; the deployment of particular actions,

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[48] The "ideological 'I' is at once everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts, in the sense that the notion of personhood and the ideologies of identity constitutive of it are so internalized (personally and culturally) that they seem 'natural' and 'universal' characteristics of persons" (76-78).

attitudes, expectations, and interpretations, including surveillance, judgment, contempt, disgust, and rejection; and the effect of those responses in creating and enforcing social distance in order to isolate and differentiate the deviant male. [49] In this chapter, I will make my case by doing the following: provide an overview of *Life Studies* that demonstrates how the structure of the work aligns with my premise; consider the transgressive nature of confessional poetry and Lowell's role within this literary movement; explore mid-twentieth century masculinity; consider indomitable masculinity as a problematized object of desire; and, finally, analyze the role of "Skunk Hour," the final poem in *Life Studies*, in valorizing Lowell's own masculinity

Life Studies: An Overview

Life Studies is a sequence composed of four parts that share an interest in male power and the performance of masculinity. Part I contains four poems that speak to "disintegration and decline … at certain moments in history" (Matterson 487).The entirety of Part II contains the autobiographical essay, "91 Revere Street," which emerged from the extensive self-reflexive writing Lowell began while hospitalized by a bout of what was named manic-depression at the time. In Part III of *Life Studies*, Lowell offers elegiac tributes to four male writers, Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane in which he recognizes both their creative gifts and their flawed masculinity. *Life Studies* closes with a radical revision in Lowell's style as he crafts a sequence of autobiographical/family-centered poems whose informal, relaxed style differs radically from all of his earlier poems. In his essay "Robert Lowell: Life

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[49] I am not speaking of sexual desire, but the presence of homoerotic impulse is always a possibility. Of primary relevance to my argument is the desire to satisfy the emotional needs that this type of dominating masculinity both arouses and promises, though it does not and cannot deliver on the expectations it creates. In the section of this chapter entitled "The Object of Desire," I will explore desire at greater length, applying DuPlessis's definition of desire as a "kind of eros" (*Purple* 7).

Studies," Stephen Matterson describes Lowell's theme as a "concern with the lack of order and meaning in reality and about the inability of the individual either to locate or formulate a coherent stable satisfying pattern" (484). While Matterson's observation rings true, this dissertation sees Lowell's concern as particularly focused on the impact of the performance of straight white masculinity in creating order, meaning, stability, and satisfaction, as well as the negative outcomes of inadequate performance. The disjunctive nature of the structure of *Life Studies*—the variety of styles and genres Lowell makes use of and the ways in which form and content subvert traditional literary and patriarchal practices—underscores the instability of normative masculinity and the anxiety that instability provokes.

The complexity and subject matter of the poems in Part I gesture toward Lowell's earlier work while also relating to *Life Studies* as a whole both broadly (with their concern about straight white masculine power and authority) and in the use of weak or failed patriarchs. The first three poems in this section intersect thematically in their critique of (flawed) straight white men at the peak of the hegemonic hierarchy. In "Beyond the Alps," Lowell's speaker/Lowell is on the move, a passenger on a night train between Rome and Paris. His backward glance at Rome holds two men within his gaze, the "skirt-mad Mussolini [who] unfurled / the eagle of Caesar" and whose impact continues to be felt as his "lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke," and Pius the XII, the papal patriarch, who "made Mary's assumption dogma"[50] despite its conflict with the

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[50] The doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary asserts that because she was born without original sin (the doctrine of the immaculate conception [proclaimed 1854]) she did not experience a human death and the subsequent decay of the body. Like Jesus the Christ, her body was assumed into heaven at the end of her earthly life [proclaimed 1950].

"lights of science [which] couldn't hold a candle / to Mary risen."[51] The signifiers of Rome, a seat of Western culture, thus possess a hybrid duality: the womanizing, murderous, fascist who ruled Italy from 1922-1943 and the pope whose infallibility in matters of doctrine and belief in the miraculous (or, some would say, outlandish) should not be questioned—though Lowell's speaker does in fact question, asking "But who believed this? Who could understand?" (7). After juxtaposing St. Peter and Il Duce to highlight the connection between religion and the abuse of power, Lowell charges Pius XII, as the successor to St. Peter, with serving a God who "herd[s] his people to the *coup de grace*" (8)—the point of destruction. Hence, in "Beyond the Alps," Lowell problematizes the role of the powerful patriarch by conflating power and violence ("pure mind and murder," "killer kings" [8]) in the exercise of straight white male authority and control.

"Beyond the Alps" ends in Paris, which is "breaking up" (8). In Lowell's second poem "The Banker's Daughter," he moves back in time to Renaissance Paris and adopts the persona of Marie de Medici, wife and then, upon his assassination, widow to Henri IV of France and regent for their son Louis XIII. As Marie, he speaks both to the corruption of the royal power whose "wardrobes … dragged the exchequer to its knees" (9) and the ineffective manliness of a monarch who is driven "to sleep in single lodgings on the town" because his wife's "brutal girlish mood-swings drove" him there (9)—despite his affinity for "blood and pastime" (10). Their "nightmare son … [who] cr[ies] / for ball and sceptre" (10) would reign in France during most of the horror that was the Thirty Years

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[51] This reference is to Lowell's *Life Studies* 7. Henceforth, all references to the text will be noted parenthetically with page number only.

War (which devastated and depopulated large segments of Europe) as France pursued and ultimately succeeded in gaining dominance in continental Europe.

Continuing with the theme of male violence and dominance, the third poem, "Inauguration Day: January 1953," takes as its context the transfer of presidential power from Harry Truman to Dwight Eisenhower, but again the subject is war and chaos. Lowell references the Civil War battle of Cold Harbor, one of the bloodiest and most strategically stupid battles of that bloody war, as well as Ulysses S. Grant, the general who devised that attack and oversaw the slaughter. The battle was notorious because it involved the Union's frontal assault against an extremely well-fortified Confederate position, resulting in large numbers of Union casualties. In now creating another pairing, Grant, the Commanding General of the Union Army, and Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, Lowell alludes to the brutal cost of wars that generals plan but in which other men fight and die. Certainly D-Day was a "success" unlike Cold Harbor, but World War II unleashed the "atoms, split apart" (11) that made the potential for nuclear annihilation the basis for the supremacy of the United States. Lowell implicitly evokes the relationship between the power of states and the individual, alluding to the human cost of the establishment of systems of authority that create a "mausoleum in [the nation's] heart (11). The American nation-state is at its core a site of death and decay, reflecting both the violence of the past and Cold War fears of the present.

In the final poem in Part I, "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined in Munich," Lowell also locates the speaker in the recent past—this time creating a hybrid self by taking on the persona of a black American soldier in the social disorder and chaos of post-World

War II Germany. Leaving behind the meta-view of history, Lowell alludes to the personal as the anonymous soldier's irrationality and confinement not only anticipates Lowell's representation of his own incarceration in McLean Hospital (a psychiatric hospital) in "Waking in Blue" but also gestures toward his own experience of incarceration in a Munich mental hospital. His appropriation of blackness can be seen as signaling to the reader that his experience of manic episodes—of being "out of control"—result in "primitive" behavior that is unacceptable within the bounds of "civilization." In making this connection, Lowell draws on cultural stereotypes of the inferiority and animal-like nature of black Americans—"subnormal bootblack heart," "feeding" (rather than eating), "black maniacs"— that anticipate the negative impact of hybridity, i.e., mixed "race," that he brings forward in "91 Revere Street." Enclosed in quotation marks, the poem's contents are the speech of the "[m]ad Negro [s]oldier," a monologue that is fractured and nonsensical, e.g., "Cat-houses talk cold turkey to my guards," and, in speaking about the destruction of Munich, "Who but my girl-friend set the town on fire?"—reinforcing the Negro soldier as a dim-witted brute. In "Memories of West Street and Lepke," Lowell shares his incarceration (for his conscientious objector stance in World War II) with "a Negro boy with curlicues / of marijuana in his hair" (90), suggesting (in addition to the fact the he seems to be confusing marijuana with dreadlocks) that his appropriation of the black male persona also provides a means to identify himself with a lack of power, which Lowell places (erroneously) in equivalency with his social position as an elite straight white man suffering from mental illness.[52] The placement of this poem immediately prior to "91 Revere Street," the long, autobiographical essay that comprises the heart of *Life*

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[52] Toni Morrison expresses concern about this appropriation in *Playing in the Dark*—"[t]he ways in which artists – and the society that bred them – transferred internal conflicts to a 'blank darkness,' to conveniently bound and violently silenced bodies" (38).

Studies provides a physical representation of the "shadow" (Rosenthal 155) of inept masculinity that haunts the remainder of the text. Making the move of using stereotypes of marginalized black masculinity to allude to the self-referential art of an elite white man (in "Memories") by showing just how "crazy" crazy can be, Lowell demonstrates straight white male privilege in action. His unselfconscious ease in this careless reinforcement of notions of racial inferiority testifies to the perceived naturalness of straight white male entitlement by those who posses it.

"91 Revere Street" is a personal essay that looks back at the years 1924-1927 when Lowell and his parents lived at this address. First published in the *Partisan Review* (1956), this prose sketch of his early years provided much of the "fuel" for M. L. Rosenthal's troubled observations in "Poetry as Confession," his review of *Life Studies*. This essay presents Lowell's father as inadequate in just about every way imaginable, Lowell's parents' marriage as fraught with tension, disappointment, and anger, and young Lowell as a discontented and judgmental boy who hungered both for a connection to dominant male power and the ability to exercise that power himself. Lowell portrays the corrosive and negative energy that throbs through the family dynamic by extending it even to inanimate objects in the Revere Street house. Young Lowell sits "through Sunday dinners absorbing cold and anxiety from the table" and even the furniture "looked nervous and disproportioned" (48, 49). The essay's concern with Lowell, Sr.'s feeble masculinity is reinforced when Lowell gives the final words of the essay to his father's alpha-male colleague, Commander Billy "Bilge" Harkness,[53] who "abhorred Mother's

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[53] Richard Tillinghast in his review of Lowell's *Collected Poems* notes that Lowell, Sr.'s friend and companion, Commander Billy Harkness, is a fictional character constructed by Lowell, "supposedly an Annapolis classmate of Lowell's father" ("The Achievement of Robert Lowell" 62). His nickname suggests his function—bilge is the water that accumulates in the lowest part of a ship, which often includes waste

dominion over my father" (51) and who states, "I know why Young Bob is an only child"

(52)—commenting on the separate sleeping locations of Lowell, Sr. and his wife (a topic

that will be discussed later in this chapter). The house and the separate bedrooms are co-

mingled in the sense that Charlotte Lowell's insistence on buying the house on Revere

Street, led the Commandant of the Naval Yard (Lowell, Sr.'s commanding officer) to

order Lowell, Sr. to sleep at the Naval Yard each night, resulting not only in separate

beds but also separate evening quarters for both. In providing an outsider's confirmation

of Lowell, Sr.'s impotent and inadequate manhood by the hypermasculine Harkness, the

essay sets the tone for the revelations that will follow in Part IV of *Life Studies*.

In Part III, Lowell salutes the brilliant and unique talents of Ford Maddox Ford,

George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane, while also tagging each with one

or more failures in the performance of normative masculinity—thereby recognizing both

their genius and the transgressive impulse that resisted some aspects of the dominant

narrative of masculinity. Lowell here further explores the ideology of masculinity by

examining the male role of literary and intellectual creation—perhaps one of the most

individual of acts.[54] Hence, these poems provide an interesting bridge that connects

Lowell's representation of his father's inept performance of masculinity in "91 Revere

Street" and Part 4's "Life Studies" poems in which Lowell revisits and expands upon his

criticism. While each poem in Part 3 speaks to the particular qualities of its subject, each

also contains allusions to Lowell, Sr. For instance, like Lowell, Sr., Ford is a "mumbler"

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products and dangerous chemicals—and Harkness's habits—his blunt speech, heavy drinking, and attempts
at humor—suggest a lack of refinement, an inferiority in class. On the one hand, his role as the most
intimate acquaintance of Lowell, Sr. calls into question Lowell, Sr.'s patrician status, while on the other
hand Harkness's success at antagonizing and dominating Charlotte in their verbal contretemps emphasizes
Lowell, Sr.'s impotence in the role of "master" of his house.

[54] I recognize that all intellectual and creative pursuits build on or respond in some fashion to what has
gone before. Yet, when a writer or poet publishes his or her work, it is his or her name that goes on the
book, and is discussed in critical reviews, and it is the individual who is considered a success or failure.

who calls to mind a fish out of water with his "mouth pushed out / fish-fashion, as if you

gagged for air" (55-56). However, Ford does so not because he is foolish but because he

had been "mustard gassed … / behind the lines at Nancy or Belleau Wood" (55). Ford did

not prosper financially—"writing turned [his] pockets inside out" with "bales of … left-

over novels" (56), yet he succeeds (unlike Lowell, Sr.) in the creation of *The "Good*

Soldier … / the best French novel in the [English] language" (55).[55] Santayana,

philosopher and coiner of many well-known aphorisms (most famously: "Those who

cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."), having spurned the constraints of

academic success, survives the Second World War in Europe only to have "G.I.'s and

officer-professors of philosophy … puzzled to find you still alive" (57)—his rejection of

academic success leading to a loss of fame (if not status). Yet, in Lowell's portrayal,

Santayana is "not like one / who loses, but one who'd won …" (57)—a sharp contrast to

Lowell, Sr., who left *his* mark by "lettering his three new galvanized garbage cans:

R.S.L—U.S. Navy" (37). Lowell's tribute to Schwartz, who by the time *Life Studies* was

published had experienced a significant professional and physical decline due to mental

illness and addiction, highlights the (semi)-youthful hijinks of 1946 haunted by the twist

on Wordsworth's words (in his poem "Resolution and Independence") that Lowell gives

Schwartz, which foretell Schwartz's own future—"We poets in our youth begin in

sadness; / thereof in the end come despondency and madness" (261). Wordsworth's

actual words at least allow for a youthful flirtation with joy and contentment,[56] an

opportunity the arc of Schwartz's suggests he was denied. However, after making this

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[55] Matterson in "*Robert Lowell*: Life Studies" also identifies connections between Lowell, Sr. and Ford
Madox Ford to support his claim that "Ford is an idealized father figure for Lowell" (485).
[56] In the original, "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and
madness" (228).

grim prophecy, Schwartz continues with a "Frank O'Hara-ish" observation, "Stalin has had two cerebral hemorrhages!" (60), reminding the reader of Schwartz's reputation for sharp repartee—in direct contradiction to the "fumbling languor" of Lowell, Sr.'s speech. Lowell's final tribute to Hart Crane stands more in the tradition of the elegy "in which the present poet lauds a prior one and in the process demonstrates his own skill and lays claim to his predecessor's authority" (Gregory 45). Yet, Lowell's choice to adopt the persona of Crane as he brings Crane's homosexuality into sharp focus—evoking castigation from M. L. Rosenthal for assuming "the most loathsome mask [he] can find" (155)—places in tension the feminized father figure and the feminized role of the poet.[57] Nonetheless, Lowell christens Crane "the Shelly of [his] age" (61), which reinforces Crane's genius while placing him in a genealogy of homosexual poets—a feminized (and hybrid) space in which Lowell, in the tradition of the elegy, also places himself (again distinguishing himself from his father).

Part 4's sequence of poems, "Life Studies," shares an interest in issues raised earlier in the volume, and this "accumulation of meaning" (Matterson 485) intensifies their effect. While "91 Revere Street" conveys particular events of Lowell's early life, the poems in Part 4 enhance that narrative, bringing forward characters—particularly Grandfather Winslow (a sequence of three poems)—who are absent or mere shadows in the essay. Through the poems the reader sees "the rest of the story" as Lowell grows up, goes to jail, loses first his father and then his mother to death, grieves his grandparents, goes "mad," becomes a father, and negotiates his relationship with his wife. The narrative arc of the poems, including Lowell's representation of himself and his various

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[57] As Richard Hofstadter observed in *Anti-Intellectualism and American Life* (1963), "Culture suggested femininity," and the proponents of culture, e.g., intellectuals and writers, were easily categorized as aberrant men (188-89).

relationships, works to form a "self." Lowell is a teller of secrets, using vivid imagery to signal his ongoing concerns about hybridity, displacement, and deviance, particularly as they relate to his father, who is the central character in three poems and a presence in two others. Lowell creates a perverse form of elegy for Lowell, Sr. in "Commander Lowell" that gestures toward each of the tributes in Part III, without sharing any of the admiration they convey. (Lowell, Sr. is not even mentioned in his own elegy until the second stanza, and then it is as "nothing to shout / about" [75].) "Life Studies" concludes with "Skunk Hour," perhaps Lowell's most famous poem in which masculine dominance and performance remain upended in failure, with Lowell ultimately facing (though not facing down) the "enemy" of civilization—the feral female skunk who "will not scare" (95).

Confessional Poetry: Transgressing the Genre(s)

In his influential review of *Life Studies*, M. L. Rosenthal described the subject matter of much of the book as "a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, [58] that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (154). Lowell's portrayal of vexed masculinities involves "breaking the rules" of the genres of both autobiography and poetry, creating "impure art … [that is] unpleasantly egocentric" (Rosenthal 154).[59] The risks Lowell took in creating and releasing this transgressive text into his conservative niche in the literary world should not be underestimated. Shortly after the publication of *Life Studies*, Lowell remarked, "When I finished *Life Studies*, I was left hanging on a question mark. I am still

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[58] It is important to consider the difference between shame and embarrassment. Embarrassment emerges from one's own actions, e.g., tripping over a stool in front of other or failing to send a thank you note. Shame, on the other hand, is about who one is and emerges from a reflexive perception of the self as deeply flawed. Thus, Rosenthal's critique resonates with Lowell's interest in demonstrating the "patrilineal flaw" that he has inherited.

[59] On the other hand, Lawrence Kramer in his essay "Freud and the Skunks: Genre and Language in *Life Studies* sees this differently, claiming that "the pattern of self-overcoming through personal crisis" (which he asserts is the "orthodox view" of the text) "with a concurrent parallelism of public and private experience, forms the basic plot of autobiographical poetry as it was more or less established by Wordsworth" (81).

hanging there. I don't know whether it is a death-rope or a lifeline" ("National Book

Award Speech"). In mid-century America, the standard autobiographical trope was the

laudable arc of the life and career of a worthy "great man" to whom other men might

aspire. The narrative arc of an autobiographical text typically involved the (ultimately

successful) struggle to overcome one or more obstacles (e.g., Charles Lindbergh's

Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, *The Spirit of St. Louis* [1953]) and demonstrated

the type of self-determination that had characterized the autobiographical lineage in the

United States since the publication of Ben Franklin's autobiography in 1794.[60] Resisting

this tradition, Lowell's "studies" or sketches represent a life in process with no triumph

nor evidence of resolution—except that, for Lowell, life goes on. Writing *in media res*,

with the outcome still uncertain, Lowell (re)presents masculinity from a more complex

and problematic perspective than was typical or comfortable in mainstream

autobiography of the time—breaking the silence enforced by patriarchal propriety.[61]

   In *Life Studies* Lowell also contravened the critical and academic apparatus that

supported the   domination of the literary space by New Criticism and its influential

critics—John Crowe Ransom, Alan Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks

among others—whose hierarchy of aesthetic value privileged complexity within a self-

contained text. Ambiguity, distancing, allusiveness, the use of symbols and dense and

difficult language all combined to require, as Tate asserts, "the direct and *active*

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[60] First published in London in 1793.

[61] That said, Lowell's risk in changing direction is mitigated by his family's standing as Boston Brahmins with deep ties to American history. His family's social location provides significant ballast in maintaining his place of privilege within the hegemonic hierarchy. Elizabeth Bishop accurately describes the advantages of his patrician status in a letter to Lowell dated December 14, 1957 in which she discusses *Life Studies*: "I feel as if I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say – but what would be the significance? Nothing at all. He became a drunkard, fought with his wife, and spent most of his time fishing … and was ignorant as sin … Whereas *all you have to do is put down the names*! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, *American*, etc. gives you, I think, the confidence you display about tackling any idea or theme seriously in both writing and conversation (emphasis added)" (Bishop and Lowell 247).

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participation of a reader" (qtd. in Whitworth 46)—a reader whose intellectual capabilities

would place him in an exclusive space beyond reach of the detritus of mass culture. [62]

This is not to say, however, that all poets conformed to these conventional standards.

Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1955) stands as a benchmark in its opposition to New

Criticism's rigid expectations of an impersonal and ahistorical poetry. In addition to

Ginsberg, those poets ultimately anthologized in *The New American Poetry* (1960),

including Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Barbara Guest, Robert

Duncan, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Jack Spicer, all wrote outside the poetic

mainstream governed by New Criticism. Lowell was not among this group, having begun

his career as a poet firmly grounded within the strictures of high modernist complexity

that characterized New Criticism. His Pulitzer Prize winning *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946)

as well as *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951) were opaque works in which he made

heavy use of verbal and metaphorical formalism. Hence, Lowell was an unlikely figure to

shrug off the expectations and limitations of generic formalism and content and lead the

transformation of literary and cultural expectations inherent in the elevation and

popularization of confessional poetry. [63] Yet Lowell's choice served his career well,

acting to reframe, rejuvenate, and one could say reinvent his literary persona. [64]

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[62] Of course women would be *allowed* to read these poems, but if one considers Ransom's essay, "The Poet as Woman," in which he eviscerates Edna St. Vincent Millay, it is no stretch at all to claim that women were not the intended readers of the inviolable aesthetic unit that characterized poetry within the framework of New Criticism—a mere woman's head might explode in the attempt to engage with such an intricate and weighty work.

[63] In saying this I do not assert that Lowell "invented" confessional poetry. The poets named above performed the difficult labor of expanding the boundaries that defined poetic art, creating a current of interest and acceptance that Lowell was able to tap into. In addition, W. D. Snodgrass, while a student of Lowell's in the early 1950s, authored the personal reflections of a divorced father that became *Heart's Needle* (1959)—winner of the 1960 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. However, because of his reputation and status within the literary establishment, Lowell did provide legitimacy for this new and often shocking genre that subsequently included other former students of Lowell including Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, as well as John Berryman (who aggressively rejected his inclusion) and Theodore Roethke.

What had changed? Two years after publishing *Life Studies,* Robert Lowell, in an interview with Frederick Seidel, described the reasons for rejecting his previous style of writing: "[It] seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life" ("Interview with Seidel" 244).[65] As Lowell brought his poetry "back into life," in what ultimately became *Life Studies*, his invocation of the relaxed form and informal language of *Life Studies* was startling, and his integration of autobiographical information even more so. In making the transition from impersonal to personal (however "factual" his portrayal was), Lowell violated the artistic imperative T. S. Eliot prescribed in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*,[66] "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (8).[67] In *Life Studies*, "the man" Lowell's suffering holds center stage showing the "mind which creates" struggling to maintain its equilibrium.

The power of Lowell's self-representation caused readers to conclude that what he shared was "fact" or "truth." In "Poetry as Confession," Rosenthal asserted that in the poems about himself and his family, Lowell "removes the mask [of the poetic persona].

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[64] Though, as Richard Dyer argues in *White*, "the right not to conform, to be different and get away with it, is the right of the most privileged groups in society … [which] depends upon an implicit norm of whiteness" (12) to go up against. Still, this "right" did not serve all equally well as one sees in Norman Mailer's struggle to find success in his mid-career novels that challenged preconceived notions about how sexuality and violence should be represented in fiction. However one could make the case that the significance of Lowell's family history made him more "white" than Mailer and thus better able to negotiate the power of the establishment and gain the benefits of status and privilege.

[65] First published in *The Paris Review*, Winter/Spring, 1961.

[66] As is his wont, John Berryman was more direct in naming the intergenerational conflict with the Modernists required to "make it new": "I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on *The Waste Land*: personality, and plot – no anthropology, no Tarot pack, no Wagner. I set up *The Dream Songs* as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry … The aim was the same in both poems: the reproduction or invention of the motions of a human personality, free and determined" (qtd. in Gregory 43).

[67] The New Critics' attitude toward life writing/autobiography is articulated by William K. Wimsatt, Jr. as an "inferior literary mode … [that is] at best a form of marginalia about great works, not a kind of artful text in itself" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 197).

His speaker is inevitably himself" (154). Lowell himself directly challenged this when he stated,

> They're not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there's this thing: if a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing—you want the reader to say, this is true. … And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry—the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell." ("Interview with Frederick Seidel" 247)

Despite Lowell's admission, in 1979 Lowell scholar Steven Gould Axelrod articulated the three essential elements of confessional poetry as "an undisguised exposure of painful personal event … dialectic of private matter with public matter … and an intimate, unornamental style" (*Robert Lowell: Life and Art* 98). In doing so, Axelrod assumes that the representation of the "personal" is "undisguised" or unadulterated. In 1987, critic Laurence Lerner offered that "the characteristics of confession … [are] factual accuracy of remembering, self-centeredness, self-abasement expressed in clichés" (qtd. in Gill 7). The degree to which the "authentic, self-identical, authoritative self" (Gill 7) is found and revealed in works identified as confessional continues to be debated, though postmodern theory calls all of the assumptions associated with this "self" into question. While the analysis in this dissertation focuses on Lowell's representations of himself and others,

i.e., "the production of knowledge itself" (Scott 37), the degree to which Lowell's claims are "true" remains of only tangential importance. DuPlessis asserts that "'experience' and 'sincerity' are the rhetorical results of tonal and narrative effects created by representation, not a necessary guarantor of unmediated truth" ("Reading American Poetry by Women" 27) and my analysis seeks to explore why Lowell's rhetorical choices regarding straight white masculinity were so effective as to be accepted as "truth."[68]

Mid-Twentieth Century Masculinity

Mid-century Americans were bombarded by messages within popular and scientific discourses about the dangerous deterioration of the straight white man in America, and *Life Studies* shares the common sociocultural anxiety about the displacement and diminished autonomy of straight white men.[69] Even the father, perhaps particularly the father, the family breadwinner, was perceived to be vulnerable to feminization and therefore the subject of surveillance and judgment. Cultural critics and public intellectuals argued that social changes were undermining self-determined manhood, creating dire prospects for the future of the nation. Writing in *Esquire* in 1958,[70] historian Arthur Schlesinger uses broad strokes to describe the scope of the "problem" of men's gender insecurity by comparing it to a mythical golden past:

> What has happened to the American male? For a long time he seemed
>
> utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society,

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[68] One could take the position that it is the "false" notes that are most revealing. As Stanley Fish has stated, "autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not" (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 15).

[69] That Lowell would take up this cultural preoccupation is not surprising. Elizabeth Bruss, an early scholar of American autobiography, writes, "[E]ach autobiographer responds to what precedes and surrounds him, if only to the fact that he … is or is not writing … against the common grain" (166).

[70] *Esquire* was/is a self-described "men's magazine." For more about the history of *Esquire* consult https://www.hearst.com /magazines/esquire.

easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. Today men are more and

more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. The ways by

which American man affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure.

There are multiplying signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong

with the American male's conception of himself. (292)

Frequently touted culprits for masculinity's uncertain state include the rapid expansion of

corporate bureaucracies that called for "feminized" behaviors from men comprising

increased conformity, teamwork, and the need to become "other-directed" rather than

self-directed in order to succeed (Riesman *passim* and Mills *passim*)[71]; materialistic,

demanding and greedy wives, as well as the domesticating impulse toward family

"togetherness" that typified suburban life[72]; the "scientific" evidence that identified weak

fathers as the cause of juvenile delinquency and other social ills by permitting their sons

to be dominated by women[73]; and the feminizing effects of mass culture in post-war

America. In 1958 *Look* magazine, a general interest periodical, published a three-part

series "The Decline of the American Male,"[74] which framed men as feeble and pathetic

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[71] In *The Lonely Crowd*, a 1950 sociological analysis of the American Character and a best seller, Riesman writes, "The nineteenth century American man was 'inner-directed,' animated by conviction and principle … now, men had become 'other directed,' concerned more with fitting in than standing out" (24). In *White Collar*, a sociological study of the white American middle class (1951), C. Wright Mills asserts: "The decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee … has paralleled the decline of the independent individual" (xii). Riesman signals his focus on white masculinity by grounding his comparison in the nineteenth century, a time of very limited opportunities for black men. Wright speaks of "individuals," but again the number of entrepreneurs who were not (closeted) white men would have been small. William Whyte's best-seller *The Organization Man* (1956) was also deeply influential.

[72] Historian Warren Sussman in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the 20th Century* writes, "Family was ideology: We watched 'family-oriented TV' in the 'family room' with 'family size' packages of snacks; we traveled in 'family cars' on 'family vacations' and ate in 'family restaurants'"(69).

[73] See Kimmel's *Manhood in America*, "During and after the war there was a concern about male juvenile delinquency—the absence of the father and the 'overdominant mother' who now could be blamed for both gay sons and delinquent sons" (150). Philip Wylie in *Generation of Vipers* produced a three-hundred page screed on "momism" that remained influential for years after its publication in 1942.

[74] Also published as a book in 1958 under the same title.

(indeed, the illustrations reduced men to the status of insects) in its consideration of three

highly charged questions that sought to expose the limiting forces on male power: "Why

Do Women Dominate Him?" (the power of women,); "Why Is He Afraid to Be

Different?" (the power of the corporation); and "Why Does He Work So Hard?" (the

power of consumer capitalism). The answers to these questions all involved some aspect

of men regaining their lost masculinity by asserting their autonomy, individuality, and

dominance over (who else?) women along with feminizing bureaucratic systems.

In his study *Manhood in America*, sociologist Michael Kimmel, one of the

pioneers of masculinity studies in the United States, demonstrates the cyclical nature of

popular apprehension about the state of the nation's manhood (typically framed as some

type of CRISIS) as a consequence of periods of significant social change. And, rightly so,

as hegemonic masculinity is not impervious to shifts in social, economic, and political

conditions.[75] As Connell and Messerschmidt note in their revised and updated discussion

of hegemonic masculinity,

> Gender relations are always arenas of tension. A given pattern of
>
> hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic to the extent that it provides a
>
> solution to these tensions, tending to stabilize patriarchal power or
>
> reconstitute it in new conditions. A pattern of practice that provided such a

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[75] In *Masculinities* (1995), Connell sees it a bit differently: "Most of the time, defense of the patriarchal order does not require an explicit masculine politics … Most of the time, masculinity need not be thematized at all. What is brought to attention is national security, or corporate profit, or family values, or true religion, or individual freedom, or international competitiveness, or economic efficiency, or the advance of science. Through the everyday working of institutions defended in such terms, the dominance of a particular kind of masculinity is achieved" (212-13). Based on American history and the rhetoric of crisis, Kimmel makes a strong and well-proven case. I would suggest that Connell is also correct—that various iterations of a discourse of social, economic, religious, and intellectual crisis can actually be boiled down to a concern about the stability of straight white masculine power.

solution in past conditions but not in new conditions is open to

challenge—is in fact certain to be challenged. (852)

The American "discourse of crisis" asserts that a change in the status quo such as evolving standards of "successful" masculinity or the penetration of others who do not "belong" into straight white male spheres of influence would unfavorably alter the realities of the nation. The deployment of a discourse of crisis suggests that the disruption of the status quo through shifts in the dominant power structure presages a descent into chaos. Within this discourse, straight white men's anxieties about the impact of change and any possible loss of their own power and status are made relevant to all members of society by connecting them with the disruption of national security and personal well being. The scale of the social, political, and economic change occurring in the United States during the post-World War II period provides a fertile ground for the desire to "stabilize or normalize categories that are used as the basis … [for] juridical, social, and economic systems" (Davidson 26).

Largely absent from mainstream reflections on the state of masculinity was any mention of the existential dangers of the Cold War (or its "hot" offshoot, the "police action" in Korea).[76] In its position as the leader of the "free" world, the United States could be called upon to defend its allies or be a target of aggressive action by the Soviet Union. Cold War historian K. Cuordileone maintains that,

National survival was now an issue. Militarization reshaped almost every

area of mid-century American society. The imperatives of war

transformed the economy, fueled technological development, dominated

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[76] This lacunae in public discourse is discussed at some length in Cuordileone's *Manhood and American Culture in the Cold War* (2004) and Alan Brinkley's essay "The Illusion of Unity in Cold War Culture" (2001).

political debate, and helped shape a broad ideological consensus, while

symbols of war proliferated in American cultural life. … [N]ational

security and the threat of nuclear war encouraged a sense of dread,

impotence, and powerlessness. But male critics largely ignored these

issues in their discussion of men's sense of self-doubt and crisis. … Still

while most male critics attributed men's problems to the effects of an

affluent mass society, the assumption that the latter was softening the

nation's men always coexisted alongside doubts that American men were

prepared to meet the demands of a hypermilitarized nation. (136)[77]

Cuordileone's claim becomes particularly compelling given historian James Gilbert's

contention that "the terminology of masculinity crisis [was used] to describe the

symptoms of what seemed most objectionable about the new society. …[T]he entire

discussion invoked serious questions about the past and future of American

Individualism" (220). Thus the national discourse of a masculinity crisis does not engage

directly with the elephant in the room—fear of annihilation in a nuclear Third World

War; instead it is displaced into a concern with varieties of feminization that center

around new social and cultural realities.

Individualism and American Masculinity

The mythology of American Individualism is a pillar of American identity, which

idealizes and enshrines icons of masculine identity (the Cowboy, the Explorer, the

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[77] In a speech made to American troops serving in Korea, General Lewis "Chesty" Puller made this case for what was at stake: "[T]here's no secret weapon for our country but to get hard, to get in there and fight. … Our country won't go on forever if we stay as soft as we are now. There won't be an America—because some foreign soldiers will invade us and *take our women and breed a hardier race*" (qtd. in Slotkin 363; emphasis added).

Frontiersman, the Self-Made Man)[78] who are largely invulnerable to and independent of

external constraints, i.e., the demands, needs, or expectations of others, unhindered by

self-doubt and thus self-confidently in control of their circumstances, i.e., autonomous.

As a consequence, one of the mythology's most significant effects continues to be the

culture's interest in guaranteeing the personal autonomy of straight white men. The

cultural reverence for self-determination relates directly to issues of power—freedom to

act, freedom from control by others, control of one's own fate—and lifts up the

imperative for independence, control, self-reliance, toughness, and individual initiative

for each member of the nation's manhood.[79] As one would expect, this national

mythology also disparages dependence, weakness, vulnerability, and uncertainty as

uncharacteristic of the American man—qualities that are freely assigned to those in

marginalized positions, i.e., all women as well as men in economic and social locations

judged as inferior, e.g., gay men, men of color, poor men, and disabled men[80]—thereby,

reinforcing misogyny, homophobia, racism, classism, and ableism. By accentuating

distinctions between masculine and feminine (or feminized) domains and providing a

means by which to organize male identities into a hierarchy of value, individuals whose

social location gives *the appearance of* a freely operating agent are valorized while those

whose social and economic status limits their autonomy and actions are diminished.

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[78] The nature and importance of these figures over time are discussed throughout Kimmel's *Manhood in America*.

[79] Sociologist Peter Callero has crafted a similar definition of Individualism in his book *The Myth of Individualism*: "Individualism is a belief system that privileges the individual over the group, private life over public life, and personal expression over social experience; it is a worldview where autonomy, independence, and self-reliance are highly valued and thought to be natural; and it is an ideology based on self-determination, where free actors are assumed to make choices that have direct consequences for their own unique destiny" (15).

[80] This ideological belief in the inherent inferiority of the male Other—particular the man of color—sits in tension with the trope of the hypersexual "beast" who must be feared and controlled by straight white men. Certainly both perspectives are dehumanizing and provide the basis for systems of exploitation and oppression (as does the comparable imaging of black women as the insatiable Jezebel, who then "deserves" and even "enjoys" the sexual predation of white men).

Although Kimmel has noted that "manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us" (*Manhood* 4), the effect of that fear is, in fact, a valorizing of domination. The discourses of gender and national identity are mutually reinforcing and enhance the security of the dominant power structure by promoting the belief that power belongs in the hands of those who uniquely possess these desirable qualities in the greatest degree, i.e., straight white men (qualities that others are understood as incapable of accessing or wielding properly). In this way, as Barthes asserts, "Myth transforms history into nature" (129). As discourse serves to control and regulate what is desirable and undesirable, the ideologies of nation and gender support the notion that any threats to the autonomy of straight white men would be risky and dangerous for all, even for those who are personally disempowered by them.

While this belief system functions well in theory, at the granular level of the individual its coherence becomes difficult to maintain. Though the myth of American Individualism both produces *and* is a product of systems and institutions of straight white male privilege and, as such, is repeatedly reinscribed on the national psyche, tensions arise at the nexus of American Individualism and the ideology of masculinity that are impossible to resolve—providing a fruitful location for the investigation of the effects of the sex/gender system. The prioritizing of an autonomous and unencumbered male personhood provides and reinforces a cultural basis/bias for straight white male privilege by reifying the perception that straight white men's economic, social, and political achievements result from their inherently superior choices, actions, and abilities. They are self-determining, self-reliant, and ultimately self-made. As such, the burden of meeting

cultural expectations of masculine performance and accomplishment rests solely with

each man, without recognition of or allowance for personal limitations or institutional

and systemic constraints that impact his choices—thus these ideologically-driven

perceptions create both "freedom and … imprisonment" (Kimmel, *Manhood in America*

7).[81] The degree to which men achieve these expectations is visible and available for

evaluation, and, though all may judge, the judgments that matter (given the cultural

primacy of heterosexuality, whiteness, and masculinity) are those made by other straight

white men. American playwright David Mamet, whose works have explored straight

white masculinity at great length, states confidently, "Women have, in men's minds, such

a low place on the social ladder of this country that it's useless to define yourself in terms

of a woman. What men need is men's approval" (qtd. in Kimmel, *Manhood in America*

5).[82] Much as the American discourse of white racial identity encouraged poor white men

to feel a sense of supremacy over black men without appreciating their common

exploitation, the discourse of hegemonic masculinity relies on men's confidence in the

validity of certain subjective benchmarks of male performance, such as physicality,

competition, emotional "toughness", i.e., lack of empathy, and aggression, as having true

significance in maintaining what Michel Foucault described as the cultural "order of

things" (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, 120-23), despite the reality that the criteria against

which men are measured are always already unattainable. Thus, at the core of a national

and gendered identity that characterizes itself as self-determining and independent lies

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[81] This is not solely a condition of 20th century America; it has deep roots in the American narrative. In 1842, Ralph Waldo Emerson noted a popular business maxim that supported the rough justice of 19th century American capitalism, "The merchant evidently believes the State street proverb, that no one fails who ought not to fail. There is always a reason *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune and so in making money" (qtd. in Sandage 46; emphasis in original).

[82] British historian, John Tosh, also emphasizes the significance of the "homosocial dynamic" within hegemonic masculinity, characterized by "comradeship and competition" that provide the opportunity for a man to prove himself to be equal to or superior in the eyes of other men (52).

dependence and objectification: performance, surveillance (both to reward and to protect against deviance), judgment, and punishment for failures of the masculine self, both by other men as well as the self-conscious "I" who monitors the "audience's" response and adjusts his behavior and self-esteem accordingly.[83]

Because gaps inevitably occur between ideological expectations of the American mythology of Individualism and men's lived realities, the culture must establish the means for some accommodation to be made in order to maintain a sense of the natural. As Barthes asserts in *Mythologies*, "paradoxical as it may seem, myth hides nothing: its function is to distort—not make to disappear" (121). The extraordinary power of mythology is that "reality" does not function to delegitimize or displace the myth. Rather, the myth normalizes the prevailing status quo and the dominant power structure by maintaining the illusions that support it and by providing the impetus and means for punishing transgressive acts. The stress that straight white men's failures and shortfalls place on the ideology of masculinity must be relieved by some means in order to retain the appearance of naturalness and stability within an artificially derived and maintained system. Typically, aberrant behavior requires a compensatory action that will allows the ideological system to regain its equilibrium—an explanation, justification, placement of blame or criticism, enforcement of some penalty (or some combination thereof), either by the agent or his observer (oftentimes both). One can see this system at work within *Life Studies* through the manner in which Lowell surveils his patrilineal line and responds to the ineffective masculinity he sees there by rejecting his father and aligning himself with the dominance inherent in hegemonic masculinity.

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[83] Having been internalized, the paradoxical connection between freedom and surveillance goes largely unmentioned, though, when noted, is often deflected toward another source, e.g., women.

The personal experiences rendered by Lowell that show an inability to control his circumstances undermine his entitlement to the self-determining power of straight white masculinity, pushing him toward the category of Other. In this disempowered state, he is vulnerable to confinement and diminishment—images of which appear throughout *Life Studies*.[84] Choosing to represent himself in this condition of vulnerability, Lowell assumes a feminized position, and from this location he engages the ongoing cultural discussion about flawed masculinity. However, he recuperates an "effective" male identity by assuming the powerful subject position of the autobiographer, with its explicit assertion of personal importance and the control of the narrative and representation of self and others. As critic John Frow asserts, "[g]enre is a set of cues guiding our reading of texts" (4) and in doing so "creates expectations and produces meaning" (10). The subject position of the autobiographer, legitimized by the genre, allows Lowell to explore marginalized and undesirable masculinity while still maintaining his status within the hegemonic hierarchy. In addition, his choice to deploying the "tool" of contempt toward deviant expressions of manhood allows Lowell to safeguard the borders of masculinity, repel the contagion of otherness, and reestablish his authority/power. Indeed, Lowell models how othering serves to "protect" masculinity from the contagion of male deviance by isolating its practitioners within the role of undesirable other, "located outside a condoned, normative system (Traber 11).[85] Hence, he calls upon the autobiographer's patriarchal *ethos* even as he transgresses some (though certainly not all) of the genre's

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[84] Repeated imagery of confinement and captivity include being "Tamed by *Miltown,* lying in Mother's bed in *Man and Wife* (92); imprisoned in "Memories of West Street and Lepke"; and incarcerated in McLean Hospital in "Waking in the Blue" and in a psychiatric hospital in Germany in "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined in Munich."

[85] Traber also notes that "[a] site of Otherness is not always at the bottom rung of the hierarchy." There are multiple categories of "Other."

basic assumptions. While breaking new ground in personal revelations of diminished manhood, he complicates the genre by making the instability of masculinity itself an obstacle with which he must contend. Lowell exposes the stitching on the seamless garment of masculinity, even as he attempts to salvage the integrity of the garment itself (the better to continue to enjoy its benefits).

Surveilling Straight White Masculinity in *Life Studies*

Life Studies begins with Robert Lowell surveilling the past, both in the subject and style of the poems in Part 1—moving across a three hundred year time span using the language and form of Lowell's highly-applauded, late Modernist technique—and in the domestic reminiscences of the early 20th century in "91 Revere Street." The poems in Part 3 move closer to Lowell's present mid-century moment, and Part 4 moves Lowell into his often tormented present. The final poem in the progression of *Life Studies*, "Skunk Hour," leaves the Lowell figure in a position of displacement—having returned from his nocturnal wanderings, he now stands alone on the back steps of a summer home, enervated and isolated, his mind "not right" (95) as he observes masculine vigor and courage now enacted by the figure of the feral female skunk. The entire body of this work speaks to how the elite, brilliant, Brahmin Robert Lowell found himself on that "top step" in thrall to mama-skunk.

Although Lowell's representation of his struggles with mental illness places him well within the category of debilitated masculinity, his contrasting portrayals of his father (disapproving) and grandfather (extolling) allow Lowell to claim (some) power and status by demonstrating that he at least understands how masculinity *should* be performed. Throughout *Life Studies,* Lowell makes masculine inadequacies, and in particular those

of his father, a substantial target of his attention. As such, he exposes the instability of the

construction of gender through his concern with doubleness, deviancy, and

displacement.[86] Lowell probes beneath the masculine façade of the patriarch and finds a

feminized being untethered from its masculine core, with much less there than he needs

and desires. Rather than a strong guide toward manhood and comforting bulwark against

the amorphous fears of childhood (the exemplar of the Father), Lowell's portrait of his

father offers a silenced, two-dimensional, disempowered object of observation (rather

than an active subject). Lowell, Sr.'s inability to fulfill the role of the "master" of his

wife, home, and family exacerbates the anxieties of his son and delegitimizes his claim to

masculine power, reducing him to an inferior Other. Lowell's essay is not a linear

narrative of the events of this time but, rather, an episodic account of character sketches

and situations that demonstrate the workings of power within his family—how it was

deployed by his mother, Charlotte Lowell,[87] surrendered by his father, Robert Lowell,

Sr., and pursued by his young self in his anxious efforts to forge an identity. Within this

family dynamic, Lowell portrays manhood as troubled and troubling, infected with a

hybridity that undermines the "pure" expression of masculinity—the competent wielding

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[86] These were also concern of the Cold War America, where fears of Communist infiltration, the association of Communists and their sympathizers with a variety of "deviancies" including homosexuality, and the displacement of America's power were common themes in political and popular culture.

[87] Lowell's portrayal of his mother resonates deeply with a popular stereotype/concern of the period—the voraciously ambitious and powerful woman who unmans her husband (which goes resonates with the perceived "crisis" of manhood). Many examples of this portrayal can be found in film and fiction (the mother in *The Manchurian Candidate* written in 1959 and released as a film in 1962 is a fascinating example). Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that during his period "female figures were recast as insistently normative, centrist, controlling, a place that females occupied not so much in power relationships as in ideological fantasy" (*Purple* 92). Cold War historian, Cuordileone offers a different view, namely that men "were reacting to something very real, albeit immeasurable: a heightening of female self-assertiveness, nourished by WWII and the new space for female autonomy it created, and by postwar affluence which brought Americans of both sexes greater expectations for self-fulfillment" (140). In *Men in the Middle*, James Gilbert highlights the importance of Alfred Kinsey's work in exploring and explaining women's sexuality—suggesting that women's increased expectations in the realm of sexual experience might have been intimidating for men (86-92).

of power, autonomy, and control. In the following discussion, I will explore Lowell's surveillance of masculinity, focusing first on the essay "91 Revere Street" and the manner in which Lowell emphasizes the incongruities of place and appearance to signal the dangers of the masculine Other in his portrait of Lowell, Sr. Subsequently, I consider several poems from "Life Studies" (Part 4 of the text) that focus on Lowell's representation of indomitable masculinity in the person of his grandfather Winslow, and the suggestion found in these poems of ambivalence toward this otherwise desirable manifestation of manhood.

Masculinity in "91 Revere Street": Displacement and Deconstruction

In making the address of the family's home the title of the essay, Lowell draws attention to the importance of place. Lowell's depiction of the home as insecure and contingent serves as an entry point into his critique of his father's inability to maintain *his* place within the boundaries of masculine ideology. During the four years the Lowells live on Revere Street, their home and their street are a location in transition—but to what remains unknown. The neighborhood is a mix of "Beacon Hill British" and immigrant Italians, with the Lowell residence "barely perched on the outer rim of the hub of decency" yet "less than fifty yards" from "the cynosure of old historic Boston's plainspoken cold roast elite" (19)—not completely up-market nor down, a hybrid space in which adjacency to the domain of traditional straight white male power seems to be no guarantee that the borders of "decency" and, subsequently, the family's status, can be maintained against intrusive forces of foreign, inferior others.[88] While the family home

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[88] Though when the Lowells moved to Revere Street it had improved its reputation from the days in which it was known as "Mount Whoredom," it was still "a world away" from Winslow's house on Chestnut Street in Beacon Hill (Kearful 121)—though young Lowell took comfort that his grandfather was "only four blocks away" ("91 Revere Street" 19).

contains the space of the domestic and the feminine, it also symbolizes patriarchal power—a man's home is *his* castle. The culturally accepted belief through the middle of the twentieth century and beyond is that the father—the head of the family—whose economic and social accomplishments put a roof over the family's head and provide security and safety within its walls. The transitional nature of the neighborhood and the resulting insecurity of place mirror the instability of male identity, suggesting that the failure to fulfill the patriarchal role begets risk and danger.

Throughout the essay, Lowell's representation of his father emphasizes the inadequacy of his performance of masculinity—his lack of autonomy, agency, and, thus, self-determination. Lowell, Sr. does not instigate the move to Boston; the move happens at Charlotte Lowell's insistence, based upon her false claim that "the miasmal damp of Washington" (51) triggers young Lowell's "asthma."[89] Lowell, Sr. does not purchase the home—"mother had impulsively bought the squalid, impractical Revere Street house" (23) because she "hated the Navy, hated naval society, naval pay" (22); and, he is not the owner of the home, having surrendered the deed to Charlotte Lowell after she threatened with "murderous coolness" to take young Lowell and "leave for Papá's" (24). Through his lack of control over his wife's behavior in purchasing the home, Lowell, Sr. has also been displaced from her bed (however difficult it is to imagine intimate relations between them given their frosty relationship) because Admiral De Stahl, his commanding officer at the Navy Yard, "outraged … about 'flaunting private fortunes in the face of naval tradition' … ordered my father to sleep on bounds at the Yard in the house provided for

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[89] Lowell is eventually "cured" by a Quaker chiropractor, a most unlikely development given that asthma is a disease of the airways. The opinion of Lowell, Sr.'s companion, Commander Harkness, that Lowell's illness is "a myth" (51), and the absence of any resistance from Lowell, who should know whether he had asthma, suggests his assent to this power-grab by Charlotte.

that purpose" (28).[90] Thus, each night, he endured an "eccentric humiliation" (28),

required to leave his family and sleep alone in Naval housing. Emphasizing the disruptive

nature of this requirement, Lowell, Sr.'s "furtive" (28) departures were kept secret from

young Lowell for several months. Finally, during this period, Lowell, Sr. is subject to

unrelenting pressure by Charlotte to give up his naval commission and transform his

identity from naval officer to business man. Ultimately, Lowell, Sr. submits to his strong-

willed wife's demands and resigns from the Navy, beginning the transformation to a

businessman, a move that Lowell describes as yet another form of displacement—his

"father's downhill progress as a civilian and Bostonian" (48)—and an inexorable decline

that will consume the final twenty-two years of Lowell, Sr.'s life. The text clearly shows

that Lowell Sr. is not the *master* of 91 Revere Street. Out of the crucible of the Revere

Street house, Lowell, Sr. emerges as its antithesis—a husband/father whose lack of

patriarchal power results in a black hole of anxiety and mistrust that attracts his son's

attention and energy and that Lowell must scrutinize, dissect, and explain as part of his

autobiographical act.

In addition to an exploration of power and place/displacement, Lowell's text also

highlights the discrepancies between the image of manhood and its realities in the

deconstruction of particular signifiers of patriarchal authority. Lowell presents his young

self as obsessed with military figures, seeking to secure himself by connecting with their

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[90] Lowell strongly implies that sleeping apart meant the suspension of sexual relations between Charlotte
and Lowell, Sr. The final words in the essay are spoken by RLS's friend, Commander Billy Harkness after
a tirade about De Stahl's requirement that resulted in RLS sleeping "wifeless." (Such an outraged attitude is
one that the reader could expect Lowell, Sr. to exhibit though he does not.) The scene ends with, "Taking
hold of the table with both hands, the Commander tilted his chair backwards and gaped down at me with
sorrowing Gargantuan wonder, 'I know why Young Bob is an only child'" (52). Certainly there are
logistical issues that would have made engaging in sexual relations difficult, but Harkness's monologue
also suggests the possibility that Lowell, Sr.'s impotence in managing the dominating (bullying) forces in
his life extended to his ability (or lack of) to perform sexually.

power. His "real love" (18) is his toy soldiers (and the much superior "thousands … of solid lead hand-painted soldiers" (18) owned by a friend, which Lowell attempts to con his way into possessing). Even the names of soldiers give him comfort, the "two hundred French generals … /… from Augereau to Vandamme. / I used to dope myself asleep / naming those unpronounceables like sheep" ("Commander Lowell 75).[91] Perhaps of most significance is the portrait of Lowell's uniformed ancestor, his great-great grandfather (on the Lowell side), Mordecai Myers. The image of the warrior within Western culture has served to reinforce male individualism, power, status, identity, and authority within the family and society for millennia by associating the violence of the combatant with social and political status—identifying him with the virtues of courage, strength, and power. The iconography of the warrior functions to establish an aspirational claim by the culture concerning what masculinity should *look* like as well as how it should be enacted. As such, the dominance, power, and authority invested in the warrior figure also creates desire: the yearning to attain his status and the (imagined) sense of security in one's identity and place within the male hierarchy that the cultural adulation of this figure conveys.

The appearance of a certain type of assertive and robust masculinity does not guarantee its reality, however, and the earliest portion of Lowell's essay engages with the deceptive nature of the signifiers of gender—the incoherence between the image of the dominant and powerful warrior and its embodied reality.[92] Lowell notes the devolution of his feelings for his father throughout the time at Revere Street because of this dissonance.

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[91] Lowell's use of the term "dope" suggests a compulsion/need beyond his own control, suggesting that Lowell, as a boy, was desperately driven to find a secure sense of masculinity so that he might finally rest.
[92] As Lowell is himself creating a series of representations, the reader might consider this a warning that Lowell's own work might be flawed, perhaps less than accurate—a fact that he confirms in the 1961 interview mentioned above.

He is now "quite without hero worship for my father whose actuality seemed so inferior to the photographs in uniform he once mailed us from the Golden Gate" (18). Lowell ultimately comes to the same conclusion about the portrait of his great-great-grandfather Myers, resplendent in his "sanguine War of 1812 uniform" (15), which comes to the family as part of the life-changing inheritance that opened the way for their presence on Revere Street. Young Lowell is initially quite taken with this image, even to the extent of "standing quite dangerously out in the middle of Revere Street in order to see through the windows and gloat" (18). The portrait's representation of male power and its assumed enhancement of Lowell's own status through this family connection with warrior culture are so compelling that risking danger to enjoy them seems to him a small price to pay. The bubble of enchantment bursts, however, when Lowell learns from his father that Major Myers, rather than being the fearsome, hyper-masculine warrior figure, the master of men with whom Lowell desires to connect, is only a domesticated "sheepdog in wolf's clothing" (16), "a major *pro tem . . .* a civilian soldier" (19). Once aware that Myers's identity is primarily that of a gentleman and not a military combatant, he is reduced in Lowell's eyes to someone merely "tame and honorable" (16). Indeed, he "los[es] his glory" (19). Unable to assuage young Lowell's anxiety of place by offering an authentic connection to a vision of desirable masculinity, Lowell discards Myers, much as he has his father. The scarlet waistcoat that once signaled the danger and bloodlust of the battlefield where "*homo lupus homini*"[93] (man is wolf to man) now possesses no more significance than a costume "in our elementary school musicals" (19).

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[93] This is Lowell's Latin; however the most common articulation of this quotation is "*Homo homini lupus*"—popularized by Thomas Hobbes as a description of the state of nature (vs. civilization).

Thirty years later, Lowell continues to process the meaning of Myer's portrait. Having dealt with his childhood response to the portrait, he continues with an analysis that could only come from Lowell the man. Despite the fact that the painting long ago went missing, the adult Lowell's sustained interest indicates that Myers's flaws remain relevant to him in the present. Lowell's focus on the experience of having two military forebears whose identity as masterful uniformed men is subsequently revealed to be deficient suggests an interest in the possibility of an intergenerational deviance—an inheritance of flawed masculinity with which Lowell must also grapple. The image's deconstruction is essential in some way to Lowell's reconstruction of his life. He exhumes the portrait from "the blank befogging of forgetfulness" (17) and performs a close reading that emphasizes the "evidence" of Myers's flaws. As with the family home and Lowell, Sr., Lowell finds signs of hybridity in Myers that indicate instability and, thus, insecurity and potential peril—a tainted masculinity that is not fully one thing or another, complicating the hallowing of male ancestral connection the painting should reinforce. [94]

Initially, his analysis finds some mild contradictions—Myers' pose is both "routine" *and* "gallant"—undercutting notions of the inherent specialness of the heroic figure. His simultaneously "good-humouredly pompous" *and* "embarrassed" smile indicates a discomfort with his authoritative pose. Though Lowell notes several of the major's accomplishments (ten children, mayor of Schenectady, elegant manners), his

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[94] The case could be made that Lowell's rejection of these two military figures bespeaks his general rejection of warrior culture, which was a life-long target of his activism particularly during the Vietnam War, and, of course, during his incarceration as a Conscientious Objector during the Second World War. However his obsession with and then radical rejection of the painting of Myers by Lowell as a boy indicates a deep need for a stable manifestation of heroic (hyper)masculinity that went unmet—creating a need that continues to haunt the man Lowell (see my discussion of the poem "Grandparents").

interest does not lie in celebrating these domesticated virtues. Instead, Lowell draws

attention to a disturbing slipperiness in Myers' appearance that calls into question the

integrity of his race, class, and national identity and, thus, certain deviancies that

undermine confidence in his power and authority, casting doubt on the legitimacy of his

status: "there was something undecided, Mediterranean, versatile, almost double-faced

about his bearing which suggested that, even to his contemporaries, he must have seemed

gratuitously both *ci-devant* and *parvenu*. He was a dark man, a German Jew—no

downright Yankee" (16).[95] Myers's economic and social identity remains ambiguous,

connected to both an enfeebled aristocracy (*ci-devant*) and the upstart social climbers of

Europe that sought to displace them (*parvenu*). Despite the major's status and service to

his nation, community and family, Lowell identifies an otherness in him, a connection to

Jews and Italians, both of whom had been categorized in the racist critiques of the 19th

and early 20th century as inferior and black within American racial classifications[96] and

whose integration into the purity of American life created cultural fears of social decline,

contaminated "blood," intellectual incompetence, and physical weakness. Calling upon

racist and xenophobic discourses that emphasize the inferiority and danger of otherness,

Lowell implicitly locates the explanation for his father's inept masculinity in the

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[95] Lowell also allows for the possibility of some status for Myers. He may have been "such a fellow as Napoleon's *mad*, pomaded son-of-an-innkeeper-general … [o]r a man like *mad* George III's pomaded, disreputable son, 'Prinny,' the Prince Regent" (122; emphasis added). However, the descriptors "mad" in both cases, "son-of-an-innkeeper," and "disreputable" place him in the category of exotic, perhaps, but hardly desirable. Indeed, these options provide support for a patrilineal flaw leading to Lowell's own mental illness.

[96] Excellent texts that consider the issue of whiteness in American society include: *How the Irish became White* by Noel Ignatiev, *Working Toward Whiteness: How American Immigrants became White* by David R. Roediger, *How Jews became White Folks: And What that Says about Race in America*, by Karen Brodkin.

compromise of pure whiteness, resulting in the impairment of the exercise of autonomy and self-determination that mark straight white masculinity.[97]

Lowell further highlights the flawed nature of his patrilineal line by setting up a comparison between the compromised nature of the Myers-Lowells and the white and undefiled "downright Yankee" (16) qualities of the men on his mother's side— juxtaposing a "real" American against a "mongrel" European.[98] Lowell establishes his mother's father, Arthur Winslow, as the standard-bearer of a superior masculinity (and, as such, an object of desire for Lowell) whose indomitable power and strong, controlling personality reassure Lowell that he, too, can access and express a similar autonomy and agency (a relationship I will explore further in the following section). Lowell reinforces the fundamental differences between these two branches of his heritage by gendering them—Winslow (masculine and superior), Lowell (feminine and, thus, inferior). He presents two signifiers of family identity to make his case: the Lowell family bookplate and family motto. The bookplate functions as a marker of ownership within the masculine realms of intellect and rationality. Yet its design suggests something more feminine and carnal— "two merry and naked mermaids—lovely marshmallow, boneless Rubenesque butterballs, all burlesque-show bosoms and Flemish smiles" (16). The family motto, "I prefer to bend than to break" (16), while pragmatic enough, is hardly a call to action. Its flaccid nature indicates a willingness to compromise or concede rather than to

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[97] Lowell also seems to speak to the anxiety that DiPiero probes, arguing that, "according to the cultural logic that defined them, no one could ever be completely white and/or completely male" (4). There is always the possibility that men can be "just a little more masculine, whether in the disposition of our bodies or our behavior" (9) and "[s]ince no one can ever be absolutely sure of his or ancestry" the possibility of racial "contamination" remains always present.

[98] Lowell's text is silent on this, but, in fact, Charlotte also had ancestors who were Jewish. The notes on his *Collected Poems* state that "Jewish ancestors are on the father's side" (1106), but this is incorrect. Winslow's wife was the grandchild of Moses Mordecai. He was a lawyer and judge in Raleigh, NC, (http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/m/ Mordecai_Family.html). In his poem "Hudson River Dream," Lowell notes that his mother is "one-eighth Jewish, and her mother two-eighths" (*Collected Poems* 521).

engage in battle and emerge victorious. Lowell contrasts this soft, sweet, feminine imagery and pliant family motto with "that granite *backcountriness* which Grandfather Arthur Winslow attributed to his own ancestors, the iconoclastic, mulish Dunbarton New Hampshire Starks" (16; emphasis in the original). The tarty breasts that symbolize the "[e]asy going, Empire State patrician" Lowells who "have given my father his character" (16) have no choice but to be dominated by the upright, rigid strength of the Winslows and Starks—juxtaposing the feminine imagery associated with Lowell's father's family with the phallic imagery of his mother's side (and reversing the patrilineal connection to masculinity). The reference to "burlesque" also brings class issues into play,[99] as burlesque would been perceived as a questionable if not immoral entertainment among the Yankees (though perhaps welcomed among some of Lowell, Sr.'s rowdier naval companions and, given his affinity for Pola Negri (33), perhaps even Lowell, Sr., himself).[100] Burlesque's urban location and forbidden displays exist in a sharp contrast to the "backcountriness" that calls to mind the romanticized vision of the virtuous nature of the American agrarian tradition, characterized by the hard work, tenacity, and self-

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[99] Lowell notes in "91 Revere Street," "Autochthonous Boston snobs, such as the Winslow's or members of Mother's reading club were alarmed by the brassy callousness of our naval visitors" (20).

[100] In "91 Revere Street," Lowell and his father have only two public experiences together, neither successful. One was attending a movie. Lowell had chosen (not surprisingly) the romantic, militaristic adventure of *Beau Geste*. He did not get his wish. Instead, his father took him to see a film starring Pola Negri—a dark, exotic, sultry actress who was the antithesis of the "good girl." Interestingly, Lowell, Sr., had already been to see this movie, so this was his second time viewing it. Lowell's disdainful view of sexualized entertainment can be seen in his description of the actress, "sloppy-haired, slack, yawning, ravaged, unwashed … foreign" (34). The adjective "yawning" suggests a cavernous, engulfing, and threatening vagina. Lowell clearly perceived her to be offensive and unclean, something to fear and reject. In the days before 1930 when the Hays motion picture code was adopted, the screen was filled with many unvarnished (though not pornographic) expressions of sexuality. Young Lowell appears displeased by his father's taste, and the classist and misogynistic language indicates that the adult Lowell continued to be disturbed by what his father's attraction to this actress might signify. In the text, Lowell is adamant that his female ideal as a child was the golden haired Alice from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Though Alice herself is quite adventurous, her physicality as illustrated by John Tenniel captivates Lowell, her "wheel-spoke black and gold eyelashes, double length page-boy blond hair, a little apron, a bold, blunt face, a saucy, shivery way of talking, and … a paper body" (33). Alice's two-dimensional stereotype of tame white female beauty contrasts significantly with the ripe, erotic presence of Negri.

reliance that grounded the life of the farmer with little space for shallow amusements. Finally, Lowell's use of the word "iconoclastic" not only suggests a strength of will absent in the "marshmallowy" Lowells but also gestures toward Lowell's own role as the author of the text—a project that goes against the grain of the traditional norms of propriety of his time and aligns him (at least in this sense) with the masculine qualities of his Yankee ancestors (appalled though they would no doubt be at his choice of material to express his iconoclastic impulse).

Having introduced a dichotomy between the flawed and debilitated patrilineal line and the "rigid strength" of his mother's people, Lowell's representation of his young self reveals significant anxieties about the implications of masculinity, identifying it with uncertainty, at best, and perhaps even violent sacrifice. Lowell's sense of being unequal to the task of being a successful boy (and perhaps even in jeopardy as such) supersedes a confident assumption of masculine power. As a student at the Brimmer School, which was co-educational in grades one through four and then a girl's school from fifth grade through twelfth, Lowell asserts that "I wished I were a girl. … To be a boy at Brimmer was to be small, denied, and weak" (32). Marginalized as a "sideline" (29) "entirely [in] a woman's world" (31), Lowell connects the designation "boy" with a mixed bag of characteristics, "weakness" (again) but also "outlawry" and "a status to be held onto" (29)—thus uniting the dichotomy of his father (weakness) and grandfather (outlawry and status) in himself. But the competing impulses within that union seem to construct an uncomfortable psychic space for him. Lowell worries about what happens to boys when they leave Brimmer; he is fearful that they "were darkly imperiled, like some annual bevy

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of Athenian youths destined for the Minotaur" (33).[101] Whether or not the fourth grade Lowell actually channeled the myth of the Minotaur, Lowell's use of it here paints a distressing picture of fledgling masculinity sacrificed as an offering to subhuman and unnatural forces in order to maintain the security of the establishment, i.e., parental, status quo. In this sense, the danger of the Minotaur, the spawn of a hypersexual woman and the hypermasculine symbol of the bull, is the mundane, yet potentially deadly, forces of socio-cultural gendering.

The young Lowell also frets that he may be trapped in the disempowering and emasculating fate of his father, where "men between the ages of six and sixty did nothing but meet new challenges, take on heavier responsibilities, and lose all freedom to explode" (33). Lowell connects the disruptive freedom to "explode," i.e., express oneself directly, with social status and, in several incidents in "91 Revere Street," he explodes into violence—engaging in acts of bullying (verbal and physical) that he seems unable to explain except to say that they enhance his standing with his peers. After tormenting a friend repeatedly so that he is led away by his nurse in tears, Lowell reports that "for two or three days I was a center of interest." He asserts that "I don't know why I couldn't stop" (27) but having confessed that "each child [at Brimmer] had an unwritten class-popularity poll inside his head" (34), his enactment of "outlawery" or his own childish version of *homo lupus homini* (which he hoped to find in Myers but could not) is transformed from a mysterious tantrum to an attempt to secure himself within the male hierarchy of value.

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[101] The first definition for "Bevy" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* states it is "the proper term for a company of maidens or ladies, of roes, of quails, or of larks"—not boys—highlighting the sense Lowell gives of possessing a gendered hybridity.

"Life Studies" and Dominant Masculinity: The Paradoxical Object of Desire

Although early in "91 Revere Street" Lowell establishes the important dichotomy between his superior maternal grandfather and his inferior and deviant patrilineal line, in the essay his focus rests primarily and often microscopically on Lowell, Sr. In the poems in "Life Studies," Winslow has a much larger presence. Lowell explores the chords of desire that inflect their relationship, a kind of eros "formed in yearning, in desires for mastery and power, in exposures of vulnerability and ruthlessness" (DuPlessis, *Purple* 7).[102] Winslow functions as young Lowell's "one ray of hope" (33) so that he might avoid the disempowered fate of his father, and the poems in "Life Studies" reveal the displacement of Lowell, Sr.'s lesser manhood by Arthur Winslow's indomitable manhood, making him the central positive masculine figure within Lowell's autobiographical text. In glimpses that are brief but imbued with emotion, Lowell's characterization of his grandfather offers an unassailable manhood that exudes the autonomy and power that Lowell, Sr., as he is portrayed, would find impossible to enact. Winslow exhibits a masculine energy that exists beyond the control of others: like his farmhouse he is "manly … / overbearing, disproportioned" ("My Last Afternoon" 66). Bigger than life, Winslow is "all [Lowell] could ever want to be" because of his "unchecked commands and demands [that] were always upsetting people for their own good" (33). Lowell perceives Winslow's propensity for assuming the right to direct and control the behavior of others without the fear of negative consequences for himself—

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[102] The entire DuPlessis quotation is as follows: "the growth of a poet's mind is social and continual, formed in yearning, in desires for mastery and power, in exposures of vulnerability and ruthlessness—that is, in eros" (*Purple* 7). This definition of "eros" also fits the relationship between Lowell and Winslow— with Winslow as the object of desire, because of his connection to mastery and power, and Lowell's to vulnerability and, as a result, ruthlessness, as the remainder of this section will demonstrate. In autobiographical writing that Lowell created while in Payne Whitney, he describes his "infatuation" with his grandfather (qtd. in Milburn 73).

critical aspects of straight white male status and privilege—as the kind of dominance he would like to possess. On the one hand, Lowell associates his grandfather's provocative behavior with being "the bad boy, the problem child" (33); he is unmanageable and as such he establishes himself as the center of power within the household. In placing his grandfather in an equal position to himself (as a boy), Lowell suggests a connection between them, one that indicates he, too, could potentially enjoy the benefits of the "bad boy." On the other hand, Lowell endows Winslow with supreme patriarchal power in the family, conferring upon him the rank of "commodore of his household" (33) and "admiral" (70), significantly higher ranks than Lowell, Sr.'s status as a naval "commander" and an ironic reminder that, in the Lowell household as represented in "91 Revere Street" and the poems in "Life Studies," Lowell, Sr. took orders rather than gave them.

Though the reader sees only glimpses of the grandfather's exercise of command, the depth of Lowell's devotion suggests that, in the company of Winslow, he feels safe, protected from the shadow of the Minotaur and the blood sacrifice required of young boys to keep society operating. The privileges and power of straight white masculinity are available to Lowell vicariously through his grandfather, offering the promise of what Lowell might become and the authority he might gain. Within the text, Winslow functions as a counterpoint to the emasculating portrayal of Lowell, Sr., emphasizing the aberrant quality of Lowell, Sr.'s personal failures while exercising his power, as Winslow participates in Lowell, Sr.'s emasculation through the erasure of his paternal identity by

stepping into the role of father to Lowell (perhaps applying Winslow's own version of *homo lupus homini*).[103]

"Dunbarton" emphasizes the pre-eminence of Winslow in Lowell's life through the support neighbors, employees, and even Winslow's wife (who, one notes, does not assume the role of mother) give to his displacement of Lowell, Sr. as father. Lowell also indicates his conscious acceptance, placing his affirmation of his grandfather's usurpation in a stanza separate from the others, as though to establish his independence from the influence of his grandfather's circle.[104]

> it seemed spontaneous and proper
>
> for Mr. MacDonald, the farmer,
>
> Karl, the chauffeur, and even my Grandmother
>
> to say, 'your Father.' They meant my Grandfather.
>
>
> He was my Father. I was his son.

Sequentially this poem is the second in "Life Studies," falling after "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," and, in the poem's second stanza, Lowell reports that his uncle has died. With Lowell's father away on a naval assignment and in the wake of

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[103] Despite, or perhaps because of Lowell's vulnerability and dependence on his Grandfather Winslow for affirmation, his writing also reflect some resentment. In her essay "Confession, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation in the Career of Robert Lowell," Elisa New identifies Robert Lowell's ambivalent portrayals of Arthur Winslow—very early in his career in "In Memory of Arthur Winslow" and in his final book of poetry, *Day by Day* in "Philips House Revisited"—highlighting his critique of Winslow's "instrumentalism" and "affective parsimony" in which "need itself [is seen] as lack of mettle." One is not at all surprised to find these qualities in a character as dominant as Arthur Winslow, or to learn that that the boy Lowell may well have not seen them as relevant to him while the adult Lowell did.

[104] This places an incestuous tinge upon the relationship between Charlotte Winslow and her father (one that is possibly alluded to again in "During Fever" when Lowell refers to "when the unemancipated woman / still had her Freudian papá (85), evoking the "father-fixation" of Electra in neo-Freudian theory). Certainly Lowell places the father and grandfather in competition here in the manner of the Freudian father/son dynamic: "Mother suspected that her husband was savorless, unmasterful, merely considerate. Unmasterful—father's specialized efficiency lacked the flattering bossiness she so counted on from her father, my Grandfather Winslow" (22).

the demise of his young uncle, the needs of both Lowell and his grandfather are accommodated in this act of adoption and bonding—Lowell for a direct connection to a "successful" masculine figure who could guide and protect him and Grandfather Winslow for a replacement son to assuage his grief and affirm his value. Lowell, too, is an object of desire in the eyes and heart of Winslow, as he depicts the intensity of their relationship—"My grandfather found / his grandchild's solitudes / sweeter than human society" ("Dunbarton" 70). No other relationship in *Life Studies* could be considered remotely equivalent in terms of the emotional depth or connection as that found in Lowell's discussion of his grandfather.[105] Yet the masculine power that liberates and makes itself an object of desire in the character of Winslow in "Life Studies" also creates a troubling paradox. Though Lowell takes great pleasure in his connection with his grandfather, the text indicates that this relationship with Winslow has a complicated and not completely positive effect on Lowell. Feminist critic, Leigh Gilmore states that "[c]ontradiction is the space in which discourse reveals its ideology" (69), and Lowell's poems about his grandfather demonstrate that although the ideology of masculinity creates and sustains the narrative that makes hypermasculinity much desired, there are unanticipated consequences in a boy's attraction to and engagement with such a free-ranging dominance that can be disruptive and perhaps damaging. While the basis of young Lowell's relationship with his grandfather remains aspirational—a desire to access his "explosive" power—Lowell's encounter with this formidable man both strengthens and weakens him. The poem signals some of these consequences, and the final two

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[105] During the time he spent recovering from a severe recurrence of his bipolar disorder (manic depression), Lowell wrote a story in which he crafted the first and last lines of a sonnet entitled, "To My Father": You sailed to China, Father, and knew your math // Friendly to all, and loving none, perhaps" (qtd. in Witek 721).

stanzas of "Dunbarton" deserve particular attention as they demonstrate some of the ways Lowell has been transformed by his relationship with his grandfather.

Having brought to "91 Revere Street" the presence of the wolf and the semi-human bull as figures that evoke fear and insecurity, Lowell uses the lowly newt to speak to his own paradoxical connection with straight white masculinity. After an enjoyable day in which he "raked leaves from our dead forebears, / defied the dank weather / with 'dragon' bonfires," Lowell "borrowed Grandfather's cane / carved with names and altitudes / of Norwegian mountains he had scaled— / more a weapon than a crutch" using it to probe for the young "newts" with which he identifies: "I saw myself as a young newt / neurasthenic, scarlet / and wild" (71). As a semi-aquatic amphibian that lives on both land and water and possesses lungs like a mammal and cold blood like a reptile, the newt embodies the notion of doubleness. Lowell's hybridity as newt and boy is reminiscent of Myers's "mongrel" status. Paradoxically, Lowell sees himself as both untamed like the newts and also fatigued, weakened, unfit ("neurasthenic"). Ultimately, there is a bad end to Lowell's borrowing of the crutch-weapon and wielding its "prob[ing]" power[106]; the once wild and now "capture[d]" creatures are dead and "lay grounded as numb / as scrolls of candied grapefruit peel" (71)—their wildness withered away. Using his grandfather's phallic crutch-weapon, inscribed with Winslow's manly accomplishments, Lowell has visited upon the newts the debilitated containment he sees (and fears) for his future as he exerts the disruptive force that he has often admired in Winslow. Given the text's overriding concern with the constraint and diminishment of male power, it is difficult to see this as simply a thoughtless boyish act. Lowell's description of the damaging outcome of the impulse to dominate the vulnerable (to which he considers

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[106] The "phallic" walking stick and "aggressively masculine symbols" are also noted by Witek (720).

himself akin—"I saw myself as a young newt") is unsettling, and the imagery of the once

wild newt as paralyzed and reduced to a decorative garnish indicates that masculinity is

dangerous as well as empowering: when the power of masculinity is unfettered the

potential for the significant diminishment of other men exists. Indeed, Winslow's

displacement of Lowell, Sr. in young Lowell's life provides evidence of this potentially

unfortunate (at least for Lowell, Sr.) outcome.[107]

Lowell ratchets up the ambivalence of his youthful relationship with Winslow as

"Dunbarton" continues to its final stanza in which Lowell describes himself "[i]n the

mornings … cuddled like a paramour / in my Grandfather's bed" (72). Though some

might argue that the 21st century awareness of adult predation of children has curdled an

"innocent" mid-20th century text, based upon the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions

of "paramour," there is no doubt that it carries with it an overt connotation of a sexually

intimate relationship.[108] Perhaps the definition most fitting, given the appropriation by the

grandfather of the father's position, is that of "an illicit or clandestine lover or mistress,

esp. *taking the place of* a husband or wife" ("Paramour"; emphasis added). Lowell's

desire may be only for the autonomy and agency Winslow possesses as an avatar of

confident and competent masculinity; yet, however the child may have understood the

experience, its interpretation by the man Lowell suggests an illegitimacy that carries with

it a subtext of secrecy, deception, betrayal, and most definitely the sense of an intimacy

that complicates the representation of Winslow. Though he exudes the domineering

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[107] The phrase "potentially unfortunate outcome" serves here because the text is silent about whether Lowell, Sr. desires a relationship with his son. Throughout *Life Studies* he is not shown to have an interest in him or in being in his presence.
[108] Witek makes the following connection between "paramour" and "cuddled in bed": "as if he were not the grandfather's son but the mother herself" (721). I do not quite see this but certainly we are both aligned in identifying an exploitative quality in the seductive attraction of male power.

confidence that offers Lowell hope that he might escape the burdens of conformity and exert his will as he desires, the image of Lowell in the role of the paramour evokes the seductive nature and confused boundaries of the relationship. Placing Lowell in the feminized role as the object of seduction suggests exploitation rather than agency, dependence rather than autonomy.

The next poem in the "Life Studies" sequence, "Grandparents,"[109] heightens the unusual framing of the Winslow-Lowell relationship. Here, the adult Lowell visits the Winslow family farm, which he has newly inherited from his mother, his grandparents long dead. He remembers his grandfather, who "still waves his stick / like a policeman" (73). Even in death, Winslow remains a dominant figure of order, authority, and protection, the "stick [he] still waves" suggesting the phallic crutch-weapon with which Lowell wrought such havoc on the helpless young newts with whom he identified. Lowell depicts himself as immersed in the sounds and images of the past, and he grapples with what has been lost:

> Never again
>
> to walk there, chalk our cues,
>
> insist on shooting for us both. (74)

In a combination of care and dominance, Winslow provides "sugar for us both" as they drink coffee and play billiards, preparing the cues but also insisting on playing both sides of the match. Lowell is reduced to a pampered but powerless observer of his grandfather's actions at the poem's climax. The feminized image of the paramour resurfaces when Lowell breaks into a wail of anguish: "Grandpa! Have me, hold me,

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[109] Although the title suggests equal play between Grandfather and Grandmother, she is merely a faint and somewhat foreign image, veiled "like a Mohammedan" (73).

cherish me!" (74). In this case, the appropriate "level" of family relationship has been

honored in that Lowell refers to Winslow as grandfather, not father. But the intimacy

reflected in the language evokes an extraordinary emotional connection much more

intense than is typically seen between grandfather and grandson and more dramatic than

any other relationship in *Life Studies*. The use of words from well-known lines from the

marriage ceremony—"to have and to hold" ("Have")[110]—alludes to the totality of the

marriage vows,[111] an exclusive, ongoing, and possessive relationship with a component

of a romance, sexual connection, and need that transcends established boundaries for

grandfather and grandchild.[112] What follows Lowell's passionate *cri de coeur* points to a

discomfort with this intensity of feeling. Lowell writes, "Tears smut my fingers" (74),

indicating that the adult Lowell becomes dirty or stained by his reaction to this

memory.[113] This language magnifies a similar image connected to Winslow in this poem:

his staining of the green cloth of the billiard table with coffee and the current means of

cover-up accomplished through the strategic placement of "[h]is favorite ball, the number

three" (73). The resolution (such as it is) occurs when Lowell as speaker defaces one of

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[110] Also from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "have" can also mean "to hold or possess, in a weakened sense; the relation being other than that of property or tenancy, e.g., one of kindred, relative position, e.g., fathers *have* sons." However, the combination of "have" and "hold" and the allusion to the bond of marriage adds an additional dimension of meaning here, particularly given the earlier use of the word "paramour" in "Dunbarton."

[111] As Justice Kennedy wrote in the recent Obergefell decision that legalized gay marriage: "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice and family" (*Obergefell v. Hodges* 28).

[112] Witek in "Lowell's Tokens of the Self" states that "Bobby is reduced to a version of femaleness rather than lifted to masculinity by this role model [Winslow]" (719).

[113] In *Pity the Monsters*, Alan Williamson's psychoanalytic analysis of Lowell's text notes, "*Smut* is the crucial word, conveying the sense of shame, but also of pornography, the deliberate feeding and working-up of an ingrown, masturbatory emotion" (68). The desire/emotion in Williamson's analysis focuses on Lowell's "own nostalgic desires," the fulfillment of which would allow him "to gain enveloping security at the cost of a wholly fraudulent individuality" (67).

his grandfather's magazines, the *Illustrated London News*,[114] "disloyal still, / I doodle handlebar / mustaches on the last Russian Czar" (74). The displacement of Lowell, Sr. has to some extent come full circle, as Lowell describes himself now as disloyal to the "*Ancien Régime*" (73) that represents both his grandfather and the czar whose image he mocks. His great need is mitigated by using minutia as a form of distancing. Yet at some level, the distancing, the attempt to gain control of the family narrative remains unsuccessful, as the desperate passion of the cry to his dead grandfather bursts through the measured tone that Lowell uses to sketch the other brief "studies" of the key events in the life and death of his father and mother. Whatever the realities of the relationship between Lowell and Winslow, Lowell's representation exudes eros, a yearning for and vulnerability to a dominant style of masculinity, while also problematizing that desire by attaching it to illegitimate and feminized positions and behavior that violate boundaries contained within the ideology of masculinity.

Constructing the Other

The strength of Lowell's experience of *eros* or desire for the power represented by the performance of indomitable masculinity is comparable in its intensity to his contemptuous response to his father's ineffectual manhood. Indeed, the repulsion seems more compelling than the attraction. Despite the force of his attachment to his Grandfather Winslow, Lowell puts significantly more energy and focus into creating a series of sketches that expose and dismantle the patriarchal edifice of his biological father as a kind of post-mortem denunciation.[115] As such, much of Lowell's self-representation

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[114] The *Illustrated London News* was the first illustrated weekly news magazine in the world. First published in 1842 (*Wikipedia*).
[115] It could be said that Lowell's lack of interest in his father's past—in the psychological "cause" of his flailing and failings—is surprising given Lowell's fascination with Freud, Lacan, and psychoanalytic

hinges on his own interpretation of his father's inadequacies—which created, among other things, financial insecurity (admittedly at an elite level). As Lowell specifies in the elegy "Commander Lowell," due to Lowell, Sr.'s "piker speculations! In three years / he squandered sixty thousand dollars" (76). Without even the courage to act boldly, due to a series of small ("piker") investments, his father lost the equivalent of $800,000 in today's dollars, a symptom of his father's inadequacy from which Lowell cannot seem to look away. Rosenthal describes Lowell's characterization of Lowell, Sr. as "a public discrediting of his father's manliness and character" (154), and this analysis asserts that Lowell's portrait of his father serves as a form of gender policing.[116] Connell and Messerschmidt claim that "[t]o sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women" (844), highlighting the need for conformity to certain ideological norms of performance to legitimize a straight white male identity. Lowell's policing of his father identifies expectations within these norms

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theory as it applied to his own life. In "91 Revere Street," he states only that Lowell, Sr. was "forlornly fatherless … brought up entirely by a mild widowed mother and an intense widowed grandmother" (22). Lowell's disinterest suggests that his only concern is the impact of those failings on his own life—enacting the angry condemnation of the disappointed son. The patrilineal flaw, whatever the cause, suffices to account for his father's "story." Given Lowell's attraction to indomitable masculinity, the simple fact that his father was raised by two women (yes, let's please blame the mother, again) rather than having a manly father or grandfather around to instill the proper male behaviors is a sufficient explanation. Perhaps no more need be said.

[116] It is significant that Lowell does not respond with even the measured kind of empathy he shows Charlotte. Sociologist Michael Schwalbe, whose research focuses on the study of empathy, notes that "Empathy requires two things. First, one must have some knowledge of the other's situation and feelings. Second, one must be motivated to take the position of the other" (qtd. in Quinn 523). Given the strict requirements of normative masculinity, there is no benefit to the display of empathy. This seems a likely reason why men who display it are seen as unusual (and certainly by some as unmanly, gay, or just weird). Pity, of course, is another matter, and there are occasional displays of this response in *Life Studies*, offered from a position of power rather than equality. In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, black cultural critic, Charles Blow wrote: "Pity doesn't dismantle privilege, but supports it. Pity requires a perch. It rolls down. Pity reinforces imbalances of power. It can be violence operating as benevolence" ("Jeb Bush, 'Free Stuff' and Black Folks). In noting this, I am not making Lowell, Sr.'s situation commensurate with that of the marginalized African-Americans Bush was referring to. However, Blow's overview of the status difference between the one who pities and the object of pity is well formulated.

regarding autonomy and the exercise of power.[117] Film scholar, Peter Hutching notes that,

> In as much as a man is the subject of patriarchy, he then has power.
> However this power is not his personal property, it does not emerge from
> within his own unique being. Rather it appertains to those institutional and
> ideological positions which the male individual occupies and through
> which he finds an identity … [I]t can be used but never owned. (qtd. in
> DiPiero 235, n .4)

Hence, simply *being* a man physiologically is not enough. Identity rests upon certain culturally approved enactments of masculinity, and failure to perform at the normative standard strips the individual man of his power—placing him in the "no man's land" of the Other, where he is subject to various negative consequences. In documenting a masculinity that blunders, cowers, gets pushed around, and is silenced, Lowell presents his father as a failed man, a deviant Other outside the boundary of acceptable manhood. In doing so within the public platform of literature, Lowell assumes the authoritative mantle reminiscent of his grandfather Winslow. His representations of his father achieve a form of dominance and serve to make "unchecked commands and demands" on his father's memory that result in the unflattering and chastening portrait that became Lowell, Sr.'s legacy—not for Lowell, Sr.'s "own good" (33), certainly, but, perhaps, for his son's. One could think of this as a final form of displacement: Lowell taking action

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[117] Allan Johnston in "Modes of Return: Memory and Remembering the Poetry of Robert Lowell" sees different forces at work, asserting that, in his portrayal of his father, Lowell is attempting to resolve the Oedipal rivalry with Lowell, Sr. by "dehumanz[ing]" and transforming his father into "objects and worn phrases" (81) in order "to overthrow oedipal domination" (83).

through the creation of *Life Studies* to distinguish himself from his father and assure his

own place in the masculine hegemony, a feat his father proved unable to accomplish.

Of course, in creating this representation of his father, Lowell relies on the

readers' understanding of the significance of Lowell, Sr.'s gendered ignominy. Thus,

Lowell's shaping of events, the manner in which he crafts his account of experiences

from thirty years before, provides a window into the functioning of hegemonic

masculinity. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asserts that "Gender is the repeated

stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that

congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being"

(33). The discussion that follows seeks to explore this "regulatory frame" by considering

the strategies Lowell uses to create a representation of failed masculinity—specifically

the choices he makes in depicting Lowell, Sr.'s lack of autonomy and self-determination,

essential qualities inherent in the gendered national narrative that buttresses straight white

men's economic, political, and social power and control. In doing so, the following

analysis takes as its starting point DiPiero's assertion that, "[w]hile white masculinity

constitutes a hegemonic force in contemporary social, political, and economic domains,

we need to analyze it as a symptomatic reply to cultural demands, not as a self-generating

ahistorical entity that somehow able endlessly to reproduce itself" (3). In particular, my

analysis of Lowell's representations reveal how failures of self-determination and

autonomy, which because of their connection to power and control are crucial to male

identity, are identified, regulated, and responded to—in other words, examining the

forces that create the ideological male Other and the ways in which systems of power

designate status while applying and reinforcing the mythology of a nationalized

individualism. Taking these formative processes into account, I will consider how Lowell creates the effects of his father as failure. Specifically, I will consider three moments in "Life Studies" and "91 Revere Street" in which Lowell, Sr. fails in his performance of straight white American masculinity and the implications of those failures.

Moment One: Carving (Un)Makes the Man

In "91 Revere Street," Lowell uses the ritual of carving the Sunday roast to create a detailed moment that highlights his father's inadequacy as the economic master of the house. Though the preparation of food remains primarily and often exclusively within women's domain in the American family, the matter of carving of the meat—a roast on Sunday, turkey on Thanksgiving, and so on—was and is often a public performance (in that it happens in *front of* those eating rather than behind the scenes in the kitchen), featuring the man of the house. Some skill is required to carve effectively—slicing the meat into thin, attractive portions—and, until the carving is complete, the meal cannot begin. Hence, as the diners wait to proceed, full attention is paid to the man at the center of the action. As historian Ellen Ross notes, "By carving meat on Sundays, fathers dramatized the fact that the money for the Sunday joint had come through their work" (39). This domestic ritual of asserting mastery over the remains of an animal symbolizes public economic achievement, and Lowell's candor about his father's inadequacies in business leaves little room for the reader to anticipate a good outcome. The detailed attention Lowell pays to the multiplicity of ways his father fails in this undertaking makes the cultural expectations at work in gendered activities come alive.

The first reference to Lowell, Sr. in this scene indicates that he has a "do-it-yourself book containing diagrams for the correct carving of roasts lay[ing] on the arm of

[his] chair" (37). Lowell amplifies his father's lack by noting that also within reach of his chair are other texts, including "Big Bill Tilden on tennis, Capablanca on chess, Newspaper clippings from Sidney Lenz's bridge column and some American's nationalist sketch of Sir Thomas Lipton's errors in the Cup Defender races" (37). Lowell, Sr. requires assistance when it comes to the patriarchal task of carving, as well as tennis, chess, bridge, and sailing [and, he's a sailor!], all of which are recreational activities that a man in his position would be expected to be knowledgeable about and reasonably proficient at.[118] Lowell, Sr.'s inadequacy creates an interesting tension. On the one hand, American Individualism certainly encourages the impulse toward self-improvement; indeed, such an impulse is an essential aspect of the "gospel" of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. However, certain assumptions about the "naturalness" of male behaviors, implicit and explicit within masculine ideology, would make suspect such a heavy reliance on self-help books. Despite various attempts at improvement, Lowell notes, "Father made little progress in these diversions, and yet one of the authors assured him that mastery demanded only willing readers who understood the meaning of English words" (37). The book's blurb functions as a marketing ploy but also as a reminder that, in these pursuits (as in all others), the responsibility for failure rests entirely with the man. If one is literate (and why else buy a self-help book), then success is sure to come. But what if, despite one's best efforts, it does not? Lowell's unblinking focus on his father's limitations offers no sympathy or solace, merely judgment.

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[118] Lowell, Sr. has trouble with other masculine pursuits as well. In "Commander Lowell," Lowell notes that his father receives the censure of the other men of the "summer colony" of Mattapoisett when he four-putt one hole. Articulating the frustration of every good golfer who is compelled to play with a hacker, they say "'Bob,' … 'golf is a game you really ought to know to play, / if you play at all'" (75). One might say this is the good natured "ribbing" in which male friends and colleagues participate, but there is nothing in the text that suggests this might be so. What seems more likely is that hostility is being camouflaged (as it so often is) as "just kidding."

The predicament Lowell, Sr. finds himself in relative to his execution of this arbitrary (but still "essential") manly activity is articulated by Charlotte Lowell, "I have always believed carving to be *the* gentlemanly talent" (39).[119] Thus, Lowell, Sr.'s identity as a gentleman, his hegemonic status, hinges on a successful performance. Lowell, Sr. clearly takes this task quite seriously as he industriously attempts to achieve respectable masculinity through his consumption of these instructive texts and even a college course.

> Father, faced with this opinion [of carving as *the* gentlemanly art], pored over his book of instructions or read the section on table carving in the Encyclopedia Britannica. Eventually he discovered among the innumerable small, specialized Boston "colleges" an establishment known as a carving school. Each Sunday from then on he would sit silent and erudite before his roast. He blinked, grew white, looked winded, and wiped beads of perspiration from his eyebrow. His purpose was to reproduce stroke by stroke his last carving lesson, and he worked with all the formal rightness and particular error of some shaky experiment in remote control. (39)

Despite an extraordinary effort to gain expertise (after all, Lowell describes him as "erudite"), Lowell, Sr. is unable to transform knowledge into skillful action. He is trapped within his inability to perform successfully in this public platform. There is a hint

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[119] As Ellen Ross writes in *Love and Toil*, "The male headship of the household was acted out through the Sunday meal even if subverted during the week, for another function that ritual (or semi-ritual in this case) fulfills is to obscure conflict or disorder ... The fathers' eminence over their children on weekdays was a theoretical rather than practical fact as the mothers were normally the disciplinarians. On Sundays though the authority of the father was often exerted at dinner; the children at the table [were] required to remain silent, eat everything on their plates, say grace, request permission to leave the table, and observe the proprieties in table manners" (39). While the upper middle class Lowells may have had servants (though no mention is ever made of them) and while Lowell, Sr. may have attended dinner each evening, I suggest that this tradition around the gathering of the family, found on both sides of the Atlantic, influenced the actions of Lowell, Sr. and the expectations and judgment passed on him by those around the table.

of the ridiculous in this representation that critics have found humorous. Yet, as anyone who has experienced performance anxiety can attest, the scene feels unpleasantly accurate. Carving a slab of meat decently seems a simple enough thing, but in Lowell's portrayal this task defeats his father. Moreover, without an even greater loss to his manhood, he cannot put the task aside or delegate it. Thus, Lowell places his father impotently behind a platter of steaming meat that he cannot carve his way out of, while suffering the unforgiving gaze of those at the table.

Lowell then adds other voices to emphasize the extent of Lowell, Sr.'s inferiority. The well-educated yet brassy wife (deeply disliked by Charlotte Lowell) of Lowell, Sr.'s friend, Commander Harkness, speaks up. Reinforcing the connection between a man's skill at carving with economic power, she comments "as she studied [Lowell, Sr.'s] hewing and hacking" (39) that *her* husband "was a stingy artist at carving who could shave General Washington off the dollar bill" (39). Lowell, Sr. attempts to rescue his situation by making a joke of it, saying, "I am just a plebe at this guillotine" and "Have a hunk of my roast beef hash" (39). This compels another member of the dinner party to speak, one who would seem to have the least amount of power. Mrs. Harkness's gibe is followed by a rhetorical low blow, as young Lowell refuses to accept his father's effort to use humor to cover-up his inadequacy. Having silently observed his father's ordeal, Lowell suddenly lashes out at in a way that emphasizes his father's inferiority, humiliating him further by invoking his father's economic dependence on the illustrious Winslow: "And I, furious for no immediate reason, blurted out, 'Mother, how much does Grandfather Winslow have to fork up to pay for Daddy's carving school?'" (40). Lowell's eruption directly after his father's attempt to minimize his own incompetence

intimates that even a young boy finds such substandard masculine performance intolerable. Both Lowell, Sr. and Lowell experience loss of control in this scene, Lowell, Sr. of his role as patriarch and Lowell of his temper. Lowell's rage is the far more manly expression; exerting his agency in pointing out his father's failure—othering his father— places him in the superior position, thereby increasing Lowell's status while diminishing that of his father within a hegemonic system that rests upon performance and judgment.

The fact that this statement of contempt meets with no disciplinary consequence, indeed no comment at all within the scene—giving Lowell, Sr. a public shaming and Lowell the final word—implies that Lowell's action of challenging his father's patriarchal authority is acceptable and perhaps even necessary. Indeed, the "hash" his father makes of the Sunday roast foreshadows the damage he will do to the family's financial well being and, in particular, Lowell's own inheritance. Having crafted a scene in which Lowell, Sr. is shown to be grotesquely incompetent and publicly shamed by a woman and his own young son, Lowell concludes with, "[t]hese Sunday dinners with the Harknesses were always woundingly boisterous affairs" (40)—indicating that this scene or something like it occurs frequently replayed and placing Lowell, Sr. within a Sisyphean cycle of failure.

Based on this scene, the wounds of the Lowell men extend in two different directions. Certainly Lowell, Sr. is in a highly agitated state of anxiety, trapped by the expectations of a cultural ritual (and by extension, expectations about his performance in the competitive economic "football game" (20) of the business world) in front of an audience who is not (and will not be) sympathetic to his dismal performance now or in the years to come. Young Lowell, too, is upset, though implying that he is mystified by

his reaction (just as he is by the physical and verbal bullying he engages in at school) seems disingenuous. Lowell's repeated expressions of concern about his own status throughout "91 Revere Street" indicate an anger that hinges on how his father's ineptitude negatively reflects upon and affects him. Young Lowell's outburst draws attention to the implications of his father's problem masculinity, and his father's silence in the face of his young son's disrespect reinforces Lowell, Sr.'s helplessness and lack of control, providing further evidence that he is the undesirable Other.

Moment Two: (Not) in the Driver's Seat

Though public performance (economic and ceremonial) provides one important means of asserting manhood, nothing is more essential to demonstrating masculinity than men's exercise of power over women—a primary feature of men's "natural" dominance within male-female relationality. While the vivid imagery in Lowell's depiction of the carving scene highlights the critical nature of material (economic) failures of manly prowess, in "91 Revere Street," he is also highly attentive to instances of the disruption of male dominance through the aberrant action of male submission. In the essay, Lowell explores the multiple ways in which his father responds submissively within and beyond the family dynamic, exposing scenes of obedience and capitulation that draw upon the reader's own expectations of masculinity and serve to displace Lowell, Sr. from the ranks of "normal" manhood. Lowell clearly distinguishes the way(s) his father differs from (and hence proves inadequate to) his domineering father-in-law (Winslow) as well as Lowell, Sr.'s "friend" and fellow Commander, Billy "Bilge" Harkness, and, most

significantly, his own wife, Charlotte, who is able to appropriate patriarchal power and position seemingly at will.[120]

Within the emphasis on self-determination that powers the mythology of American Individualism is the expectation that normative straight white masculinity is autonomous in the sense that a man is not only free to act, but also free from certain types of constraints—particularly those exerted by someone lower than he within the hegemonic hierarchy. As Charlotte states early in "91 Revere Street," "A *man* must make up his *own* mind" (22; emphasis in original). In contradistinction to Charlotte's standard of authentic masculinity, throughout "91 Revere Street" Lowell documents multiple instances in which his father is dominated by others without raising an objection. In "91 Revere Street" and the poems in "Life Studies," Lowell offers not a single example of his father wielding authority over anyone, including Lowell as a child, though more than once the text shows Charlotte Lowell exerting control and dominance over her husband. The zero-sum/binary understanding of power that undergirds patriarchal ideology assumes that, for Charlotte to gain power, Lowell, Sr. must lose it. His silent acceptance of Charlotte's persistent, aggressive, and overtly hostile remonstrations indicates a role reversal: Lowell, Sr. has become the feminized, passive (and some might say oppressed) "object" to her masculinized subject. Self-determination by its very nature requires that

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[120] Charlotte's longing for/fascination with masterful men suggest that she is, despite her "unfeminine" assertions of power and dominance, (more) "normal" than Lowell, Sr.—she is appropriately feminine in her attraction to "sublime," romantic and powerful male figures such as the fictional Siegfried and Napoleon (22-23). Hence her bitterness and disappointment to find herself paired with a "twentieth-century naval commander interested in steam, radio, and 'the fellows'" (23). In his essay, "Grief and Nothingness: Loss and Mourning in Lowell's Poetry, Jay Martin provides an interesting context for the relationship between Charlotte and Lowell, Sr. as well as evidence of another negative impact of dominant masculinity. Martin writes, "Arthur Winslow, Lowell's grandfather had already rejected several possible suitors for his daughter Charlotte's hand, due to deficiencies in ancestry. He found [Lowell, Sr.] acceptable, but, unfortunately, apart from his bloodlines, Lowell's father had little to recommend him" (27). As Lowell portrays his father throughout *Life Studies*, he seems to doubt even the quality of the bloodlines—leaving Lowell, Sr. with nothing to recommend him.

the individual be free to make his own decisions, an essential aspect of which is to be free from being compelled to act in ways that go against what is considered normal or "natural" inclinations (the parameters of which are, of course, defined by the culture's gendered norms). The consequence of the belief in straight white men's inherent autonomy is a culturally imposed obligation that a real man must resist (in some form) attempts to disempower him. This belief in the obligation to push back assumes that a man is able to do so, that he possesses a certain level of control, that he is dispositionally aligned to do so, and that he desires to do so. Failure to resist results in being unmanned, to lose one's place within the hegemonic hierarchy, i.e., to be feminized invites being reconfigured as an inferior Other.

A particularly demeaning moment for Lowell, Sr. occurs in a scene in which Charlotte prevents him from accessing the "driver's seat" of his vehicle. As Lowell, Sr. begins his nightly trek back to the Navy Yard, a journey predicated on Charlotte's refusal to live in Navy housing, Charlotte refuses him permission to take the car (he's in control of the care of the car but not its use), calling into question Lowell, Sr.'s driving skills: "Alone and at night … an amateur driver is unsafe in a car." Lowell notes that his father "drove with flawless, almost instrumental monotony (27), giving no evidence that he was a risk or an "amateur" behind the wheel and distinguishing himself from Winslow—who, in "Dunbarton," "let[s] his motor roller-coaster / out of control down each hill" (70). In light of the strong connection between masculinity, with its norms of control and freedom, and cars, which provided a mobility that offered the same, creating a bond that

has existed from the beginning of the popularization of the automobile, [121] Charlotte's action is flagrantly emasculating (all the more so, given that this scene occurs because of Charlotte's prior assertions of power). Yet Lowell, Sr. accepts her prohibition wordlessly: "Father sighed and obeyed … he would keep his self-respect by taking the trolley rather than a taxi" (28). Sighing is hardly a masculine response to a loss of autonomy, and Lowell, Sr.'s lack of resistance, e.g., getting in the car and driving away, indicate that his sigh signals resignation and acceptance of both sides of the situation: Charlotte's exercise of control and his own choice to accept her authority.[122] Lowell's ironic suggestion that his father will maintain his "self-respect" by exercising his agency in the small act of deciding *how* he will conform to Charlotte's demand emphasizes the diminishment of his autonomy and ability to control his circumstances. Pinching the penny to take the cheaper mode of public transportation seems a pathetic (and again feminized) attempt to assert power. At the very least, a real man would have thought he was important enough to be driven back to his bachelor quarters in a taxi.

Lowell reinforces the connection between submission and displacement by immediately following this scene of his father being supplanted from the driver's seat with one that involves further evidence of Lowell, Sr.'s inclination to capitulate. Adding to his father's lack of masculine credibility, Lowell presents the disruption of the family's Christmas Eve dinner, this time by the Admiral. Here, Lowell gives his father one of his rare moments of direct speech, but it merely reinforces what his (mostly) silent presence

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[121] As Robert Creeley writes in "I Know a Man," one of his many poems concerned with men's autonomy, "the darkness sur- / rounds us, what // can we do against / it, or else, shall we & / why not, buy a goddamn big car" (132).

[122] While the science of sighing is still relatively new, one study by Vlemincx, et al. has indicated that "sighing is a way of resetting (normalizing) the breathing process, after irregular breathing during stress." In addition, sighing often reflects a feeling of frustration and resignation, "that realities have to be accepted, and one can start moving forward after that" (Tiegen qtd. by The Scicurious Brain).

throughout "91 Revere Street" has demonstrated—that he is anything but masterful. Having been called back to the Navy Yard in the midst of the family Christmas dinner, Lowell, Sr. puts up no objection; however "[a]s usual with him under pressure [he] become a little evasive and magniloquent. Rather than complaining about the inconvenience, Lowell, Sr. declares, "A woman works from sun to sun … but a sailor's watch is never done" (28), offering a rather bizarre version of an old cliché.[123] Lowell, Sr.'s use of this expression creates a disempowering juxtaposition, placing himself in the position of the woman in the well known saying, "A man works from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done." Throughout this scene and especially in his appropriation of a woman's cultural subordination, Lowell's father relegates himself to a marginalized position—admitting his helplessness in limiting or directing his labor—while also suggesting a form of male martyrdom devised by the needs of a larger system of power that he cannot control. Then, in a flight of fancy, Lowell, Sr. goes on to "compare a naval officer's hours with a doctor's, hint at surprise maneuvers, and explain away the uncommunicative arrogance of Admiral De Stahl [with] 'The Old Man has to be hush-hush'" (28). While the Admiral is a legitimate authority-figure who Lowell, Sr. must obey, he fails to resist the Admiral's unreasonable request even to the extent of uttering a complaint to his family. Instead he foolishly defends the Admiral's action by exaggerating or simply inventing a secret Christmas naval action that requires his presence. Within this scene, Lowell, Sr. is again superseded by his wife, as she is left to take the Admiral to task in a phone call later in the evening when inebriated sailors create a ruckus outside their door in Revere Street. "'Sir,' she shrilled, 'you have compelled my

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[123] This may be an old Navy cliché, but, despite much searching, I was unable to find a source that indicates it is part of any naval parlance or vernacular.

husband to leave me alone and defenseless on Christmas Eve!'" (29). Lowell, Sr.'s

displacement is complete when Charlotte elevates the very young Lowell's status to that

of the dominant male of the house when she says, "Oh Bobby, it's such a comfort to have

a man in the house"—a promotion that Lowell resists straightforwardly and with vigor by

stating, "I am not a man … I am a boy" (29). In resisting his mother's assertion of his

raised status, the young Lowell demonstrates more moxie than does Lowell, Sr.'s habit of

submission.[124] In addition to diminishing his father during the carving incident, Lowell

now demonstrates his ability to defy his mother's efforts to define him—two ways in

which Lowell proves that he as a young boy exercised his masculine power more

effectively than his father.

Moment 3: Father Outsider

One of the great advantages of straight white masculinity was (and in some cases

still is) its status as the universal category, the central point of reference for what is

natural and normal in all gender-inflected matters. This privileged status makes straight

white men the ultimate insiders as it establishes and reinforces where power, control, and

authority rest by determining whose voice is heard, i.e., taken seriously, within the

culture. Lowell confirms his father's status as Other by silencing him. As has historically

been the case for women and members of marginalized groups, those with more power

define him as Other and then exclude him from the benefits of the insider. Of course

Lowell mediates each voice in the text, but he represents his parents in significantly

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[124] Lowell's fearlessness in standing up to Charlotte and resisting the constraining roles she attempts to place him in are witnessed in an earlier scene in "91 Revere Street": "'A penny for your thoughts, Schopenhauer,' my mother would say. 'I am thinking about pennies,' I'd answer. 'When *I* was a child I used to love telling Mama everything I had done,' Mother would say. 'But you're not a child,' I would answer" (20). Lowell's disobedient response is a non sequitur that resists the double bind of responding to her as an adult man, i.e., the philosopher Schopenhauer, as well as conforming in the way of an obedient child—thereby aligning himself with Winslow, the "bad boy" of the family.

different lights. In his portrayal of Charlotte, Lowell grants his mother the contextual framing that provides (some) understanding and insight into her behavior by giving her a voice and an interior life. His own feelings of empathy and agreement with certain of her frustrations, particularly those relating to his father, are made clear within the text. Though she is unlikely to win an award for wife or mother of the year, Lowell portrays Charlotte as a three-dimensional woman whose qualities include wit, determination, and intelligence. However, he does something quite different with his representation of Lowell, Sr. who exists in a space of exclusion, mostly silent and, when not silent, foolish. He operates within the text as an absence of patriarchal force, an empty space where a thinking and active subject, the *pater familias*, should be. Lowell's action functions as a form of "social distancing," the deliberate isolation or segregation of those for whom one feels contempt.

Lowell, Sr.'s segregation within the family system emerges in the poem "During Fever," a poem written in the context of Lowell's daughter's illness and in which Lowell entertains memories of his mother, whose death had been the subject of the previous poem in the "Life Studies" sequence, "Sailing Home from Rapallo." It is his child's fever to which the poem's title refers, but she is not the subject of the poem. Instead, Lowell examines, perhaps in a kind of fever himself, various aspects of his mother—her relationship with her father, his beloved Grandfather Winslow, and the material things she possessed. Lowell brings his father into the poem in a way that emphasizes his isolation within the family. Reminiscing about his college days, Lowell remembers himself as "part criminal and yet a Phi Bete / I used to barge home late" (84), his language suggesting that he is dangerously smart. The verb "barge" places him in a

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dominant and very typical masculine position as one who interrupts.[125] When he "breaks in" to his parent's home late in the evening, his mother has placed "always by the banister / my milk-tooth mug of milk / … waiting for [him] on a plate / of Triskets"(84). This semi-infantilizing nurturance is then paired with the happy memory of Lowell and his mother taking great pleasure in an evening of bonding as they dished the dirt about Lowell, Sr., an apparently common occasion: *"Often* with *unadulterated joy*, / Mother, we bent by the fire / rehashing father's character—" (emphasis added). Particularly striking in these lines is Lowell's use of the phrase "unadulterated joy," which indicates an almost obscene amount of pure pleasure being experienced through the sharing of mean-spirited blether. The connotation of purity hearkens back to Lowell's concern about the impure qualities of his father's ancestor, Myers, which he also associates with his father. Hence mother and son share an experience characterized as pure, while scorning the impure patriarch. Lowell, Sr.'s complicity in this dynamic occurs as he waits until mother and son go to bed (having reveled in their shared perusal of his flaws) to "tiptoe down the stairs / and chain the door" (84).[126] The perverse juxtaposition of Lowell, Sr. assuming the responsibility of keeping the family safe by locking the door against intruders, while tolerating the undermining of his patriarchal authority within that home (and tip-toeing to avoid disturbing them) signals his passive acceptance of his outsider status. One cannot imagine Winslow behaving in a similar fashion; he seems more likely

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[125] In "Meta-analyses of Gender Effects on Conversational Interruption" (1998), sociologists Kristin J. Anderson and Campbell Leaper found that men were more likely to be motivated to demonstrate their dominance by interrupting women and that interruptions happened more frequently when men were in a mixed-group of men and women—an environment in which men were "performing" before other men. One could see Lowell's action in "barging" into his home late at night as a form of interruption or interference that demonstrates his power.

[126] Sandra M. Gilbert also notes Lowell, Sr.'s "culpability" (73) in her essay "Mephistophilis in Maine."

to have shoved them both out the door and locked it behind them—and, this, of course, is why it would never have happened to him.

Lowell gives the reader a sense of what that conversation may have sounded like by silencing his father's interiority and reducing him to a two-dimensional figure (much like Mordecai Myers) upon which readers can easily project Lowell's critique without a conflicting interpretation. Thus, Lowell can segregate his father based on intellectual limitations without evidence to the contrary. He describes his father as "deep—not with profundity, but with the *dumb* depth of one who trusted in statistics and was dubious of personal experience" (22; emphasis added). His use of the word "dumb," which was then used (though rarely now) to describe an individual who lacked the ability to speak, gestures toward his helplessly silent presence. But, it also suggests a lack of intelligence, a lack of intellectual capability and curiosity. Lowell asserts that "[he] had reached, perhaps, his final mental possibilities" (22) when he graduated from Annapolis, which means he peaked intellectually at less than twenty years old[127]— the "bare and white … bookshelves" in his den evidence of the sin of disinterest in literary culture. And, surely Lowell would have been familiar with Mark Twain's famous description of "lies, damn lies, and statistics," thus calling into question the reliability of his father's view of himself as "a matter-of-fact man of science" (20). Clearly, what Lowell considers "deep" in terms of valued intellect is vastly different from his father whose gifts lie in his "accuracy," his "high sense of abstract form, which he beclouded with his humor" (a positive linked

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[127] In "Commander Lowell," Lowell states that at "nineteen, the youngest ensign in his class, / he was 'the old man' of a gunboat on the Yangtze' (77), which suggests that he was at most nineteen years old when he graduated from Annapolis and attained his intellectual peak. In "91 Revere Street," Harkness who was at Annapolis with Lowell, Sr. refers to him as "our class baby" (48).

to a negative), and his "specialized efficiency" (22), none of which are ultimately of any use to him outside the Navy.

Out of this silence, the accumulation of Lowell's negative descriptors (some placed in the voice of Charlotte Lowell) function to separate him from competent manhood. Far from possessing the "habit of command" (38) that allowed Lowell, Sr.'s "friend" Harkness to become a hero in World War II, Lowell describes his father as having "submissive tenacity" (38)—an unusual hybrid state that makes him, on the one hand, masculine (determined and resolute) but on the other hand, feminine (obedient and compliant—so that even one of his (few) manly qualities is held in tension with its opposite). The text describes Lowell, Sr. as a "mumbler" (20), "morbidly hesitant," possessing a "fumbling languor," "myopic," "evasive" (22), guilty of "backsliding," and "living in a fool's paradise of habitual retarding and retarded do-nothing inertia" (24). He is "savorless, unmasterful, merely considerate" (22), interested primarily in "steam, radio, and 'the fellows'" (23) rather than heroics. He is "white and sheepish" while being "browbeat[en]" (31) by the headmistress of Brimmer, who overwhelms him as she (ironically) makes the case for feminine inferiority.[128] He has a "wishy-washy desire to be everything to be everybody" (32) and is prone to "smack[ing] his lips, and beam[ing] absentmindedly and sensuously" (44) when guests are present. He becomes "cowed" on occasion, at which time he begins to "wheedle" (44) in order to gain approval of his opinion. Like the drip, drip, drip of water that wears away rock, Lowell's language about his father emphasizes incompetence (vs. prowess); submission (vs. dominance),

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[128] The headmistress' name in the essay is "Manice." I can see the humor here—a mannish woman with her "icy" lack of femininity, but it is also striking how intent Lowell was on reminding the reader at every possible opportunity of his father's inadequacies.

weakness (vs. strength), creating a man whose lack of power places him firmly in the category of the Other.

Lowell reinscribes Lowell, Sr.'s isolation in his final mention of his father; even in death, Lowell separates his father from others. Buried in the family cemetery in Dunbarton that the boy Lowell had so happily tended with his Grandfather Winslow, Lowell, Sr. is the only "'unhistoric' soul to come here / … beneath his recent / unweathered pink-veined slice of marble" ("Sailing Home from Rapallo" 82). In a poem focused primarily on the death in Italy of Charlotte Winslow, Lowell nevertheless insists on the exclusion of his father: Surrounded by "twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks" whose "names … Frost had given … a diamond edge / … the Latin of his Lowell motto: / *Occasionem cognosce*, / seemed too businesslike and pushing here" (83). Once again, Lowell, Sr. is the Other, the negative, the feminized, the "un," neither "historic" enough (whatever that might mean) or "weathered" enough. His "pink-veined slice of marble" seems a bit girlish next to the Puritanical grey "slate" grave markers of his wife's ancestors. Lowell, Sr. is further excluded by the "businesslike and pushing" nature of the Lowell motto, "Know your opportunity," etched on his gravestone.[129] The "downright Yankees" (16) of his mother's side seemingly have no connection to the indignities and potential failures of the business world.

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[129] In fact, this is not what is found on Lowell, Sr.'s grave. Instead a line of Lowell's poem, "Where the Rainbow Ends," is inscribed there: "Stand and live / The Dove has brought / an olive branch to eat." The critique implied by Lowell placing a fictitious motto that emphasizes his father's *inability* to "know his opportunity" is quite clear (emphasis added). From a photograph on the *Find a Grave* website: http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid= 62960388&PIpi=36800401. Accessed 8 Nov. 2015.

In Conclusion: "Skunk Hour" & the Other

Having assumed the patriarchal mantle of the autobiographer, thereby gaining the authority and status of the one who speaks truth, Lowell ends (but does not resolve) *Life Studies* by returning to the theme of displacement. Lowell begins *Life Studies* in an anxiety of place, and he explores that concern through the lens of gender throughout the text: Rome and Paris transformed into sites of darkness not light, the home of his childhood as unsteady as his father's performance of normative masculinity, and white male poets and intellectuals marginalized. In Part 4, the "Life Studies" sequence, Lowell grows up and, despite his devotion to and fascination with his Grandfather Winslow, "the problems of the Father are the problems of the son" (Witek 725). Lowell's compromised masculinity resembles his Father's far more closely than his grandfather's, as he presents himself as unassertive, anemic, and feeble. Lowell's struggle with mental illness results in psychiatric confinements that leave him "frizzled, stale, and small" ("Home" 89), grappling with marital conflict that finds him "stall[ed]" ("To Speak" 93), "tamed by Milltown" (92), and isolated and decentered within his own alienated "hell; nobody's here" ("Skunk Hour" 95). In "Man and Wife," it is his wife's power that has three times "face[d] the kingdom of the mad … and dragged [him] home alive" (92), rather than his own. Despite his debilitated condition, "Skunk Hour," as the final word from Lowell in *Life Studies* on masculinity, demonstrates that he is *not* Other, allowing the reader to infer that he is in some essential way different from and better than his father. Asserting a masculine authority even as he experiences a bout of madness, Lowell demonstrates the role othering plays in buttressing the inherently unstable construction of straight white masculinity.

In "Skunk Hour," Lowell locates himself well within the boundaries of normative masculinity through his exercise of the "ideological I" specifically surveilling and assessing anonymous Others in a shorthand version of his scrutiny and judgment of Lowell, Sr.[130] As an object of Lowell's attention, each character represents an inferior (and, in two cases, an often despised category) within the hegemony of straight white masculinity—suggesting the categories of "not [legitimate] boys" Lowell creates in "Commander Lowell": girls and undesirables.[131] Although in "Skunk Hour" Lowell alludes to his own mental chaos in the opening stanzas, one sees no sign of it; the representations of the three "undesirables" are made in a coherent, rational, methodical tone. Indeed, the close observation of the dotty rich old woman, the failed *parvenu* businessman, and the gay interior decorator resemble those made by an investigative reporter or private detective. Lowell's language offers a connection between the "ill" season experienced by these people and their declining village and the speaker's own "ill-spirit"(95), suggesting the possibility of a shared kinship of isolation, hardship, and failure that subverts traditional normative expectations of effective straight white masculinity. However, Lowell's *elite*, straight white male status places him in a superior position when compared to these characters and indicates that, much like the black soldier in "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined in Munich" in Part 1 of *Life Studies*, through

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[130] Lowell would no doubt disagree with my interpretation, having articulated the following (and, to me, unclear) statement regarding the purpose of the three townspeople featured in this poem, which was to depict "a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect" (qtd. in Kramer 89).

[131] Adrienne Rich critiques his later work in a way that resonates here as well: "The poet's need to dominate and objectify the characters in his poems leaves him in an appalling way invulnerable" ("Caryatid" 42).

Lowell may appropriate the sufferings of Others to speak to his own chaotic condition, by virtue of his pedigree, he is not one of them—he is not Other.[132]

Each of the characterizations in this section represents a potentially transgressive force that challenges the status and authority of elite straight white men. As such, individuals within these categories (categories that have themselves been created by this dominant power structure) have been common targets of various forms and intensities of social control, from innuendo and gossip to violent abuse. Lowell begins with the anxiety-provoking old woman, the widow (the witch, the crone) who is no longer under the control of a husband and who squanders what no doubt was "his" money as she "buys up all / the eyesores facing her shore / and lets them fall" (94). The figure of unconstrained feminine power is followed by the ostentatious nouveau riche striver (very different from well-established "People Like Us"), whose preoccupation with looking the part of old money leads the speaker to claim he "seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean / catalogue" (94). Diminishing him as a "feminized male consumer" (Davidson 53), the "summer millionaire" also evokes the figure of Lowell, Sr. as his "lost" status and need to "auction off … [h]is nine-knot yawl … to lobstermen" (94) suggests a common bond of professional failure. Moreover, his status as an arriviste conjures up Lowell's rejection of his patrilineal ancestor, Mordecai Myers, who he describes in "91 Revere Street" as "both *ci-devant* and *parvenu* … no downright Yankee" (16). Finally, Lowell offers the (even then) well-worn cliché of the gay decorator, that locus of projection for so much

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[132] There is some overlap in my analyses and that of Marjorie Perloff in "The Return of Robert Lowell." In this review of Lowell's *Collected Poems* (2003), Marjorie Perloff discusses "Skunk Hour" and notes "the undertone of elitism, snobbery, and homophobia in the passage. … Nowhere in the second half of the poem does Lowell imply that this jaundiced picture of eccentric old ladies, nouveau riche summer visitors, and gay decorators, should be qualified. Indeed, the repeated use of the first-person plural suggests that the poet regards his neighbors with the bemusement that comes with a feeling of natural superiority." She does not, however, make the same connections with straight white male privilege and the concept of "othering."

cultural anxiety about the inevitable power and stability of masculinity itself. Again

Lowell, Sr. is called to mind as this character's flawed masculinity is reinforced by the

kitschy, inauthentic objects in which he unsuccessfully trades—"there is no money in his

work" (23). In addition to being a failure in business, Lowell, Sr. was also fond of flashy

but largely useless items like a "mother-of-pearl scout knife … [and] a tea-kettle

barometer" (21). The use of the pejorative term "fairy" (19) to describe the decorator,

while serving as a reminder that Lowell is a man of his time, also asserts a normal

masculine homophobia that to some extent offsets the feminized position of Lowell's

impaired speaker (and of Lowell, himself as a poet, intellectual, and self-confessed

inmate of mental institutions).[133]

Having presented the reader with these images of deviant Others within the

physical space of a small town, in the fifth and sixth stanzas Lowell then shifts to the

representation of his own struggles in allusive ways that reinforce his masculine status

even as they expose his disordered state of mind. He places himself in a "dark night"

(25), a reference to the concept of the dark night of the soul, which, given Lowell's deep

and intense immersion in Catholicism during the 1940s, should not be accepted as a

simple metaphor. The condition known as the "dark night of the soul" and formalized in

the 16th century writings of St. John of the Cross (among others) is a feeling of

dislocation, of being cut off from God, and most typically occurs when an individual has

been feeling a close connection with the Divine. The mystics' explanation for this feeling

of abandonment is that it is part of a process of purifying the senses and the spirit in order

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[133] For an interpretation of these four stanzas as psychological displacement in an "Oedipal group portrait" of the Lowell family (91), see Lawrence Kramer's "Freud and the Skunks," pp. 89-92.

to be worthy to join with divine.[134] Through this allusion, one is again reminded of

Lowell, Sr., and the concern Lowell expresses in "91 Revere Street" concerning the

impurity of his patrilineal line.

Lowell then moves physically to a site of potential impurity—the local lover's

lane—where the surveillance found in the poem's opening stanzas crosses boundaries of

intimacy that are discomfiting. The speaker's voyeuristic gaze takes possession of those

in "love-cars" (95) whose expressions of sexuality transgress the social norms of the

historical moment, which would have deferred most expressions of intimacy to those who

were married and in the privacy of their bedroom. The speaker's position, outside "Love,

O careless Love" (95), highlights his isolation and alienation. He admits that his "mind's

not right" (95), but still his unapologetic deployment of the gaze as he "watche[s]" for

these cars asserts a sense of dominance and predation as he exploits these surreptitious

lovers by invading their quasi-private space to meet some unnamed and unsatisfied need

of his own.[135]

In these same two stanzas, Lowell places the account of the speaker's voyeuristic

activities side by side with a description of his psychological and emotional suffering,

which he compares to that of two extraordinarily powerful, though dichotomous figures

of Jesus and Satan, placing himself in a type of congruency with the highest (and lowest)

echelons of the cosmos. In locating the speaker at the site of his own personal Golgotha,

"the hill's skull" (26) at the beginning of the poem's fifth stanza, Lowell points to the

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[134] The dark night of the soul has been part of Catholic mysticism since the 16th century. For more information on this consult *The Dark Night of the Soul* (2007) by St. John of the Cross and Father Benedict Zimmerman or *The Wisdom of the Christian Mystics* (2015) by Tim Freke.

[135] As Frank O'Hara wrote, no doubt to Lowell's dismay, "I don't think anyone has to get themselves to go watch lover's in a parking lot necking in order to write a poem, and I don't see why it's admirable if they feel guilty about it. They should feel guilty. Why are they snooping? What's so wonderful about a Peeping Tom?" (qtd. in Perloff).

despairing agony of Jesus of Nazareth during his crucifixion, as evidenced in the biblical

text by his cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark

15:34/Matthew 27:46). In the sixth stanza, the speaker is then aligned with Milton's

Satan in *his* dark moment of despair—"I myself am hell" (35). Lowell's speaker, like

Satan, is alone, outside of social relationship, and, in the speaker's isolation, he suffers.[136]

Lowell juxtaposes the speaker's torment with that of (according to the Biblical text)

God's son and God's great opponent Satan,[137] larger than life figures whose anguish

results from their commitment to their convictions. The suffering of Jesus and Satan is

an effect of their heroic nature, their extraordinary courage at the hands of the ultimate in

straight white patriarchal power, God himself (sic) elevating them to superhuman status.

On the other hand, to be sick in the mind is not heroic and dislocates the speaker from the

rational masculine center and thereby reduces his status. Yet, in using allusion to place

the speaking "I" in the company of Jesus and Satan, and by implication well-known

Christian mystics such as St. John of the Cross, Lowell gives his speaker, i.e., himself, at

least by association, an extraordinary status and power. While I make no claim that

Lowell seeks to connect his speaker or himself with the divinity of Jesus, the connection

with such powerful male figures as Jesus and Satan and the opportunity for the deep

change or revelation that is the promised (or at least hoped for) resolution of the "dark

night of the soul" offers the possibility of envisioning what many would understand as

the speaker's weakness, the mental illness that is the cause of this dark night, as

something associated with power—thereby diminishing the feminizing and thus

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[136] My thanks to Dr. Danielle St. Hillaire at Duquesne University for a most helpful discussion about Milton's Satan.

[137] The "maleness and whiteness" of God has long been evidence for the position of straight white masculinity at the top of the hegemonic hierarchy.

marginalizing impact of his impaired condition and reasserting his status within hegemonic masculinity.

   In these ways, Lowell projects a powerful stance within the difficulties created by his mental illness in a period that had very little understanding of the causes of or treatment for his diagnosis of manic-depression or, in today's terminology, bipolar disorder. Aligning himself with figures of power and establishing his credentials within hegemonic masculinity through his actions of othering, Lowell recovers the status that his confessions might diminish. To use another Roman Catholic reference of the period, the poem ends in limbo, as Lowell surveils one final Other, the skunks whose "hour" it is, as they "[t]hey march on their soles up Main Street: / white stripes, moonstruck eyes red fire" (95) to his back door. This final collection of others differs radically from the members of the town, the lovers, and certainly the speaker. In contrast to the humans in this community, the skunks seem to be flourishing: as they "search," "march," "swill," "jab," "drop," and "will not scare," they demonstrate the kind of manly vigor absent in the speaker. The skunks bring to the poem the force of nature, which has often been represented as the irrational feminine under the control of the rational and active masculine. In doing so, they suggest that energies exist that are beyond the control of elite straight white masculinity. As the mother skunk returns the gaze of the speaker (the only figure in the poem permitted to do so), Lowell troubles the traditional articulation of the gender binaries: male vs. female, civilization vs. nature, subject vs. object. In this final stanza, the manhood that has been both diminished and propped up throughout this poem is in a stand-off with the feral female. The skunk is not a predator—she will not kill the speaker—but her powerful scent can certainly make him sorry. So, who now is the

feminized Other? If the skunk "will not scare," what is left for him to do but retreat? And then what? Though for the moment the speaker maintains his position on the top step, mama skunk's invasion of not only his community but also his particular domestic space in order to provide for her children and ultimately their progeny indicates that the patriarchal categories that have established and reinforced his status and privilege have their limits. Some type of reckoning is forthcoming, and, as the poem ends, the outcome is unresolved. In this unstable and contingent space, the comforts, the enticements, the necessity of the ideology of straight white masculinity become evident. Although it requires unending labor to maintain, this ideology supports a narrative that assures straight white men of their entitlement to the secure continuity of place and status. By remaining within that narrative, Lowell can believe that mama skunk—despite the forces she represents—will not prevail.

Chapter 2

The Female Body, Masculine Identity, and the American Dream: Resisting the

Totalitarian Menace of Women's Liberation in Norman Mailer's *The Prisoner of Sex*[138]

Introduction

To continue the examination of intersections between the multi-faceted ideology

of straight white masculinity and American national mythology, this chapter considers

the gendering of the American Dream and the role the American Dream plays in

maintaining disparities in women's economic and social agency. What expectations does

the American Dream hold for the male body? For the female body?[139] How is the straight

white male response and resistance to Second Wave Feminism's struggle for equal rights

shaped by the expectations of the Dream and its promises? And how might the Dream be

used or repurposed to justify and maintain straight white male status and privilege?[140] To

consider these questions, this chapter turns from a focus on the genres of lyric poetry and

the personal essay as found in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* to New Journalism—a genre

of reporting that emerged in the 1960s and remained popular through most of the 1970s.

As noted earlier, Lowell's introduction of the "confessional" voice challenged the tenets

that distinguished modernist poetry, and New Journalism functioned in a similar (though

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[138] A typical definition/discussion within Mailer's oeuvre, here from "The Ninth Presidential Paper": Totalitarianism's most dangerous feature is that it "beheads individuality, variety, dissent, extreme possibility, romantic faith, it blinds vision, deadens instinct, it obliterates the past (*Presidential Papers* 183). In an essay on Mailer, Michael Glenday asserts that "[i]n political and social terms, totalitarianism cannot tolerate those who demand to express themselves independently of the system. As a result, it produces a culture marked by mediocrity, conformity, and the elimination of any human aspiration except as it serves the system" ("The Hot Breath of the Future 203).

[139] Note: Until the 21st century, only a heterosexual body was understood to play any part in the mythical ideals and aspirations of individuals in the United States.

[140] In limiting my discussion to straight white males, I do not in any way assert that this was just a white man's issue. However, in terms of the scope of this project, I do need to limit my focus to how this dominant sector of American culture, in the form of Norman Mailer, responded to the challenges of Second Wave Feminism—recognizing that within that cohort of feminists there were immense conflicts created by race/class/sexuality blind spots held by the middle-class white feminists who articulated (in their minds) THE feminist message.

not quite so disruptive) fashion within professional journalism. The practitioners of New

Journalism apply the literary principles and techniques of fiction to non-fiction reporting,

with the writer and his experience in engaging with the subject of the essay/narrative

assuming a significance and scope that traditional journalism eschewed.[141] According to

one of the founding scholars of contemporary autobiographical studies Albert E. Stone,

the emphasis on the personal in New Journalism meant that it "emerged … as an

alternative form of autobiographical discourse. For even the most surreal narratives …

are not intended to be taken as fiction" (275). Norman Mailer, having struggled

throughout the 1950s to find popular approval for his fiction, made the turn to the

autobiographical essay in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), and this form became a

significant source of his cultural relevance, status, and income in the years that followed.

In March 1971, *Harper's* magazine dedicated its entire issue to Mailer's documentation

of his "heroic" encounter with the burgeoning Women's Liberation Movement,

publishing his extended essay "The Prisoner of Sex."[142] This chapter will explore the

ways in which *Prisoner of Sex* (*Prisoner*) uses genre (New Journalism) and structure (the

hero's quest),[143] while calling upon tropes of war, displacement, and chaos to emphasize

the manifold dangers inherent in redefining women's roles. As a text of resistance to the

principles and goals of the Movement, *Prisoner* reinforces the existing boundaries that

limit women's economic and social opportunity, achievement, and mobility by

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[141] New Journalism was very much a boy's club. With the exception of Joan Didion (an admirer of Mailer) and Gail Sheehy, its best known practitioners (in addition to Mailer and Tom Wolfe) include Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Terry Southern, Gay Talese, Jimmy Breslin, David Halberstam, Pete Hamill, Mike Royko, and Joe McGinnis.

[142] The hardcover book was published in May 1971.

[143] In her incisive review of the *Harper's* edition of *Prisoner of Sex*, Annette Barnes also compares Mailer's framework for his encounter with Second Wave Feminism as a "hero['s] … journey" (269). She gives an accurate overview of the key points of his text, without (given the purpose of her ten-page article) the space for an in-depth analysis. Like his concern with the impact of "totalitarianism" on masculinity, Mailer's conflation of masculinity and the heroic is well-evidenced throughout his body of work.

controlling the extent to which women could access and exercise power in the public sphere—in other words, women's full and equal participation in the American Dream.

If Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* offers insight into how the male Other is created through various forms of gender-policing in the private sphere, Mailer's *Prisoner of Sex* serves as a primer in understanding the role gender essentialism and, specifically, the female Other plays in constructing a stable male identity in the public sphere. Published as the Women's Liberation Movement continued to gain momentum, *Prisoner* was one of the earliest literary responses to Second Wave Feminism.[144] In what follows, I will consider the essentialist view of women and the impact of their presence in the public sphere on a stable male identity as it relates to the mythology of the American Dream— the agency inherent in the ideals of equality, opportunity, access, purpose, and mobility that the Dream promises.[145] I do so accepting the premise asserted by political scientist Jane Flax that "the normative American citizen has always been a white man and, though others have won rights, he remains so" (*The American Dream in Black and White* 2). Although the American Dream has always been most accessible to straight white upper class men, Second Wave feminism sought to recalibrate this gendered advantage, asserting in the National Organization for Women's "Statement of Purpose" (1966),[146]

> NOW is dedicated to the proposition that women, first and foremost are
>
> human beings, who, like all other people in our society must have the

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[144] A survey of the literature suggests this may have been the first serious book-length opposition to the Women's Movement. It would be followed by a large surge of "Men's Rights" books including Steven Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarch* (1973), and George Gilder's *Sexual Suicide* (1973).

[145] "However variegated its applications … all notions of freedom rest on a sense of *agency*, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives. Agency, in turn, lies at the very core of the American Dream, the bedrock premise upon which all else depends" (Cullen *The American Dream* 10).

[146] NOW's "Statement" arrived 118 years after the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls released the "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," modeled on the *Declaration of Independence* and claiming the right to "autonomy, freedom, self-expression, and self-development … the whole bundle of rights, duties, and opportunities that men enjoyed" (Jillson 115).

chance to develop their fullest human potential. … We organize to initiate

or support action … in any part of this nation … to break through the

silken curtain of prejudice and discrimination against women in

government, industry, the professions, the churches, the political parties,

the judiciary, the labor unions, in education, science, medicine, law,

religion and every other field of importance in American society. (113)[147]

Given the profound changes heralded (or, as some would see it, threatened) by statements

such as this in terms of increasing women's power and presence in the public sphere, the

social upheaval of the period provides a robust context in which to consider how straight

white men respond to challenges to the norms of gender that both constitute and reinforce

their dominance and privilege.

That Norman Mailer would weigh in on the issue of women's liberation was

hardly surprising, given his standing as a public intellectual and enthusiastic agent

provocateur. Beginning in the mid-1950s with his essay "The White Negro," Mailer, as a

writer, cultural critic, and celebrity, claimed a place for himself on the transgressive

fringe of society—a nonconformist voice advocating for social change.[148] Through his

fiction, Mailer also longed to be recognized as The Great Writer of the 1950s (and no

doubt beyond) by exploring the "taboo …the mysteries of murder, suicide, incest, orgy,

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[147] Second wave feminism struggled internally not only with what Adrienne Rich named "white solipsism … [the tendency] to think, imagine , and speak as if whiteness described the world" (299), but, in addition to race, with issues of class, sexuality, ethnicity, and political and economic frameworks for theorizing the situation of women and taking action to make change. For an excellent overview of this complicated wave of movements, see McClean, "Postwar Women's History."

[148] As author and critic, Philip Beidler describes him, "[T]here is no doubt that Mailer as a literary intellectual wished to assume the mantle of '60s youth-illuminatus, at once existential prophet and pied piper. Accordingly, his career across the decade revealed a relentless, almost obsessive wish to be the voice of '60s adversarial culture in its broadest sense: a voice uniting the radical intelligentsia *and* dissenting youth in a new project of revolutionary consciousness spilling over from bohemian lofts and campus enclaves into the streets of the nation at large" (qtd. in Kimball, "Norman Mailer's American Dream"). There was one important exception to this, of course: the "dissenting youth" mostly female, who were part of the Women's Liberation Movement.

orgasm, and Time" (*Advertisements* 107) and thereby offering a new way forward for

men who were "flattened … dinched… tamped into a flat-footed class" by the totalitarian

forces of society (*Advertisements* 19).[149] However, many of America's literary critics

and a large segment of the public failed to appreciate the work that followed his best-

selling first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), a traditional war story grounded in

his experience as a soldier in the Pacific during World War II. [150] His decline in literary

status proved to be particularly difficult for Mailer because of the causal relationship he

perceived between success and manhood. In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), he

directly connects the success of *Naked and the Dead* and the consequent elevation of his

status with masculinity: "[it] moved [me] from the audience to center stage—I was on the

instant a man" (92). However, Mailer's success creates an unanticipated existential threat.

Attaining "the peak power" results in a "consequence [of] terror" at the possibility of

being displaced—and, one would assume given the connection he makes between success

and masculinity, feelings of emasculation as well (*Advertisements* 477).

Given the physical and verbal aggression that characterizes Mailer's response to

any real or perceived criticism or threat, this "terror" regarding a loss of status and

manhood appears to have shaped much of professional his life. In the six years that

followed the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer's second and third novels,

Barbary Shore (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955) received mostly mediocre reviews and

generated marginal sales. Meanwhile, other writers (e.g., William Styron, James Jones,

and John Cheever) continued to gain reputation and popularity. As Mailer describes it, "I

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[149] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "dinched" as "to be extinguished by crushing" as a cigarette
would be. Accessed 9 Sep. 2016.
[150] Mailer had left Harvard and enlisted in the Army with the intention of gaining the experience to write
The Great War Novel about World War II. *The Naked and the Dead,* published in 1948 is considered by
some to be among the best works emerging from the World War II experience.

had the freak of luck to start high on the mountain, and go down sharp while others were passing me" (*Advertisements* 476). Faced with the negative impact of "being his own man" (*Advertisements 242*) in terms of his professional and economic status, Mailer attacked those who thwarted him with accusations of inferiority and cowardice: the public who "seem[ed] to consist in nine parts of the tense tasteless victims of a mass-media culture, incapable of confronting a book unless it is successful," while the opinions of the remaining tenth part were determined by "men of large knowledge and small daring," or, as Mailer also referred to them, repeatedly, "the shits" (*Advertisements* 23, 475), i.e. critics, academics, and members of the publishing industry.[151] In another rant, Mailer pits the "snobs, arbiters, managers and conforming maniacs … [in] the world of letters" against a hypermasculine self who arouses in them the "sense at the core of their unconscious that the ambition of a writer like myself is to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous and more powerful" (*Advertisements* 22). Mailer sought status as both a rebel and as a Great Man of Letters, a paradox he recognized but could not resolve. Ironically, considering Mailer's literary aspirations, conforming to the literary tradition enabled his success and validated his manhood. Yet Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself* continues to contend that his unique destiny is to "mak[e] a revolution in the consciousness of our time. Whether rightly or wrongly, it is then obvious that I would go so far as to think it is my present and future work which will

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[151] Mailer's conflict with mass culture is observed with some sympathy by critic Ross MacDonald in his jeremiad, "Masscult & Midcult" (1960). "In Masscult (and its bastard, Midcult) everything becomes a commodity, to be mined for $$$$$, used for something it is not … Artists and writers have always had a tendency to repeat themselves, but Masscult (and Midcult) make it highly profitable to do so and in fact penalize those who don't … Although Mailer is still a Name … he has crossed up his public and his publishers by refusing to repeat himself. His reputation was made with this first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, in 1948, but he has insisted on developing, or at least changing, since then, and his three subsequent books have little in common, in either style or content, with his first great success" (27).

have the deepest influence of any work being done by an American novelist in these years" (17).

Notwithstanding his sense of destiny as well as his fighting stance toward "the shits," Mailer did not have another novel published until *The American Dream* in 1965, and it was his largely autobiographical non-fiction writing that allowed him to retain his status and influence.[152] The first of these works to gain widespread attention was the controversial essay "The White Negro" (1957) published in *Dissent* magazine. In this text, Mailer invents a version of the African American experience in order to provide a model for straight white men's uncompromising resistance to what he sees as the feminized totalitarian culture of conformity and masculine "cowardly passivity" (*Advertisements* 325) that characterized the Eisenhower years.[153] Mailer lifts up an approach to life defined by the exoticism of African American men:

> The Negro was forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square … condemns as delinquent or evil or immature … or self-destructive or corrupt … [He] live[s] in the enormous present … relinquishing pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body … g[iving] voice to … rage … and the despair of orgasm. … [There is a] new breed of adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code … The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro and for practical purposes could be considered a White Negro." (*Advertisements* 348, 341)

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[152] *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) was well reviewed by Irving Howe for its "marvelously forceful and inventive style"; *Why Are We in Vietnam* (nominated for a National Book Award in 1968); and *Armies of the Night* (won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for Arts and Letters in 1969).

[153] Shoemaker posits, "The question raised then is whether Mailer has seen 'the Negro' at all, or merely a distorted reflection, a figment of his imagination" (355).

Critic Morris Dickstein claims this essay represents "a momentous shift in American literary culture, a turn toward the dark side, the rebellious and the demonic," establishing a "new sensibility" (*Leopards* 151). Those critics writing in praise of "White Negro" failed to recognize, or at least to articulate, that Mailer's "new sensibility" reinforced racist stereotypes, "fixing in the Negro the [primitive] sensibility that will regenerate whites" (Shulman 219), and endorsed violence as essential to a healthy and productive straight white masculinity, violence that had historically been turned against African American men and women.

In essays published in *Esquire*, *The Village Voice*, *Harper's*, and *Life* and in collections that included *The Presidential Papers* (1963), *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), and *The Idol and the Octopus* (1968), Mailer regularly aired his concerns about the totalitarian forces and constraints within American society: "chastity, regularity, pomposity and the worship of the lifeless, the senseless, and the safe" (*Advertisements* 106). Indeed his fears that men like him are in danger of "losing some part or quality of our soul unless we act and act dangerously" (qtd. in Lennon 318) dominated his nonfiction work. Hence, by the time "The Prisoner of Sex" was published in *Harper's* in March 1971, Mailer had been wearing the mantle of the cultural prophet of and for straight white American masculinity for more than fifteen years, as he articulated (often in outrageous and hyperbolic ways) concerns about the effects of the infringement of a feminizing culture upon expressions of authentic masculinity. While anxieties about the manliness of the nation's men had been a preoccupation in the 1950s and early 1960s, not since Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, originally published in 1942, had a

mainstream male writer undertaken such a polemical look at the politics of gender[154]—

and, understandably so given the Women's Liberation Movement's challenges to deeply

held beliefs concerning identity, power, and the inevitability of the economic, social, and

political dominance by straight white men in the United States.

Gender and the American Dream

As discussed in Chapter 2, a symbiotic relationship exists between the ideology of

straight white masculinity and the mythology of American Identity. If American

Individualism mythologizes the connection between being a straight white American man

and possessing independence and autonomy, the American Dream does the same for

equality and agency. The classic cliché relative to the Dream is that the United States is a

country in which anyone can grow up to be President.[155] Although a false promise, it

provides support for what historian Scott Sandage describes as an "ideology of achieved

identity" (Sandage 18) that masks the historical reality of those whom institutional

systems of inequality obstruct from achieving such positions: people of color, women, the

economically, educationally, and socially disadvantaged, the disabled, non-Christians,

and the list goes on.[156] Political scientist Jennifer Hochschild notes that "the emotional

potency of the American Dream has made the people who were able to identify with it

the norm for everyone else … Those who do not fit the model disappear from the

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[154] Assorted Wylie quotes include the following: women were "an idle class, a spending class, a candy-craving class" who were turning healthy men into "tweedy, corpulent, hornrimmed dollar chasers" at women's mercy; "It is her man who worries about where to acquire the money while she worries only how to spend it so he has the ulcers" (88, 192, 207); and on and on and on for 300+ pages.

[155] The hyperbole of possibly becoming the most powerful man in the world emphasizes a kind of radical egalitarianism, but it also speaks to an underlying preoccupation with success. Improving one's position in life is inherent in the Dream, and to be a bricklayer or a steelworker or a human resource manager would certainly not carry the same kind of cachet.

[156] The first African-American male president was not elected until 2008. A woman of any race or ethnicity, a gay, lesbian, Hispanic, transsexual, atheist, Latino/a, Jewish, etc. president remains an unfulfilled hope at this time.

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collective self-portrait"—at least as this "self-portrait" exists within the white

imagination (26). The mythology of the Dream functions to expunge from the national

narrative the reality that even when marginalized populations "achieved new rights, these

usually amounted to the right to compete against well-entrenched white men in a matrix

of established law and policy that they had developed to protect their current interests and

future prospects" (Jillson 8). The Dream also provides a way to understand and

categorize those who do not achieve success—eliding the institutionalized, systemic, and

internalized obstacles they face, including discrimination, exploitation, racism,

segregation, sexism, ageism, and homophobia—and to emphasize instead some aspect of

inferiority: personal failings, irresponsibility, and/or a lack of initiative, effort, and

commitment. The possibilities that the American Dream offers—the equal opportunity

for merit-based achievement in which an individual's hard work will be rewarded by

social and economic mobility and an enhanced status and identity—reinforce Americans'

sense of their country as transformative and themselves as uniquely empowered. As such,

the Dream exerts great power culturally as it operates within a society that esteems

productivity, competition, growth, and consumption and where there are clear social,

economic, and political winners and losers.

The historian James Truslow Adams, who first articulated the specific phrase

"American Dream"[157] in *The Epic of America* (1931), had something more inclusive and

broadly defined in mind, using it to emphasize the nation's egalitarian principles during

the difficult early days of the Great Depression. He defined the American Dream as

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[157] Though Adams is credited with coining the phrase, the values and expectations grounding the mythology of the Dream had been present since the discovery of the New World. Jillson describes it as "a distinctive ideal, the American dream took shape very early in our national experience, defined the nation throughout its growth and development and today [it] remains central to our national ethos and collective self-image" (xii).

a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability and achievement. … [N]ot a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest share of what they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are. (410)

Adams's American Dream was part epistemology and part social contract, with success measured in qualitative as well as quantitative ways. However, the nation's post-World War II economic boom and geo-political expansion provided a new framework for defining success that focused on the identity-shaping values of consumption and affiliation, exemplified by cultural markers and signifiers of material success as celebrated by and experienced within the sphere of the family: a college education and white collar job; a new car and a new house in the suburbs filled with newly available technologies like television, air conditioners, automated washing machines, and other labor saving appliances; engaging in the status affirming social rituals of the country club, the cocktail party, and the backyard barbecue. The mythology of the Dream highlighted the positive qualities and outcomes of the nation's economic, political, and social systems that included the highest standard of living in the world, the world's largest economy, the availability and affordability of consumable goods, and the convenience provided by ongoing technical innovation; but the Dream also elided the systematic inequities and adverse impacts caused by racism, sexism, homophobia, discrimination, exploitation, segregation, environmental degradation, and nuclear proliferation.

The mythology of the American Dream, like that of American Individualism, is prescriptive of men's economic performance in the public domain, but (unlike American Individualism) it requires a family to make it complete. A common position held by experts within the realm of the social sciences of the 1950s and 1960s (and, in some schools of thought, even in the present moment) is articulated by sociologist Morris Zelditch in 1955: "the American male, *by definition,* must provide for his family. He is responsible for the support of his wife and children. His *primary area of performance* is the occupational role … and his *primary function* in the family is to supply an 'income' to be the breadwinner" (339).[158] Hence, women, limited to the "expressive" and homemaking roles within the family, operate in support of the male's "instrumental role," while maintaining clear distinctions between the role of women and that of men (Zelditch 315). Within this articulation of the economy of the American family, women could only experience the Dream as a gift from her father and/or as a form of exchange from her husband. She could not access the Dream herself, a reality that shaped women's identity—reinforcing a hierarchy in which women are dependent beneficiaries of men's largesse, i.e., lesser rather than co-equal. Her productive contribution occurred via her fertility and in unpaid domestic and child-rearing labor.

Of course, the gender-specific nature of social roles was hardly a new concept, having been an intrinsic part of multiple twentieth-century discourses—economic, scientific, religious, to name but a few—all of which placed the father at the top of the family hierarchy. The middle class, white, heteronormative family of 1969 with a husband, wife, and 2.3 children (Hagewan and Morgan), in which success is understood

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[158] Zelditch also makes the claim that "The more expressive type of male, as a matter of fact, is regarded as 'effeminate,'" [which he then he follows with this feminizing assertion] *and has too much fat on the inner side of his thigh* (339; emphasis added).

in terms of the ability to consume and prosper, supported by a male breadwinner with a wife at home managing the domestic, would have been recognizable to economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen at the turn of the twentieth-century as a key metric of male status and identity,[159] as, indeed, it remained throughout the twentieth-century. The consumer capitalist culture continued to thrive on this domestic dynamic: employers would find it easier to make claims on male workers whose families were exclusively dependent on one income; the pressure to consume in order to provide public evidence of success would reinforce the need for men to be productive in the professional/public sphere; and, of course, with women either limited to the home or segregated in low-paying pink collar jobs, competition for high-paying positions was reduced. These complementary gender roles, along with other social forces, facilitated the economic, social, and political status quo and, as such, were often invisible—experienced simply as how things should be.[160] Thus, the values and expectations underpinning the American Dream were a valuable tool in sustaining straight white men's identity and status.

NOW, in its "Statement of Purpose" (1966), vigorously contested this standpoint, emphasizing a sharply different economy of the family, but maintaining the family unit as fundamental:

> WE REJECT the current assumptions that a man must carry the sole
>
> burden of supporting himself, his wife, and family, and that a woman is

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[159] See: *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

[160] To demonstrate just how difficult it is to see these matters accurately, consider the following riddle that really stumped me when I first heard it when I was 10 in 1970 – about the time that Mailer was "discovering" Women's Liberation. "A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies instantly, and the son is taken to the nearest hospital. The doctor comes in and exclaims "I can't operate on this boy." "Why not?" the nurse asks. "Because he's my son," the doctor responds. How is this possible?" Of course the answer is that the surgeon is the boy's mother. The fact that I found this riddle perplexing 45 years ago is sad, but understandable. What is amazing is that a study at Boston University found that, in 2016, 85% of children and 86% of college students participating in a study STILL found this riddle confounding (Barlow).

automatically entitled to lifelong support by a man upon her marriage, or

that marriage, home and family are primarily woman's world and

responsibility. … We believe that a true partnership between the sexes

demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the

responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their

support. ("Statement of Purpose")

Given the strong response within the Women's Liberation Movements (and other

movements) toward eliminating existing boundaries and rebalancing participation and

influence in the public sphere, the pervasive systems that had seemed to prove straight

white masculinity's unique superiority seemed in jeopardy, thereby placing masculine

authority in jeopardy as well. Sociologist Michael Kimmel observes that, with the onset

of the Industrial Revolution, "American men began to link their sense of themselves as

men to their position in the volatile marketplace, to their economic success … Now

manhood had to be proved" (*Manhood* 6). He goes on to assert that the impact of Second

Wave Feminism (as well as other liberatory movements[161]) on male identity—which he

describes as that "impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously

stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero"—was devastating. And, why would it

not be, as enacting the vision articulated within NOW's "Statement of Purpose" would

impact men's roles significantly in terms of status and power in the family by eliminating

the tasks, responsibilities, and opportunities that served to differentiate the place of men

from that of women. The forceful demands for a redistribution of power by women that

challenged the dominant political, social, and economic structures called into question

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[161] Those liberatory movements included: the Civil Rights Movement, Chicano Civil Rights, Gay
Liberation, and the American Indian Movement, along with movements that challenged the dominant
power structure in many forms, including Environmental, Anti-Nuclear, and Anti-War movements.

systemic inequalities that often "go-without-saying" (Barthes 11) and in doing so struck a blow at straight white men's veneer of inevitable dominance—exposing its contingent nature. As Kimmel describes it in *Manhood in America*, "[t]he constant search for some masculine terra firma upon which to ground a stable identity had never provided firm footing … [and in the 1960s] [a]ll the marginal groups whose suppression had been thought to be necessary for men to build secure identities began to rebel" (174). Given that straight white male identity had been shored up by negative assumptions about so-called inferior segments of the population, the disruptive assertions and actions of these groups as they demanded the right to equal treatment, opportunity, access, purpose, and mobility (all attributes of the American Dream) could not help but arouse fears about a diminished masculinity, potentially "weak, timid, frightened" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 4)—or, as androcentric criticism is often framed, feminine or homosexual.

Modernity's confidence in the ability of science to settle instances of cultural uncertainty has been, not surprisingly, applied to matters of gender identity as well. During the Great Depression when millions of men lost their positions in that volatile marketplace, a new means of affirming masculinity was developed within the social sciences. In 1936, Lewis Terman, creator of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Quotient Test (1916/1937) and his colleague Catherine Cox Miles developed the M-F (Male-Female) scale "that measured gendered behaviors, attitudes, and information by which parents could plot their child's 'mental masculinity and femininity'—the successful acquisition of gender identity." An individual's response (usually in early adolescence) to an inventory of 456 items positioned her or him along a continuum with masculinity at one end and femininity at the other. A major purpose of the test was to "serve as an 'early

warning system' for future homosexuality" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 108).[162] If the test scores

were not quite where they needed to be to establish a normal gender formation, then steps

could be taken to guide and move one's son or daughter in the proper direction on the

scale. Given more current understandings about gender and sexuality, this evaluative

process evokes alarm and antipathy. However, it also speaks to the insecurity of

generations of Americans regarding the development of and the need for evidence of

"normal" gendered behaviors/performance in their children.

By the late 1960s, research in the social sciences was undermining the validity

claims for such tests,[163] calling into question whether the behaviors, attitudes, and

aptitudes attributed to the binary of male/female biological sex resulted from an innate,

fixed essence and demonstrating instead that they were the result of learned behavior,[164]

a social construction. Kate Millet puts this new perspective simply and bluntly in *Sexual

Politics*, "the sexes are inherently in everything alike save reproductive systems,

secondary sexual characteristics, orgasmic capacity, and genetic and morphological

structure" (93). The impact of this seismic shift in thinking about sex/gender continues to

be felt in the 21st century, which indicates the high level of angst and apprehension it

must have aroused in the historical moment for those invested in an essentialist definition

of gender difference. In *Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer discusses two such studies. The first is a

scientific study, "'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' as Scientific Law: Psychology Constructs the

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[162] "The M-F test was perhaps the single most widely used inventory to determine the successful acquisition of gender identity in history and was still being used in some school districts into the 1960s. The test also formed the basis for virtually all studies of gender-role acquisition ever since" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 137, 138).
[163] I am using "validity" in the social science sense, i.e., that a test measures what it is designed to measure.
[164] Of course this was also a philosophical concern of the period epitomized by the work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.

Female" (Weisstein 1968) (published in *Sisterhood is Powerful* [1970]),[165] in which the

subjects "were asked to identify which of two piles of a clinical test, the *TAT* had been

written by males, and which … had been written by females. Only four students out of

twenty identified the piles correctly, and this was after one and half months of intensively

studying the differences between men and women." [166] One of the findings of Weisstein's

study held that concerning "the differences between men and women … the teachings

themselves are simply erroneous" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 128). Mailer speculates about whether

"it [is] possible that women had come to identify themselves with qualities the culture

called male, and so had begun to give answers more manly than men,"[167] and his over-

reaction (the women were *not* more manly, simply not distinguishable) suggests that the

inability to discern gender disempowers men. In the second study (also featured in

Sisterhood), "the ability of judges, chosen for their clinical expertise, to distinguish male

heterosexuals from male homosexuals on the basis of three widely used clinical

projective tests—the Rorschach, the TAT, and the MAP (Make a Picture Story test), *was

no better than chance*" (129; emphasis in Mailer). Mailer's apprehension is palpable as

he contemplates what is now considered the fluidity of gender. The lack of clear

boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual men also raises a major concern for

Mailer because the possibility that "demonstrating that heterosexuals could not be

distinguished from homosexuals might have been stating that all men *are* homosexual but

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[165] In supporting his claim to carry out "research" on the social and moral implications of Women's Liberation, Mailer consults a handful of essays in *Sisterhood is Powerful*—choosing for the most part those that were the most provocative.
[166] The *TAT* (Thematic Apperception Test) is a diagnostic psychological test involving the subject's understanding of what is happening in ambiguous images, from which the subject creates a narrative. The projection involved in this task and the patterns of response offered are believed to identity a wide range of personality characteristics.
[167] This reference is to Mailer's *Prisoner of* Sex, pages 128-29. Henceforth, all references to this text will be noted parenthetically with page number only.

for their choice not to be" (129).[168] Mailer's reaction to the prospect of permeable borders between men and women and between heterosexual and homosexual men reflects the anxiety aroused by the unmooring of straight white masculine identity from the security of fixed biological constraints. Mailer declares these possibilities evidence of a "crisis of civilization" (170) and goes to tortuous lengths (discussed later in this chapter) to restore these borders and the hierarchy of dominance and power they maintain.

New Journalism and the Prophetic Voice

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson understand "autobiographical truth [as] resid[ing] in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (16). A similar (though not identical) relationship exists between the journalist (traditional or "new") and the reader, as the journalist invites the reader to better appreciate or comprehend some aspect of the world or events of the day through the journalist's eyes and pen. In New Journalism, the writer uses his personal experience with the issue at hand.[169] Both autobiographers and journalists thus seek to read and make meaning of experiences and events through narratives they control that are then consumed by a public shaped by an expectation of their authenticity. In both cases, the *ethos* or authority of the writer "depends on the narrator's winning and keeping the reader's trust in the plausibility of the narrated experience and the credibility of the narrator" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 34).[170]

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[168] Mailer apparently worried extensively about whether or not he was homosexual (Lennon 165).

[169] As noted above, this gendered pronoun is deliberate. The New Journalism cohort consisted almost solely of men.

[170] In this quotation, Smith and Watson are speaking only about the autobiographer. However, New Journalism, having made a deliberate connection between the role of the journalist and the life of the writer, calls for a similar appeal to the reader's belief in the integrity of the writer.

Mailer's work in *Prisoner* strains both plausibility and credibility, as the repeated intrusion of his personal mythology and ideology transforms the text into a kind of jeremiad. The flexibility of New Journalism allows Mailer to adopt a stance that echoes those of the prophets in the Tanakh.[171] If there was ever a writer that channeled the prophetic voice, that writer was Norman Mailer. Morris Dickstein pronounced him "the prophet of the orgasm" (154); Diana Trilling compared his moral sensibility to that of Moses (qtd. in Kimball); and, in a televised conversation with Marshal McLuhan, Mailer was introduced as "the prophet of hip and the probable conscience of the nation" (McLuhan). He spoke as prophets do, condemning social failures, and calling for change involving a return to a particular type of patriarchal orthodoxy.[172] His nonfiction work established a vision of straight white manhood from which he did not deviate, taking on those who challenged him with the intensity of Jeremiah and the brutal rhetoric of Amos. Thus New Journalism's emphasis on "personality, energy, drive, bravura … [and] style …"; its promulgation of the use of any "literary device" to "excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally" (Wolfe); and, no doubt most importantly, its placement of writers as "the primary figure of their work" often adopting one or more "persons" in the addition to the role of journalist (Olster 48) fit Mailer well. New Journalism legitimized his inclination to give himself a prominent presence in his nonfiction work, as he represented his own opinions about and engagement with events as facts, enhancing them

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[171] The Tanakh is also known as the Hebrew Bible and, among Christians, the Old Testament.
[172] This dissertation understands patriarchy as "male-based power and regimes of gender enforcement" that maintain the subordination of women and other marginalized forms of masculinity (DuPlessis, *Purple* 10).

with a literary flair that gave him a foot in the camps of both the popular and the critical/intellectual.[173]

Albert Stone asserted that New Journalism and other "innovative forms of autobiographical literature today are … attempts to recreate a self amid and against a variety of cultural cross currents and forces which limit or deny that possibility (276). Mailer had been critiquing and condemning a particular set of these "currents and forces" since the mid-1950s. Objecting to the "totalitarianism of the totally pleasant personality" (*Advertisements* 278) and "rag[ing] at the cowardice of our time which has ground down all of us into the mediocre compromises of what had been once our light-filled passion to stand erect and be original" (*Advertisements* 23), Mailer's conflation of phallic imagery and productivity and his scathing attitude toward the submission and superficiality associated with the feminine "pleasant" insists that anything less than a full-on performance of masculine dominance dilutes male power and inhibits men's ability to create both biologically and cerebrally. His use of the inclusive "us" emphasizes the gender (as well as the sexuality and race) of the victims of this national predicament — straight white men like himself, who by their birthright both desired and believed themselves entitled to agency, i.e., "to be born free to wander, to have adventure, and to grow on the waves of the violent … and the unexpected" ("Superman" 39). In his works up to and including *Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer contends that these bold souls have been stripped of their creative potency by the compromises required by the nation's feminizing culture.

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[173] Fulfilling Mailer's long-held (and expressed) "desire to be successful while still being taken seriously" (D'Amore 72).

Mailer's decision to frame his experience in the third-person throughout *Prisoner* presents an interesting interpretive challenge as doing so puts several genres and literary conventions in play.[174] This action "disrupt[s] the expectation of first-person intimacy" (Smith and Watson 74), which, given Mailer's assumption of a prophetic persona, seems appropriate—the prophet possesses a very different status and social location from those receiving "the word." Mailer's use of the third-person also calls upon the conventions of biography in which a writer records the challenges and accomplishments of an important and esteemed "he." In this case, Mailer is the subject, the "he," who is that esteemed man. Yet because the text with its wealth of autobiographical material also makes it clear that the "teller and protagonist are one and the same" (Smith and Watson 7), Mailer, as protagonist, can call upon the reader's sympathies in his struggles with the antagonist, which in this case is those in support of the equalizing themes of the Women's Liberation Movement. Third person also lends itself to Mailer's interest in the hero. As theorist Jean Starobinski writes, "Autobiographical narrative in the third person accumulates and makes compatible events glorifying the hero who refuses to speak his name" (77). Finally, the distancing effect of third-person effaces (to some degree) potential judgments of bullying and egomania, as the narrator merely records the ways in which his subject (himself) has been compelled to take certain actions and positions.

If Robert Frost had a "lover's quarrel with the world" (350), Norman Mailer had more of a fist fight—at once provoking others in both his writing and personal encounters

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[174] Mailer also used this conceit in several of his nonfiction works including his Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel / The Novel as History* (1968), as did fellow New Journalists like Tom Wolfe.

while portraying himself as the victim of their aggression[175]—always ready to punch or counterpunch his way into the fray, literary or otherwise. Throughout his autobiographical works, Mailer's "sense of being 'I'" (Eakin 4 and passim)—his identity and status—coalesces in the tension between being the agent *and* the victim of conflict, aggression, and opposition. Willie Morris, editor-in-chief of *Harper's* magazine, leverages Mailer's embrace of the adversarial role in the magazine's promotion of the "Prisoner of Sex" issue. To do so, Morris purchased "a ten [column]-by-fifteen [column] ad in *The New York Times* on publication day featuring the cover of the *Harper's* issue under this headline: 'The Favorite Target of Women's Lib Chooses His Weapon. Harper's Magazine'" (Lennon 435). The ad's call to action at the bottom of the page challenges the reader to "Pick up a Copy. Before Your Newsstand is Picketed." The ad's large, bold, black headline, all in capital letters, suggests a strong and unyielding barricade.

The image of the cover of *Harper's*, placed in the center of the ad, uses the same font to feature "Norman Mailer" just below the magazine's title, followed by a tagline emphasizing his authority on the issues of the day—"on women and men, liberation and subjection, the body, the spirit, and physical love." The article's title is set in an even larger bolded font, laid out in two lines; "THE PRISON" (no hyphen) runs from the left

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[175] The social enabling of Mailer's propensity toward violence becomes clear by the response to a drunken Mailer stabbing his second wife Adele, nearly killing her, after she taunted him, "[C]ome on you little faggot, where are your cojones, did your ugly whore of a mistress cut them off, you son of a bitch" (Lennon 282). To which Irving Howe, literary critic and found of *Dissent* magazine responded by saying, "Among 'uptown intellectuals' there was this feeling of shock and dismay, and I don't remember anyone judging him. The feeling was that he'd been driven to this by compulsiveness, by madness. He was seen as a victim" (qtd. in Kimball "Norman Mailer's American Dream"). Kimball adds sarcastically, but also appropriately (at least to this reader), "Readers who wonder how stabbing his wife could make Mailer a 'victim'—and who ask themselves further, what Mailer's being a victim would then make Adele – clearly do not have what it takes to be an 'uptown intellectual' in the Irving Howe mold."

edge to the right edge of the cover, with "ER OF SEX" directly below it.[176] For men (and women) concerned about the disruptive possibilities of the Women's Movement, the connection between their potential loss of freedom and privilege and the constraints of prison would resonate. Any feelings of trepidation would be reinforced by the cover, as the paired categories of "liberation and subjection" immediately follow those of "women and men," with liberation and women placed first in these categories, and "subjection and men" listed afterward.[177]

Morris's strategy worked well and "nine days after the magazine arrived on newsstands, it had sold out" (Lennon 435). Hyperbole and vivid imagery are the life blood of advertising, calling for the consumers' ATTENTION. However, their use here can also be understood as both reflecting and playing upon the anxiety the Women's Movement created—emphasizing the need for straight white men to re-establish control. In the scenario suggested by the ad, Mailer is, as usual, both antagonist and victim—but the ad, in making his adversary an idea (Women's Lib) rather than an individual or group of people, evokes a danger that is amorphous, invasive—like cancer or communism (indeed, the color of the cover of the actual magazine was a bright red)—something that requires a strong, hard-hitting response. Thus, the ad reinforces misgivings that Women's Lib threatens not only Mailer but his like-minded, admiring audience.[178] Identifying *Harper's* as a weaponized agent to be used against this menace makes clear where the

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[176] A thumbnail image of this cover of Harper's can be found at https://harpers.org/archive/1971/03/.

[177] Given the fact that the riot at Attica State Prison had taken place just two months prior to the publication of Mailer's essay in *Harper's*, an event that received a vast amount of coverage in the media, the stark design of the cover may have tapped into public awareness of that violent debacle.

[178] An audience that, male or female, would have been likely to resist the social, economic, and political displacement the women's movement's pursuit of equality would create.

sympathies of the magazine's leadership (and its readers) lie.[179] During a time of national

discord, when pickets, demonstrations, and protests oftentimes turned violent, the image

of picketing creates a sense of foreboding—a disruption of the peace, the imposition of

an illegitimate blockade of hostile women between *Harper's* (and, by extension,

Mailer's) readers and their desired news source. Proposing that the forces of Women's

Lib would be called into action because of Norman Mailer's essay inflates his

importance, placing him in the position of the hero leading the charge against the

invasive dangers of Women's Lib,[180] using his mighty, phallic pen to subdue and conquer

the Other's wayward and obstreperous threat.[181]

This Is War: Norman Mailer's Heroic American Dream

The figure of the hero and the theme of heroism appear frequently in Mailer's

fiction and nonfiction. He had, on more than one occasion, envisioned himself in such a

role—"a hero for [his] time" (*Advertisements* 284)—taking spirited and, at times,

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[179] Self-defined as a well-respected, cerebral journal, the home to many a New Journalistic essay, which offers a "unique perspective on politics, society, the environment, and culture" ("Harper's History").

[180] Mailer had what can only be described as a compulsion to be the center of attention, and in "taking on" the Women's Liberation Movement, he was guaranteed to gain the attention, burnishing his "fame" among the era's public intellectuals, fellow writers, etc. Mailer writes in *Prisoner* "To be the center of any situation was … the real marrow of his bone—better to expire as a devil in the fire than an angel in the wings" (16). Not surprisingly, Mailer was also immensely competitive, and Millet's great success with *Sexual Politics*, the admiring reviews and "best-seller" status for a book that included a disparaging assessment of Mailer and his literary heroes would have irked Mailer. In addition, as a man with several ex-wives, always a current wife, and (at this time) five children, expensive projects [the film *Maidstone*], a political campaign for Mayor of New York City, as well as a fairly extravagant life style in general, Mailer always needed money. As he writes in *Advertisements for Myself* about his life after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, "a new life had begun … I had gone through the psychic labor of changing a good many modest habits in order to let me live a little more happily as a man with a name which could arouse quick reactions in strangers … I had learned to like success—in fact I had probably come to depend on it, or at least my new habits did" (240). A case could be made that *Prisoner* is the attempt to make a quick buck by taking on the Movement du jour—while maintaining his cultural relevance and celebrity. Regardless of his motivation, what Mailer has created—the choices he did and did not make in crafting this book—remain a useful and valid object of analysis.

[181] Mailer's unique powers and the danger posed by the Women's Movement are emphasized in the preface to his essay, which states, "no writer in America could have illuminated as Norman Mailer has the deep underlying issues raised" by advocates for women's liberation. His focus is "the most perplexing, not to say *threatening problem of all:* the private relations [i.e., sex and power] between men and women" (qtd. in Barnes 269; emphasis added).

belligerent action to restore straight white masculinity to its proper place as unbridled, forceful, and potent. For instance, about his decision to write a weekly column in the *Village Voice*,[182] Mailer writes, "This was not the time for peace: there was a generation which was ready to be awakened, a task for whose heroic proportions some part of me seemed to consider myself divinely suited … a journalist whose words would cut the smog of apathy, gluttony … and the general victory of all that is smug, security-ridden and mindless in the American mind" (*Advertisements* 283-84).[183] Matters concerning the liberation of women and subjection of straight white men were of perpetual interest to Mailer, and he framed the conflict between the forces for one versus the other as tantamount to war. In Mailer's worldview, there was always an enemy to be resisted, an adversary to be dominated—and in almost every case, that adversary involved institutions, systems, and/or individuals that sought to feminize or domesticate men, i.e., take away men's power and status. Mailer perceived the agency of straight white men as essential to the well-being of the nation and the various permutations of this agency were how he defined the American Dream—a Dream that Mailer believed had been deliberately repressed, particularly in the middle years of the 20th century. He articulated this ideal in "Superman Goes to the Supermarket" first published in *Esquire* magazine (November, 1960):

> Since the First World War, Americans have been leading a double life,
> and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other
> underground; there has been the history of politics which is concrete,
> factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of

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[182] A publication that Mailer co-founded in 1955.
[183] No small undertaking when limited to approximately 700 words per week.

actions of some of these men;[184] and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation. (*Presidential Papers* 38)[185]

For Mailer, the Dream of the nation's manhood lies in the rejection of totalitarian limitations and the recovery of repressed desires—resulting in a fusion of brutality and orgasmic pleasure.

The subject of the article, John F. Kennedy, was in Mailer's estimation the "hero America needed … a man whose personality might suggest contradiction and mysteries … because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation … [because] a hero embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow" ("Superman 42).[186] Mailer anticipated that Kennedy's heroic nature (as demonstrated by his war service, youth, and physical beauty) would reclaim and encourage access to that second path toward the Dream, which contemporary social orthodoxy had made largely unattainable. Kennedy was the "heir apparent to the psychic loins" of America, "the romantic dream of itself … the mirror of its unconscious" (59)—an unconscious that demanded the free exercise of dominant masculinity. All of which is to say, electing Kennedy would be a liberatory act, unleashing new possibilities for men like Mailer.

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[184] Mailer's language seems to include all Americans, but both the "history of politics" ("Superman" 38) and the history of the unpunished covert/subversive impulse were in his time principally the province of straight white men.

[185] Paradoxically, Mailer's personal ambition, to write the Great American Novel that would place him in the literary pantheon, places him squarely within the mainstream American Dream. His challenge was to tap into the "subterranean river" to access that Dream, and there is no critical or popular consensus that he ever accomplished this goal.

[186] For reasons known only to Mailer, in this section of his essay, he conflates the terms fantasy and myth. They are separate though not dissimilar concepts, and the way in which they are used suggests that Mailer is not making a significant distinction.

Despite Mailer's optimism, straight white masculinity in 1964 was not noticeably different in its manifestations than in 1960. Nevertheless, Mailer remained steadfast in his conviction that the second path was the only one that could be taken by real men—leaving the first for women and faint-hearted or homosexual men. From Mailer's perspective, it was not enough to say that these two modes of being were different. Rather, they were paradoxical and in perpetual conflict for the soul of American manhood.

Mailer's revisionist take on the American Dream also surfaces in his fictional work. Through that fiction and its portrayal of violence, often sexualized, against women, the reader gains a better sense of the realities of the "subterranean" locus of "ecstasy and violence."[187] Hence, to gain a better understanding of Mailer's intervention into Second Wave Feminism's assertions of female power, a brief consideration of the ideology of male dominance at work in his fiction proves useful. By the time Mailer had written *Prisoner of Sex*, his aggressive rhetoric and fictional portrayals of sex, violence, and sexual violence had long been a distinctive characteristic of his critically admired work, about which, critic Philip Rahv notes not so admiringly, "[Mailer] nearly always identifies with its perpetrators, almost never … its victims." Of particular relevance to this analysis is Mailer's only novel of the 1960s, *An American Dream* (1965), which

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[187] Consider one of Mailer's most highly praised short stories, "The Time of Her Time," in which the protagonist, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, weaponizes his penis, dubbing it "The Avenger." (Note: In *Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer at one point designates his penis as "The Retaliator" [14]). O'Shaugnessy was the protagonist of Mailer's novel *The Deer Park*, about whom Mailer wrote, "I was writing an implicit portrait of myself" (*Advertisements* 238). Having failed to bring a recent conquest to orgasm during an early sexual encounter, O'Shaugnessy rapes her anally: "I turned her over suddenly on her belly, my avenger wild with the mania of the madman, and giving her no chance, holding her prone against the mattress with the strength of my weight, I drove into [her] … the avenger rode down to his hilt … and I wounded her, I knew it, she thrashed beneath me like a trapped animal, making not a sound" (*Advertisements* 502-503). This forcible violation stimulates her to the extent that she achieves her first orgasm ever. It is quickly followed by a second orgasm, triggered by O'Shaughnessy's whisper of "You dirty Jew" in her ear. (503). James Shapiro, reviewing a retrospective of Mailer's work that included "The Time of Her Time" for *The New York Times*, describes it as "a shocking story … And yet, with all its flaws … a masterpiece of short story fiction."

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revisits the act of murder as a form of straight white men's emancipation that "opens the limits of the possible for oneself" (*Advertisements* 354)—a prophylactic intervention to ward off the negative effects of "a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled" (329) that Mailer first critiqued in his controversial essay "The White Negro" (1957). In that text, Mailer endorses and promotes actions that channel "psychopathic," "primitive," and violent impulses as enacted by "Negro" men, so that straight white men can avoid being "jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage … [being] trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society" (*Advertisements* 339). [188]

In Mailer's *American Dream*, the protagonist, Steven Rojack, a man living the mainstream version of that Dream, including financial prosperity as well as social and professional success (and, in the somewhat recent past, wartime heroism), enters into Mailer's dream of freedom by murdering his demanding, wealthy, corrupt, upper class wife[189]—snapping her neck after she mocked him by revealing that not only did she not love him *but* she had also engaged in anal sex-play (one of Rojack's favorite predilections) with several lovers, who were very impressed by her technique ("[They] [d]idn't know such things went on outside a Mexican whorehouse") (30).[190]

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[188] Perhaps one of the most concise and cogent critiques of Mailer's appropriation of an imagined black experience comes from political theorist, George Shulman, who writes "[A]s Mailer embodies [an] existentialist myth in 'the Negro,' he repeats the racial coding and myth of regenerative violence at the core of the culture he claims to resist … Mailer fixes African Americans in symbolic place as he puts on blackface; he uses African American culture to serve white renewal" (220).

[189] Mailer's choice to make Deborah a victim of sexual abuse by her father, using the incestuous abuse as a trope to signal the "corruption" of the wife (and this wealthy family) and further justifying her violent death serves as a reminder of the ways in which cultural silencing buttresses straight white male power.

[190] Unwittingly, Mailer offers proof for a well-known feminist aphorism "Men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them."

Subsequently, Rojack anally rapes their maid[191], after which he throws his wife's body out of a tenth story window. Later, as he reflects on these events, he realizes just how much more violence he would like to unleash on his deceased wife.

> I felt a mean rage in my feet. It was as if in killing her, the act had been too gentle, I had not plumbed the hatred … I had an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple and kill her again, kill her good this time, kill her right. I stood there shuddering from the power of this desire. (8)[192]

If Robert Lowell experienced desire in his relationship with his grandfather as he observed his demonstrations of dominant masculinity, Mailer's re-envisioning of the American Dream also speaks to a desire for dominance, albeit of a much more brutal sort, connecting national identity, gender identity, and sexualized violence.[193] Critic Donald L. Kaufmann describes *An American Dream* as

> a dramatic critique on those nuances underlining the ambiguous values in contemporary America, on those individual roots of American aspirations and ideals. And what results are peculiar inversions—*for does not every American male, lulled by mass media sex and violence, secretly wish to*

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[191] The kind of "romanticized" rape that begins without the woman's consent, but, in the way of male/ pornographic fantasy, results ultimately in her ecstasy and gratitude.

[192] Rojack then goes on to fantasize about consuming (cannibal-style) both women (50-51).

[193] Richard Poirier, one of the founders of the Library of America described it this way, "It is … an introspective novel, and in reading it – a very different activity from thinking afterward about those Terrible Things done by its hero – I was most often reminded … of the recent poetry of Robert Lowell [!]. Mailer and Lowell are alone … in having created the *style* of contemporary introspection, at once violent, educated, and cool. Their language substantially extends the literary resources of English, and people will later turn to them in any effort to determine the shapes our consciousness has been taking." Connecting Lowell with Mailer in this way seems an over-reach—but, while Mailer's "confessions" are more scatological and violent, one can trace Lowell's influence in opening up doors that until then had remained tightly closed.

commit incest or murder his wife?[194] Such individual fantasies become

nightmares when interpreted by the cultural norm … The American

Dream becomes another cultural mode of regimenting the individual, of

rarefying and stultifying his true nature. To exist in one's own dream

world is to avoid having one's ideals institutionalized. … As his

protagonist acts out his dream, the reader can see what stuff American

dreams are made of—*all the magic of murder and sex*. (emphasis added)

Though Kaufman's assessment leans toward hyperbole, the presence of violence and

abuse within the family unit does not seem too much of a stretch for Mailer (at least in

terms of murdering the wife). He once stated in an interview that "most men who

understand women at all feel hostility toward them. At their worst, women are low sloppy

beasts" ("An Impolite Interview" 131). As Mailer portrays women, they are, in addition

to being bestial, also a danger to men, i.e., "all women were killers" and "women must

murder [men] unless we possess them altogether" (*American Dream* 82, 100). Mailer

agonizes over his perception that the feminized, regimented, and homogenized nature of

American life, encouraged by the institutionalized workings of the mainstream American

Dream, will kill the mythologized power of the individual—a belief system essential to

the nation and its people, i.e., men. He warns, "As cultures die, they are stricken with the

mute implacable rage of that humanity strangled within them … as it dies, a civilization

opens itself to the fury of those betrayed by its meaning, precisely because that meaning

was finally not sufficiently true to offer a life adequately large" ("Tenth Presidential

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[194] It is difficult to believe that this statement is being made unironically, but the respectful even reverent tone of the article suggests that it is. Donald L. Kaufman is the author of two studies on Norman Mailer: *Norman Mailer: The Countdown* (1969) and *Norman Mailer: Legacy and Literary Americana* (2014). The article that this excerpt comes from was published in the first edition of the *Norman Mailer Review* (2007).

Paper" 210). Within Mailer's fictional world, those straight white men who have been "betrayed" by the limits placed upon them by societal norms often turn their fury against female adversaries. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett articulates the connection between the ideology of straight white masculinity and the antagonistic forces arrayed against women in Mailer's dark imagining of the American Dream, writing, "Rojack is the last surviving white man as conquering hero. Mailer's *An American Dream* is a rallying cry for a sexual politics in which diplomacy has failed and war is the last political result of a ruling caste" (16). And, where there is war, there is death and destruction.

In Mailer's work, the answer to what "a life adequately large" would look like demonstrates why the literary context is so important in analyzing *Prisoner*. The contrast between Mailer's vision/version of the American Dream—freedom as license to exercise male power to its most destructive extent—and that of Second Wave feminists is more than extreme.[195] The majority of feminists were seeking a distinctly different form of the "collective ideal," one that had little to do with "primitive desires"—less interested in "divorcing oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that unchartered journey in the rebellious imperatives of the self" (*Advertisements,* "White Negro" 341) than in creating a radically altered society that would result in true equality in both the private *and* public domains. Though sexual freedom held a place of importance within the Women's Movement, there were also very practical concerns. The imperative to act on the part of the Movement's advocates was multifaceted, with a significant concern that women's economic position had deteriorated over the course of the most recent decades

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[195] However, the radical feminists take an approach must closer to Mailer's, and the attention he gives them in *POS* suggests that he found their claims a better target for his outrage, e.g., Valerie Solanas in the *SCUM Manifesto* writes, "Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, and destroy the male sex" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 46).

of the 20th century.[196] NOW's Statement of Purpose articulates the importance of "equality, freedom, and human dignity"—ideals that do not countenance the excesses of murder and rape.

Visionaries and theorists throughout the Movement asserted their own critical and prophetic voices, and works like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* affirmed women's right to exercise critical judgment of the prevailing institutions and systems and the straight white men who were privileged within them. Of course none of this fit Mailer's mythology of male dominance, i.e., the inherent need for men to subjugate women, and his reckoning with these assertions of female power proved to be a catalyst for Mailer's plunge into Second Wave Feminism. Contrary to the critical consensus that accepted if not embraced Mailer's implicit and explicit violence against women, in *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett emphatically did not. Her analysis of "The Time of Her Time" finds it "his most notable exercise" of "intensive sexual hostility" (455), demonstrating a "masculine pride so desperate … it can welcome alliance with anti-Semitism" (456). She summarizes *An American Dream* (1965) as "an exercise in how to kill your wife and live happily ever after.[197] The reader is given to understand that by murdering one woman and buggering

[196] NOW's "Statement of Purpose" (1966) asserts that the "actual [economic] position of women in the United States has declined, and is declining, to an alarming degree throughout the 1950s and 60s. Although 46.4% of all American women between the ages of 18 and 65 now work outside the home, the overwhelming majority—75%—in routine clerical, sales, or factory jobs, or they are household workers, cleaning women, hospital attendants … Working women are becoming increasingly … concentrated on the bottom of the job ladder. As a consequence, full-time women workers today earn on the average of only 60% of what men earn, and wage gap has been increasing over the past twenty-five years in every major industry." Fifty years later, this difference has improved by approximately 35%. In 2015, white women earned 80.8% as a percentage of white men's earnings; Black women earned 66.8%; Hispanic women earned 61.5%; and Asian women earned 93.5% ("The Gender Wage Gap").

[197]Similarly, Elizabeth Hardwick, writing in *Partisan Review*, kicked off her review in this fashion, "*An American Dream* by Norman Mailer is a fantasy of vengeful murder, callous copulations, and an assortment of dull cruelties. It is an intellectual and literary disaster, poorly written, morally foolish and intellectually empty" (qtd. in Lennon 349).

another, Rojack became 'a man'" (20).[198] How might the hero respond to such comments? Given, Mailer's affinity for going on the attack and his reflexive misogyny, one would imagine a literary show of force that would restore any loss of status and identity and eliminate the threat. Mailer does not disappoint. His intention is encapsulated in his vigorous defense of his literary forefather, Henry Miller, from the rough treatment given Miller by Millett:

> We are looking for an accommodation of the sexes, whereas [Henry Miller] calls out for an antagonism—'[T]he eternal battle with women sharpens our resistance, develops our strength, enlarges the scope of our cultural achievements.' Yes, [Miller] cries out to us, 'the loss of sex polarity is part and parcel of the larger disintegration, the reflex of the soul's death and coincident with the disappearance of great men, great causes, great wars.' The ram wandering the ridges has come back as a prophet, and the tablets are in [Miller's] hands. 'Put woman in her rightful place.'

> But the men moving silently in all retreat pass the prophet by. It is too late to know if [Miller] is right or wrong. ***The women have breached an enormous hole in the line, and the question is only how far back men must go before they are ready to establish a front.***" (125; emphasis added)

In this call to arms, Mailer lays out the depth of the threat offered by the Women's movement in martial terms, asserting (using Henry Miller's words) that the war between

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[198] One is reminded of Mailer's "becoming a man" with the success of his first novel (*Advertisements* 92), and the interconnectedness of violence, manhood, and success in his creative and personal endeavors.

the sexes, i.e., the actions taken to "put woman in her rightful place," are essential to straight white men's achievements and therefore their identity. What follows will examine and analyze the means by which Mailer uses *Prisoner* to establish such a front of resistance.

The Prisoner of Sex: An Overview

Mailer's rhetoric, as he attempts to protect the gendered order by contesting the reasoning of Kate Millet and other feminists, is of particular value in this analysis. As he makes the case for the necessity of men's domination of women in a variety of ways in the content of his arguments, he also enacts that dominance in the form of his arguments—often through his use of fantasy, misdirection, and outright deceit.[199] Specifically, he makes use of three postures of rhetorical dominance, each of which functions to reinforce male status and power while delegitimizing the agency of the feminine Other. The first posture redefines the past to bolster a position being championed in the present moment. Rather than seeing the days when pregnancy and childbirth were very real dangers for women—before "Semmelweis uncovered the cause of puerperal fever … and … anesthesia, antiseptics, obstetrics [were available]"—as the bad old days, Mailer characterizes the elimination of these existential threats to women as the beginning of a breakdown in women's "respect [for] men" (126). In doing so, he creates an artificial binary in which the medical/technological advances that have saved countless women's lives are explicitly placed in opposition to the stability of gender relations (i.e., respect for men) and, therefore, society itself. Mailer writes, "Technology, by extending man's power over nature, reduced himself before women" (128). This

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[199] Much of what follows evokes the current trend in political discourse, which suggests, forty-five years after Mailer wrote these words, the power, adaptability, and deep entrenchment of this ideology. These postures need not always be used together, but when they are they can be quite powerful.

revisionist history lays the foundation for Mailer's stance against women's control of their fecundity via contraception and abortion.

The second posture is to call into question or flatly deny widely-accepted knowledge/science as unproven. For example, Mailer questions the fact that all embryos begin as female, stating that this assertion is based "upon scientific conclusions he could not evaluate" (131), cynically promoting skepticism and uncertainty in the face of proven science/fact. The third posture involves creating an alternative truth supported by its own set of facts with the expectation that they will be believed because of the authority of the speaker. Mailer notes and then challenges the science about the sexed (female) nature of very young embryos:

> [Mailer] … believed the … the sexes were originally as one … not on the scientific evidence which *was vastly too scanty*, but on the metaphorical feel, the metaphysical drift … *of his own thought*, which found it reasonable to assume that the primary quality of a man was an assertion … that one had to alienate oneself from nature to become a man … be perhaps even the *instrument of some larger force* in that blind goat-kicking lust which would *debase* females, *make all women cunts*. (132; emphasis added)

Projecting the subject position of a mystical prophet of straight white American masculinity, Mailer creates his own theology, anthropology, philosophy, ethics, and psychology, flavored with a hearty dash of misogyny as he recasts scientific findings based on his "own thoughts." He uses common sense stereotypes to ground his argument, i.e., men are uniquely forceful; men are alienated from and must reject nature (the

feminine); and, from the prophetic tradition, the male is God's ordained emissary. All of these points ground his argument within a coherent (if certainly debatable) ideology of gender. But Mailer's choice to expand his framework of male empowerment by making the disturbing connection between the divine imperative and the demeaning and dehumanizing of women gives pause.[200] Mailer's contention belongs to a centuries-long sequence that emphasizes the need for men to be dominant and forceful, because "man was a spirit of unrest who proceeded to become less masculine whenever he ceased to strive" (133). Clearly, the striving Mailer speaks of and the truth he creates has direct and negative implications for women: they are reduced to their genitalia; they are "cunts" to be seen "as a source of sexual gratification … or promiscuous … or a slut"; and/or they are women who deserve to be recipients of this "general term of abuse" ("Cunt").[201] What embryo would not choose to be male, if only to avoid being subject to such contempt and disparagement? Mailer reinforces a fiction as old as traditional interpretations of the Genesis story—that women must be vastly inferior to deserve such treatment at the behest of a larger force. In his bizarre fantasy, Mailer combines his contempt for women with a call to action for straight white men to follow his lead.

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[200] There are many (primarily male) critics who suggest that Mailer should not be taken seriously when he makes these statements, that he is merely running amok in his use of languages and images because that's just how he rolls [a quote here]. However, I do take this seriously because, as a writer, Mailer conceived of this (and other) misogynistic images and statements, a publisher accepted it, and an editor let it stand. And, as Harold Bloom noted, "Mailer's prime aesthetic flaw … [is a] total absence of irony" (*Norman Mailer* 3). Mailer takes himself seriously, and so do I.

[201] When Norman Mailer was first introduced to Diana Trilling, author, critic, and member of the New York Intellectuals (the group that most faithfully supported Mailer's work) at a dinner party given by Lillian Hellman, he sat down at the table, turned to Diana and said, "And how about you, smart cunt?" She was apparently charmed by this, "I am usually addressed with appalling respect: he got my attention. We became good friends." (Lennon 228). There are any number of ways to interpret this exchange, but given Mailer's use of the term in *Prisoner*, I would suggest that he used it as an equalizer, a way to, on the one hand recognize her status—"smart"—while also placing her in the category of inferior Other. In the 1950s (and even today), "cunt" is a word that jars because of its association with the extreme disrespect of women.

While Mailer's arguments in *Prisoner of Sex* have many targets within the

Women's Liberation Movement, he is particularly preoccupied with the work of Kate

Millett, whose assertion of gender as a social construction violated Mailer's eccentric

essentialism and whose criticism of his writings as patriarchal, misogynistic, and not the

work of a genius clearly got under his skin.[202] Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), an

exploration and critique of the role Western patriarchy plays in the relationships between

men and women—with particular attention to the portrayal of these relationships in

literature—offers a vivid and vigorous critique of the misogynistic treatment of women

within Western culture and, in particular, in the writings of Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence,

and Norman Mailer. Their predilection for deploying scenes of men's sexuality and

power provide a rich space for Millett to consider the dynamics between gender, culture,

and literature.[203] *Sexual Politics* was among the first books emerging from Second Wave

Feminism to offer a theoretically-grounded opposition to straight white masculine culture

and, in particular, its literary dominance. Millett's book became a best-seller and was

lauded by many in the literary establishment, e.g., Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New

York Times* book critic, who, in a two-part review in August 1970 described it as

"Supremely entertaining to read, brilliantly conceived, overwhelming in its arguments,

breathtaking in its command of history and literature … and written with such fierce

intensity that all vestiges of male chauvinism ought by rights to melt and drip away like

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[202] *Prisoner* contains multiple examples of Mailer's payback for the vigor of Millett's argument. In one instance Mailer compares Millett's writing to that of "a gossip columnist" (27), diminishing her authority as critic and scholar and placing her among the mostly female cohort of such writers—a kind of name-calling reminiscent of the school yard or Donald Trump.

[203] Millett also analyzed several works of Jean Genet, though his focus on alternative iterations of masculinity—on homosexuality, cross-dressing, and the connection between death and ecstasy—place him in a different category of analysis from Lawrence, Miller, and Mailer. There is a certain irony, given Mailer's homophobia, that Millet's positive assessment of Genet is placed after Mailer's chapter, abutting it, as it were, and giving Genet the final word.

so much fat in the flame of a blowtorch."[204] Applying a feminist critique (when such a

theoretical standpoint was still relatively new), Millet's confident and assertive voice

unapologetically makes innovative claims about these writers' text, a feminist analysis of

the relationship between gender and politics, history, psychology and sociology. Her

relentless undermining of patriarchal ideology gains her the reputation (at least among the

writers at *Time* magazine in an issue focused on Women's Liberation [date]) as the "Mao

Tse-tung of the Women's Movement."[205] *Sexual Politics*, more fairly, is labeled

"polemical" ("Who's Come a Long Way Baby?) which, of course, it is—a shot across the

bow of a governing belief system that marginalized women and supported their

domination by men.

    The Prisoner of Sex is Mailer's aggressive response to her attack (and by

extension all of the feminists who had or might consider threatening his authority, status,

and power). With its interest in defining how the opponents of the Women's Liberation

Movement should be understood and responded to, *Prisoner* can be classified as a

conservative text of hegemonic resistance to the Women's Liberation Movement and its

call to re-envision and restructure society.[206] The hyperbolic excesses and occasionally

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[204] But the reviews were not all so positive. Irving Howe, the defender of Mailer's murderous attack on his wife, Adele Morales, reviewed Millett more than her book: "[She] is a figment of the Zeitgeist, bearing the rough and careless marks of what is called higher education and exhibiting a talent for the delivery of gross simplicities in tones of leaden complexity. Brilliant in an unserious way … She has a mind of great energy but small feeling for nuance … She is the ideal highbrow popularize for the politics and culture of the New Left." And, finally, this, "there are times when one feels the book was written by a female impersonator." Millett had clearly gotten the attention of the dominant literary powers.

[205] This was during the time before Nixon's rapprochement with China when very little was known among the general public about life and conditions in China. However, the political implications of the "loss of China" wrought by Mao Tse-Tung (now Mao Zedong)'s Communist revolution continued to reverberate, and combining history with the racist fear of the "yellow peril," this designation suggests a high degree of concern about the power of Millett's revolutionary text—her own little "Red Book."

[206] In *Masculinities*, Connell defines hegemony as "the ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideas and define morality" (107); Thomas DiPiero further refines this notion, taking it one step further by defining hegemonic acts as

hysterical tone of Mailer's argument in support of an essential masculine identity makes visible the functioning and utility of a particular type of rhetoric and style. The rhetorical strategies and conventions Mailer uses to enhance his authority as a prophetic figure who can access and has knowledge of a divine truth in order to make the case for the continued subordination of women are not new—the literary canon contains too many to count. Millett describes Mailer as experiencing a "dilemma … the plight of a man whose intellectual comprehension of what is most dangerous in the masculine sensibility is exceeded only by his attachment to the malaise" (440). As Mailer roars back at the female menace, the incoherencies, inconsistencies, and lapses in logic that arise in his argument provide access to the uncertainty and fear at work within the ideology of masculinity as well as the responses employed to mitigate those feelings and perceptions.

In the analysis that follows, I will employ life-writing scholar Paul John Eakin's approach of considering the text "in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, asking what such texts can tell us about the ways in which individuals experience their sense of being 'I'" (27). Specifically, I will analyze *Prisoner of Sex* as a straight white masculinist response to threats to men's dominance by Second Wave Feminism that provides insight into the work required to maintain a cohesive straight white male identity. Given the overarching preoccupation with masculinity, power, and violence that characterizes Mailer's oeuvre, the gendered nature of the self that encounters and reacts to the ideas and individuals associated with Second Wave Feminism provides a substantive basis to consider what was perceived to be at stake by those at one pole of the debate within the historical moment. While Mailer cloaks his moral and theological claims in a concern

those involving "the production of meaning as a way of unifying and ordering people" (12). *Prisoner* easily falls within these delineations.

with the sanctity of the fertile and productive female body, much of his argument focuses on the impact of women's bodies on male potency and productivity in the private *and* public spheres—men's status, power, legitimacy—and thereby reveals anxieties about straight white men's displacement in their existing bastions of dominance by the forces of women's liberation. For this reason, I will also consider the ways in which Mailer draws upon the mythology of the American Dream (both the mainstream rendering and his own revisionist version) and how, as he does so, he reveals the Dream's connection to a gendered power dynamic that structures straight white male privilege.

Norman Mailer: Rhetorical Warrior

In *Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer emphasizes that his motivation for scrutinizing the Women's Liberation Movement lies in its (potential) connection to one of his primary concerns: "that the spirit of the twentieth century was to convert man to a machine"—thereby disconnecting men from the instinctive, the passionate, and the dominant, i.e., Mailer's revisionist definition of the American Dream. In light of this concern, Mailer entertains the possibility that "the liberation of women might be a trap" (29)—a measure the totalitarian society would use to further strip straight white men of their power by giving women control over their own fertility and by leveling the playing field in the public sphere so as to open up social, political, and economic opportunities for women.[207] New Journalism serves Mailer well here, as there is no need for him to stand aside from his well-documented male chauvinism. Indeed, when the creative team at *Harper's* chose a tagline that suggested the magazine, itself, had been transformed into an instrument of destruction by Mailer's essay, "Prisoner of Sex" ("The Favorite Target of Women's Lib

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[207] Concerns over the expanded powers and opportunities for women, and particularly regarding women's control over their fertility were not restricted to straight white men. The implications of Second Wave Feminism created disruption across the spectrum of identities.

Chooses His Weapon"), they were not simply enticing readers with an eye-catching overstatement. Though initially Mailer downplays his aggressive agenda against the Movement, across the totality of this self-mythologizing text Mailer represents himself as a heroic warrior who risks his own well-being to protect civilization from the dangerous forces of technology and femininity that seek to reverse the natural order of things, unleashing chaos by displacing straight white men from their rightful position at the top of the hierarchy. To make his case, Mailer adopts a series of personas—shaping the text around four identities which, in some fashion, he adopts, "The Prizewinner," "The Acolyte," "The Advocate," and "The Prisoner"—each of which advances a particular facet of his inquiry/inquisition into the Women's Movement. The following discussion of each chapter will examine the means by which Mailer creates and sustains the drama of the hero facing down the monstrous female Other in order to protect straight white masculinity, i.e., uphold the good, protect the future, and resist the illegitimate and perverse.

"The Prizewinner" or Duty Calls

Throughout *Prisoner of Sex,* there are more than a few occasions when Mailer's meaning is difficult to decipher, but in titling his first chapter "The Prizewinner," Mailer's claim is clear—he is a man of importance, a winner in a nation that honors winners and scorns losers. Despite Mailer's frequently expressed feelings of disgust and distrust regarding mainstream America and the Dream of success that so captivated it, he had an unbending determination to maintain his standing as a public figure and Great Man of Letters—a status that had ebbed and flowed since 1948, but never floundered completely. By claiming for himself the position of "prizewinner," Mailer establishes an

elevated ethos in intervening in the matter of women's liberation. He is not merely a journalist, or a writer, or an intellectual; he has proven that he is among the best and the brightest, and thus his position on any matter, but certainly that of women and their liberation should be respected and accepted. While millennia of male dominance and privilege suggest that women could never win the war of the sexes, in Mailer's historical moment and recent experience, the resistance expressed through the Women's Liberation Movement disturbs the equilibrium of male hegemony—the feminine Other now encroaches on previously unavailable/sacred markers of straight white male privilege and status. Mailer sees it as his heroic duty to restore men's power through the use of the ad hominem attack.

Mailer learns that during an absence from New York City, feminists (for some mysterious reason) have been speaking about him in unflattering terms. As Mailer perceives it, feminists have taken hostile action in an attempt to diminish his status: "his ghost-phallus … his very reputation … had not only been *ambushed*, but was apparently being … chewed half to death by a *squadron* of enraged Amazons, an *honor guard* of revolutionary (if we could only see them) vaginas" (13; emphasis added). By creating an equivalency between the phallus and his status, Mailer again reinforces the connection between manhood and success (the mainstream American Dream) with the implication that losing status means placing manhood in danger. The image of his penis being "chewed half to death" by a man-hating horde of infuriated women communicates feelings of both anxiety and disgust. Amazons, representing a society of woman warriors in which men had very limited utility, are also a useful trope to invoke a dangerous female menace. Although Mailer somewhat undermines the peril invoked by this

metaphor by reducing women to "vaginas," a bodily opening able to be penetrated/breached by the penis (voluntarily or involuntarily), the descriptor "revolutionary" contains an implicit threat wherein these vaginas and the women who possess them may not behave in ways prescribed by patriarchal ideology. If Robert Lowell locates the contamination of an unstable male identity within the blood of the father, Mailer locates it within the sexual freedom of women. Whether via *vagina dentate* or some other form of insurgency, Mailer's imagery dramatizes the dangers men risk (emasculation by various means—hands, teeth, etc.) should they lose control of women's bodies.

Having put forward women's capacity to separate men from their penises, Mailer turns his attention to a critique of women wielding intellectual/professional power over men, i.e., separating them from their success. In *Thinking about Women* (1968), Mary Ellmann, one of the earliest modern feminist critics, challenges the "contempt" (39) men held for women's writing by engaging in a "phallic critique" of a selection of men's literary efforts, including those of Mailer. He derides her assessment as mere "pinpricks, bitchy … caustic … disdainful pinpricks … pricks [some of which] were downright unfair" (26), diminishing her *ethos* by connecting it with domestic work/the feminine (sewing) and a catty motivation (petty meanness). Though Mailer states that the impact of Ellmann's appraisal could "hardly be felt" (26), her observations were sharp enough that shortly thereafter Mailer compares her analysis to "a lady kicking him in the nuts" (26)— again presenting men's genitalia as under attack by transgressive women who question their authority. Ellmann writes:

[Mailer's] imagination is offended by a combined odor of clam shells, salt

marshes, female bodies and sickening brews—'perfumes which leave the

turpentine of a witch's curse.' Choking with sexual disgust (fresh sheets!

fresh air!) he describes a nose's nightmare. The witch herself is dead,

Mailer smells her unwashed corpse (*Thinking* 145; qtd. in *Prisoner* 26).[208]

Mailer charges Ellmann with not being able to "speak with balance" about *An American*

Dream, arguing that she misunderstands his writing and that, in placing a quotation of his

work within her larger analysis (diagnosing Mailer's "sexual disgust" with women), the

conclusions she draws "were actually a set of connections which existed only in her

mind" (26). He goes on to charge Ellmann with incompetence because "[F]or her [to

insert] *her* witch's unwashed corpse to be arbitrarily thrown in with *his* witch's turpentine

curse was straight abuse of the critic's function" (26; emphasis added). For doing what

critics do, by using her mind to examine his text, making connections, and developing an

interpretation of those connections that then she publishes, Mailer rejects Ellman's

argument and her book on the basis of injury: she had "not be[en] fair to him" (26).

Mailer questions not only her competency but also her professionalism; specifically, he

charges her with operating outside "the literary niceties" … [such as] measured attack,"

i.e., the professionalism displayed by men within the "stern code of professionalism

[which] … was bound to cut [a man] down" (27) if he attempted such an action. Mailer

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[208] Mailer's *American Dream* bears out Ellmann's observation. For instance, of Rojack's soon to be murdered wife, Deborah, Mailer writes, "A powerful odor of rot and musk and something more violent came from her. It was like the scent of a carnivore in a zoo. This last odor was fearful—it had the breath of burning rubber" (30). And, again about Deborah, "that smell … of the wild boar in full rut, that hot odor from [again] … the zoo" (34). While assaulting Ruta, the maid, "a thin high constipated smell (a smell which spoke of rocks and grease and the sewer-damp stones in poor European alleys) came out of her" (43). Back to Deborah, Mailer states after her death (but before Rojack throws her out the window), "There was a stingy, fish-like scent in the air, not unreminiscent of Ruta" (52). So, to Ellmann's point, it does seem that Mailer has a problem with the way women smell.

remains silent on the not infrequent disparagement of his own critical work as unfair and self-serving.[209]

Further developing his theme of identifying nontraditional women as dangerous, incompetent, or both throughout *Prisoner*, Mailer uses language that both heightens and disparages the feminist threat. Hence, he describes Bella Abzug as a "battle-ax" (23) whose "bosoms … spoke of … the firepower of hard-prowed gunboats" (21), redefines members of the Women's Liberation Movement as [Roman] "legions" (77), and senses something treacherous in these "ladies with eyeglasses, no-nonsense features, mouths thin as bologna slicers, a babe in one arm, a hatchet in the other, gray eyes bright with balefire" (18). Mailer constructs the feminine Other with a combination of martial and misogynistic metaphors and stereotypes that dehumanize and delegitimize women in general and feminists in particular. Unavoidable in the ideologies of essentialism and misogyny is the dichotomy that women are both inferior and to be feared—calling into question what the future might look like if the "legions of Women's Liberation" succeed. To give women the same prerogatives as men could expose men to considerable danger, not the least of which is the change in the power dynamic of day-to-day exchanges. Moreover, the threats Mailer imagines exist in the world as it is—a world in which women remain marginalized. Mailer must keep at bay what the world might look like should women gain the ability to exercise the unvarnished power inherent in Mailer's dream world of freedom as license. In those circumstances, it might well be possible that

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[209] Here is a taste of Mailer's "measured attack." In *Advertisements for Myself*, he states, "I have a terrible confession to make—I have nothing to say about any of the talented women who write today. Out of what is no doubt a fault in me, I do not seem able to read them. Indeed I doubt if there will be a really exciting woman writer *until the first whore becomes a call girl and tells her tale.* At the risk of making a dozen devoted enemies for life, I can only say that the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy Goysy, tiny, too *dykily psychotic*, crippled, creepish, fashionable, *frigid*, outer-Baroque *maquillé* in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn. *... [A] good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls*" (*Advertisements* 472; emphasis added).

the violence in *The American Dream* becomes reversed; Rojack's wife kills him, not vice versa. To revise the critic Philip Kaufman (quoted earlier in this chapter), "for does not every American woman … secretly wish to … murder her own husband?"

Alas, women's liberation holds more to fear than simply the exercise of personal power. As "Prizewinner" winds down, Mailer shares an anecdote that reveals a key motivation for taking on this project. Before leaving New York City for the Maine coast in that summer of 1970, Mailer appeared on *The Merv Griffin Show* where he asserted (humorously, according to him) that "women should be kept in cages." Having made that statement, Mailer reports that he was "pleased with himself … pleased that he might be the last … to cut such an outsized hunk of remark in the teeth of growing piety over the treatment of women" (28). The audience did not share his pleasure or admire his heroic effort to put women (literally) in their place by reestablishing his masculine command and control. The failure of the studio audience to respond positively to Mailer's jibe signals that the times were indeed changing.[210] Despite Mailer's prizes, the world was beginning to shift under his feet. The remaining chapters of *Prisoner of Sex* represent his efforts to reverse this process. Adopting the (false) posture of the reluctant hero, Mailer takes on the challenge of confronting "the ladies with their fierce ideas" (31) in order to restore the safety and well being of the social order (and, hence, the hegemony of straight white men).

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[210] After being charged with "hat[ing] women" by actor Orson Welles (hardly a poster child for enlightened manhood) (29), Mailer defends himself by saying "Orson, we respect the lions in the zoo, but we want them kept in cages, don't we?" And, a bit later, expressing his disgust that the audience did not get the joke, Mailer asserts, "[N]o man who thought women should be kept in cages would ever dare to declare such a sentiment. Think of the retribution!" (29). Is there some humor here? Yes. Are fear and hostility present? The image of imprisoning women in cages as a normal activity (how women should be "kept") says yes. Is this an example of aggression veiled as humor? I among those who would say yes.

"The Acolyte" or Feminism's Frontal Assault

The mythology of the American Dream sets up a world of attainable possibilities

in which the ability to access and profit from those possibilities is controlled by the self—

through hard work, commitment, and resolve. The mainstream Dream narrative also

contains a subtext of assumed superiority in those who benefit most from systems and

institutions that sustain this mythology. Mailer's response indicates the anxiety produced

by the invasion of women (actually or potentially) into this dynamic. His encounter with

feminism results in a grim vision of the world created by women's ability to access the

power of self-determination inherent in the mainstream Dream, not to mention the impact

on Mailer's darker, more violent, and more sexual revisionist version. In his role of

"acolyte"—the neophyte who seeks to learn about and understand the various aspects and

complexities of the Women's Liberation Movement—Mailer grapples primarily with the

ways in which it would negatively impact life for men, setting up a cascade of

justifications for resistance to the Women's Movement based upon the inherently

menacing nature of women (apparently this cannot be emphasized often enough); the

ominous content of women's "direct speech" (37); and the threat to men's power and

identity unleashed by women's control of their own fertility. In this chapter, Mailer

loosens his prophetic voice as he considers what the future might hold should "penis

contempt" (86) take root within the culture.

Having begun his narrative in "Prizewinner" by sketching out the feminine Other

and gesturing toward the points on which he will contend with Second Wave Feminism

and its advocates, in "The Acolyte" Mailer fills in his rough sketch with additional

evidence as he mines a limited selection of mainstream and radical feminist texts for their

ideological predilections. The title of this chapter places Mailer in the role of novice, but, unlike "The Prizewinner," an identity Mailer fully embraced, this chapter title is a form of misdirection about his motivation in undertaking this investigation. Mailer's subject position in "The Acolyte" is far more that of an adversarial inquisitor, judge, and prophet than a neophyte seeking information and/or truth. Mailer asserts that the usual journalistic approach when researching an issue of this nature is to interview the participants, but he minimizes the potential usefulness of that approach as too tame and mainstream, resulting in "an article in the *New Yorker*" (29) rather than the hard-hitting piece he seeks. Instead he concludes that "[t]he only decent way to approach the liberation of women was by the writing of participants [because] you had to hang the subject of the interview when the subject was in the position of selling his ideas" (36). While Mailer does consult approximately twenty feminist texts, of the fifty-five pages in this chapter, only half are directly related to quoting a text, and his response is more propaganda than analysis. The remaining pages are a gloss on Mailer's thoughts, opinions, and general concerns about himself, women and their bodies, and men's role in society.

Mailer's half-hearted attempt at gaining a working knowledge of feminist thought highlights the primary difficulty with *Prisoner*. Mary Dearborn, literary critic and biographer of Mailer describes the book as having a "a lot of bad writing of a sort Mailer had never produced before … [T]here is no one coherent argument; he indulges in flights of fantasy … No single idea emerges as terribly interesting … [in] an essay about one of the most pressing issues of the day" (291). This dissertation argues that the cause for this lack of coherence rests in the duplicity of Mailer's mission. While positioning himself as the "heroic" journalist attempting to gain knowledge about the women's movement,

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Mailer has no doubt about his position and through his writing in *Prisoner* seeks to undermine support for the movement. Assuming the combined stance of an ideological Inquisitor and a mystical prophet, Mailer's text preaches an apocalyptic rendering of what the future might hold for straight white men should the Women's Movement succeed in creating a society in which men and women are co-equals. With this organizing principle in mind, *Prisoner* makes (somewhat) more sense as a form of propaganda— impassioned, often over the top, appealing to prejudice rather than rationality.

Mailer's heightened sense of suspicion in examining these texts (and about feminists and feminism in general) suggests surveillance rather than research and inquiry. His mindset is skeptical as he "explore[s] the revolutionary ideas which emerged from these collective pamphlets, books, and bible of Women's Lib, and explore[s] them with all awareness that they were twentieth-century ideas, and so might be artfully designed to advance the fortunes of the oncoming technology of the state" (50-51).[211] Exercising his perceptions, prejudices, and paranoia as he ascertains the degree of threat posed to straight white men by the Women's Movement, Mailer seeks confirmation for his long-standing belief that there exists a "technology of the state" or totalitarianism that has as its primary impulse the disempowerment and feminization of straight white men. Under the guise of the acolyte, Mailer searches for feminism's hidden agenda and evidence for his assumption that women would not "be satisfied [with economic equity]… women were also looking for a cultural revolution and a sexual revolution …" (51), making clear that in his view that within that space of transformation lies great danger.

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[211] In *Prisoner*, Mailer refers to Millett's *Sexual Politics* as a "bible of liberation which newspaper reviews intimated would succeed at last … in separating the female from her womb (27).

Even without the insurgent feminists, Mailer asserts that women's capacity to undermine men's dominance through the ongoing "battle of the sexes" in which women "attempt to take over the world from men" (62) provides a threat to straight white manhood. Though he sees men continue to win this battle (women's efforts have "result[ed] in an unbroken string of defeats" [62]), Mailer's assessment that "men were relatively fragile," trapped in "a brutal bloody war … in which too many women down too many men, some with a campaign of applied force masterful as Grant on the way to Appomattox … [and in which] too many men … failed to accomplish what they desired because a woman had ground them down" (45-46) allowed for the possibility of a major reversal of men's dominance. Here Mailer imagines women as misandrists, powerful in ways not visible in the hierarchies of power in the domestic and public spheres of American life.[212] He proposes that the problems of the historical moment—smog, inner-city violence, racial tensions, etc.—rest with women's subjugation of men. He questions "[w]ho could know if the inability of men to administer a world which would not destroy itself was ultimately the fault of all those women who had exhausted the best of their men?" (44). He goes on to say, "If smog, civil war, foreign war, drugs, and the male's loss of confidence that he could properly run the world were insidious female accomplishments—then female success was Satanic, and the world was lost" (49).

Portraying men as both victims and victors, Mailer's catastrophic imaginings justify continued wariness and distrust of women's attempts to change society and, by extension, the world—a world, he claims they are already putting at risk by exerting their power over men. As he notes, "behind every Rousseau is Robespierre" (55), indicating

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[212] Mailer recycles common cultural concerns about inadequate American manhood voiced in the 1950s and early 1960s, suspicions commensurate with those he articulated in his autobiographical collection *Advertisements* (1959). Times had changed a bit but, on this subject, Mailer had not.

the risks inherent in the continued progress of the Women's Liberation Movement—the likelihood that society would devolve into chaos and violence as a result of the overthrow of the existing straight white male power structure. Social and cultural critic Amanda Third in her analysis of the vision of Valerie Solanas (author of the S.C.U.M. [Society for Cutting Up Men] Manifesto) describes the revolution envisioned by radical feminists as "images of masses of newly empowered women—those traditionally excluded from the pact that founds the state—wrenching control from the patriarchal state in the most violent way … [as] perhaps the most powerful and terrorizing threat to modern social order" (Third 113). Mailer's framing of this possibility demonstrates that such a redistribution of power triggers his deepest fears.

Gaining a voice and being taken seriously in the public sphere will provide women with the opportunity to accumulate power and accomplish deep economic, social, and political change. Hence, in addition to his consideration of the generally menacing nature of women, Mailer also applies his scrutiny to the impact [on society] of women "offering direct speech" (37) regarding their gendered experience, demands for change, and attitudes toward men—an atypical action to which Mailer (assuming a universal perspective) "was no more accustomed than anyone else" (37). He understands such candor as opening up a previously unseen (and sometimes "shock[ing]") world—"[a] few of the women were writing in a way no women had ever written before" (39), transgressing the limitations of what was considered appropriately subdued "women's writing" and thereby taking up "many a manly subject" (36), in a confident and at times belligerent tone.[213] He notes "[t]he base of male conceit was that men could live with

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[213] Mailer quotes from ten or so books, manifestoes, pamphlets, claiming that "when all was counted the books directly on the theme were few and the articles dispersed in twenty hopeful magazines and forty

truths too unsentimental for women to support (hence the male mind was gifted with superior muscles…) now women were writing about men and about themselves as Henry Miller had once written about women, which is to say, with all the gusto of a veterinarian getting into the glisten of the chancre in a show mare's dock" (43), meaning (it would seem) that women are now writing using "male" forms of expression that mainstream society perceives as repugnant or distasteful and thus inappropriate. In a larger sense, though, despite Mailer's great admiration for Miller, Mailer's imagery reinforces perceptions of threat, placing men in the feminized position of "the mare" with women standing over them with a sharp knife quite near their anus (the area just below the tail root [dock] of a horse).

Mailer's preoccupation in his "remedial reading" (44) and analysis of feminist texts lies with writings that articulate experiences or possibilities that could ultimately result in significant changes/loss to men's identity, activity, and privilege. To give a brief overview, he presents an excerpt from an essay by Meredith Tax that gives an evocative description of what a woman experiences when she walks down the street: "What [men] will do is impinge on her. They will demand that her thoughts be focused on them … They will use her body with their eyes … They will make her a participant in their fantasies without asking if she is willing … They will make her feel like a thing (37).[214]

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underground sheets" (39). This is not true and supports the assertion of this dissertation that Mailer had little interest in surveying the literature. He had already determined his position. *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) the source for several of the articles Mailer uses, contains seventy-four different essays and textual excerpts, and Wikipedia lists more than sixty feminist books, articles, and manifestoes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_feminist_literature#1960s. It is certainly easier in these days of *Wikipedia*'s power to gain access to aggregated information. However Mailer's experience as a journalist suggests that if he wanted to find the articles and books he had the means to do so. Just as he had determined there was no benefit to interviewing leading feminists, he had little interest in expanding his text-based knowledge.

[214] For an insightful look at women's experience walking publicly, see "Ten Hours of Walking" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35KqGNa1FGA. It makes one think (and laugh).

Taken to its logical conclusion, the serious consideration of the objectification of women would require that men modify their public behavior toward them. Although Mailer affirms the invasive nature of the male gaze, saying, "any man feeling so stripped of his skin would be suffering an unholy mix of narcissism and paranoia" (37-38), he does not take seriously the impact on women. After that admission, "he was obliged to recognize" Tax's experience as "the natural condition of a woman in such a situation" (37). So, any woman walking down the street has no choice but to endure the intrusion/intervention of male strangers into her mind and body. Though Mailer offers a bit of empathy, he also asserts that it is natural to be objectified and/or harassed by men in public. Assuming that actions creating psychic distress and dysfunction for men are somehow inherent in being a woman normalizes men's behavior and undermines any impetus for change.

Mailer also engages with Valerie Solanas whose wildly radical S.C.U.M. is, he claims, the "magnetic north for Women's Lib" (47). Solanas contends (among other things) that "[t]he male claim that females find fulfillment through motherhood and sexuality reflects what males think they'd find fulfilling if they were females. Women, in other words, don't have penis envy; men have pussy envy" (Solanas qtd. in *Prisoner* 48). While Mailer does not believe in penis envy (82), the possibility that "pussy envy" might exist strikes him as astounding. His harrumphed response reinforces the true preoccupations of men: "Pussy envy! Three quarters of the men in the world, bewildered by complexities for which there was no solution, no precedent, no leader, and no guide, must now be ready to lay down the *dread weight of a man* and pick up the onerous burden of the woman. Pussy envy" (48). The weight of the world's problems (exacerbated by women—as Mailer notes earlier) borne by men does not allow for the

possibility of considering such a thing (at least for seventy-five percent of the men in the world that Mailer is channeling).[215]

One of the two most disturbing aspects of Mailer's "damnable descent" into the "direct speech" of feminists is their fondness for the clitoral orgasm and dismissal of the vaginal orgasm: "Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men; our own biology has not been properly analyzed. Instead, we are fed the myth of the … vaginal orgasm—an orgasm which in fact does not exist. What we must do is redefine our sexuality" (Koedt "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" qtd. in *Prisoner* 75). If pussy envy caused Mailer's head to spin, the possibility that the source of women's orgasm was not simply the movement of the penis in the vagina—that the clitoris (a small penis!) was involved—was untenable. Mailer writes, "What a confusion! What a blow to self-esteem for any man! …What of his own poor experience? All lies? … [h]e [now] had a glimpse of how Tories reacted when India was lost" (76, 80). Mailer's comparison of the loss of the vaginal orgasm to the liberation of India from British colonial control—an imperial ideology that idealized the worth of straight white masculinity and its rights over the bodies of the Other—demonstrates the degree to which male identity is invested in control over and production within the female body.

Mailer's unease with respect to the dangers conveyed by women and his ambivalence at the phenomenon of women's "direct speech" (better known as women having the audacity to speak their truth) culminates in his exhaustively chronicled anxiety regarding the possibility of a sexual revolution that would reduce the double standard of permissible sexual activity to a single standard and, as such, invalidate important markers of men's status and privilege. As Kate Millett states in *Sexual Politics*, "the goal of

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[215] One assumes the other twenty-five percent are some variety of inferior masculinity.

revolution would be a permissive single standard of sexual freedom, and one uncorrupted

by the crass and exploitative economic bases of traditional sexual alliances" (qtd. in

Prisoner 7). Mailer responds with nostalgia for the past: "feminism had always come to a

halt … before the mysterious advantage and burden of her womb … be[coming] a

privileged element of nature, closer to the mysteries than men" (62). Ignoring the wooly

language of women's mystery and privilege, Mailer points toward the barrier women's

lack of control over their fertility presents to the development of their agency in the

social, economic, and political spheres. In other words, the sexual revolution would

undermine the privilege and power now granted straight white men within the mythology

of the American Dream by giving women the ability to participate fully. Maintaining

sexual orthodoxy maintains the status quo, including straight white male dominance.

Mailer argues for this status quo, asserting that if women do the "natural" thing, they will

continue to be in their current biologically constrained position. If, however, they choose

to take charge of their bodies, he implies without evidence, then BAD things will happen

to them:

> The ultimate logic of the sexual revolution required women to stand equal to the
>
> male body in every aspect—[but] how could this prevail if women in competition
>
> with the other sex for the role of artist, executive, bureaucrat, surgeon, auto
>
> mechanic, politician, or masterful lover should have to cry quits every now and
>
> again for months of pregnancy plus years of uneasy accommodation between their
>
> career and their child, or else choose to have no children and *be so obsessed with*
>
> *the possibility of biological harm, worse, the possibility of some unnameable*

harm to that inner space of creation their bodies would enclose (58-59; emphasis

added).

What these harms are, Mailer does not specify, but the negative impact—the punishment

visited on women who take "unnatural" action to prevent pregnancy—has long been part

of common sense wisdom and, indeed, continues today in the discourse of false science

that argues abortion as the cause of a multiplicity of physical and mental pathologies.

Mailer looks with trepidation at the impact of women's sexual freedom, alluding

to the resulting loss of social order and civilization itself. Citing a study arguing that

"[n]ot until [women's sexual] drives were brought under control … somewhere between

c. 8000-5000 BCE … by rigidly enforced social codes could family life become the

stabilizing and creative crucible from which modern civilized man could emerge" (73),

Mailer anticipates a disturbing future in which the markers of patriarchal authority would

be disrupted—"monogamy and legitimacy would be gone, when distinctions between

heterosexuality [and homosexuality] would be gone" (63). Women's agency in regard to

their bodies had extraordinary power to induce change: to rebalance the access to

privilege, the exercise of power, and the understanding of what one can expect from life.

"The Advocate" or Potent Masculinity and Mailer's American Dream

Having chronicled the second step of his heroic journey in "The Acolyte," which

confirmed the intentions of feminists to encroach on straight white men's economic,

cultural, and sexual entitlement, Mailer uses the following chapter to take up the

complexities of potent masculinity—both as "a passion … rooted in the flesh and

existence of a Creation deeper than reason" (69) *and* as a state/status to be achieved. The

manhood to which Mailer beckons would flourish in his reinterpretation of the American

Dream, a life characterized by violent passion that is no easy matter to attain. Mailer perceives that a "man can hardly ever assume he has become a man—in the instant of complacency he may be on the way to becoming less masculine" (168). Thus he must understand what he needs to maintain his masculinity in taking on the challenges and tests of strength required to defend the borders between men and the feminine Other against invasion and potential inversion. The validity of this argument is essential to Mailer's project. Without biological fixedness that establishes the individual's powers (and, particularly in the case of women, the limits of those powers), "anyone who believed that women could do no worse than men at delivering us from world crisis and air pollution would be forced to move inch by inch into General [Ti-Grace] Atkinson's army" (69).[216]

Mailer's primary target in this chapter is Kate Millett and the ideas she espouses about sex and gender in *Sexual Politics*. Not only does her analysis emphasize the cultural ubiquity of misogyny, but her review of anthropological and scientific literature finds that "patriarchy's biological foundations [are] … so very insecure" (42). In focusing on patriarchy and misogyny, Millett spends a great deal of time talking about men, and Mailer interprets this as being "unwittingly obsessed with [describing] the nature of men," albeit from a place of total ignorance "as a child born blind from birth might … imagine what a landscape was like" (70, 69). In an interesting turn of phrase, Mailer describes *Sexual Politics* as "a game reserve … [in] the very Kenya of the subject" (69),

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[216] Ti-Grace Atkinson aroused a special revulsion in Mailer because of her championing of extra-uterine conception, which would have stripped Mailer and his like-minded cohort of a primary aspect of their identity.

[217]—thus intimating that Millett's text does not understand the true nature of men but, instead, operates within a protected area, wherein the feral proclivities of masculinity are to some extent domesticated. He describes his engagement with *Sexual Politics* as a kind of "hunt" in which the "game" or trophy that is pursued is "the nature of that passion" to be masculine (69). In this hunt, Mailer's goals are mutually dependent: to undermine the authority of Millett and her analysis and to override her assertions about men by highlighting representations of authentic and potent masculinity found in the works and lives of Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence—a lineage to which he aspires and which he expects his readers to esteem.

In "The Advocate," Mailer creates a showcase for Miller and Lawrence's representations of masculinity along with his own discussion and appreciation of their representations. His approach in challenging Millett involves not so much an intellectual disputation as a summary judgment in which he gives a brief synopsis of her line of reasoning, declares it invalid, provides a lengthy excerpt of the original text along with his analysis and interpretation, and, having identified what he sees as a truth Millett has missed, declares victory and moves on.[218] Mailer locates his authority in his essential identity as a man, thereby trumping any insight Millett may offer. He uses his interpretations of Miller and Lawrence to define what manhood looks like, while at the same time aiming a stream of disparagement at Millett, as he attempts to dismiss her from the critic's seat. In reality, this chapter offers not so much a battle as an intellectual

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[217] Mailer's comfort with casual racist and quasi-racist allusions is well-documented. Here it would seem he is alluding to some version of a "heart of darkness," but in Kenya, rather than the Congo. Mailer is a firm believer in the importance of instinct and the primitive, as well as the negative effects of the civilizing mission of technology and progress in diminishing the vigor of straight white masculinity.

[218] Some of Mailer's objections are worth considering. Is Miller's work more reflective of the 1920s than the 1930s? Do Millett's citations occasionally eliminate aspects of the text that would better have been left in place? However, most often Mailer's lack of evidence and convoluted reasoning makes it difficult (unless one is predisposed to do so) to appreciate his argument.

mugging—a payback for Millett's claims and critiques in *Sexual Politics*. In "The Advocate," Mailer highlights the importance of Miller and Lawrence in expressing a phallus-centered manhood characterized by sexual dominance, writing against the grain of Millett's critique of these men and their works that often finds both the men and their texts misogynistic and self-serving.

In Miller, Mailer finds an artist whose representations of sex emphasized a masculinity limned by lust. From Mailer's perspective, Miller's genius lies in his willingness to "wage an all-out war to storm the mysteries ("the inner space which gives [women] a link to the future," i.e., women's vaginas) with his phallus as a searchlight because all sexual experience was valid if one looked at it clearly and no fuck was in vain … So he dives into the sordid, portray[ing] men and women as they have hardly been painted before" (103-04). Miller's male characters are sexual commandos, performing at levels that often stagger the imagination (and turn the stomach). Any opportunity for sex "seems to call for a show of mettle [because] … his manhood is involved" (Miller *Tropic of Cancer*, qtd. in *Prisoner* 107). The sense of showmanship brings to mind DuPlessis's assessment of "hypermasculinity as a form of masquerade" (*Purple Passages* 109). Men should perform sexually as long as the penis is able to penetrate, to be productive. As Miller writes in *Sexus*,[219]

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[219] This from Gore Vidal's review of *Sexus* (25): "Everyone he meets either likes or admires him, while not once in the course of *Sexus* does he fail in bed. Hour after hour, orgasm after orgasm, the great man goes about his priapic task. Yet from Rousseau to Gide the true confessors have been aware that not only is life mostly failure, but that in one's failure or pettiness or wrong-ness exists the living drama of the self. Henry Miller, by his own account, is never less than superb, in life, in art, in bed. … At least half of *Sexus* consists of tributes to the wonder of Henry Miller. At a glance men realize that he *knows*. Women realize that he *is*. Mara-Mona: "I'm falling in love with the strangest man on earth. You frighten me, you're so gentle…I feel almost as if I were with a god." After two more pages of this keen analysis, she tells him, "Your sexual virility is only the sign of a greater power, which you haven't begun to use." She never quite tells him what this power is, but it must be something pretty super because everyone else can also sense it humming away." Recognizing that Vidal was nothing short of an egomaniac himself, this critique provides a view of

When I returned to resume the ordeal my cock felt as if it were made of

old rubber bands.[220] I had absolutely no more feeling at that end; it was

like pushing a piece of stiff suet down a drain pipe … What surprised me

was that it continued to stand up like a hammer … it looked disgustingly

like a cheap gadget from the five and ten cent store, like a bright-colored

piece of fishing tackle minus the bait. And on this bright and slippery

Mara twisted like an eel. She wasn't any longer a woman in heat … just

wriggling and squirming like a piece of fresh bait" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 113,

112).

If none of this sounds particularly erotic, pleasurable, or even possible, Mailer notes that

"it is another of Miller's descriptions of the worst of fucks … which he loathes" (112).

Mailer does not quote Millett's precise critique at any length but summarizes it as

asserting that Miller "reduc[es] woman to object, to meat for the cock" (113), at which

Mailer cries "hypocrisy" because of Millett's positive reporting of Masters and

Johnson's work that used vibrators to demonstrate women's capacity for multiple clitoral

orgasms. The introduction of technology removes the possibility of conception, Mailer

argues, and this absence of risk for pregnancy reduces the status of women. Continuing,

Mailer asserts that a "sexual revolution" is more likely to come from Miller's "love and

lust" than through the technology of the scientific lab.[221] The critical difference between

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Miller that is not invested in feminism, nor is it that of a disciple of Miller's such as Mailer. As a gay man,
Gore's send-up of Miller puts another perspective in play that also finds Miller's record of the adoration of
the straight white penis less than compelling literature.

[220] Mailer describes this ordeal as, "a marathon of lust-fuck in which [Miller] is fixed, which he loathes"
(112). Without an orgasm, he simply cannot be released from his "ordeal" (112).

[221] The question becomes what kind of sexual revolution will emerge from Miller's "love and lust" given
passages such as, from Miller, "How the hell can you get up any passion when you've got a starving cunt
on your hands." This in response to the request by a "15 franc whore" for a "crust of bread" (qtd. in
Prisoner 108).

Masters and Johnson's lab and Miller's sexual scenarios, according to Mailer, is that, no matter how repulsive or exploitative the act, "its justification … [is that] it still drives toward the creation … that moment of transcendence when the soul stands in the vault of the act and the coming is its mirror" (114).[222] The possibilities of orgasm and conception demand that the sexual act be followed through to its completion. Miller's description of Mara's orgasm after the "ordeal" demonstrates that men's erotic experience uniquely differs from that of women's: "Towards dawn … I saw by the frozen condensed-milk expression about the jaw that it was happening. Her face went through all the metamorphoses of early uterine life, only in reverse. With the last dying spark [her face] collapsed like punctured bag, the eyes and nostrils smoking like toasted acorns in a slightly wrinkled lake of pale skin" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 114). It is not clear what this might mean, though for Mailer this depiction offers "profound significations" (114). This writer sees something that is less than profound, something in fact that might be an excerpt from *The Exorcist*. Mara has no power here, and if this experience contains pleasure it marks its presence by reducing Mara to the state of a smoking embryo.

In addition to Miller's portrayal of the driving impulse that requires men's productive use of the penis, Mailer also hails him for having "captured something in the sexuality of men as it has never been seen before … man's sense of awe before women" (116). What Mailer means by awe is enacted in a scene from *Tropic of Capricorn* that begins with "He took pleasure in degrading her … she was such a prim, priggish bitch …

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[222] Miller at one point in *Tropic of Capricorn* describes the "' best fuck' he ever had … [with] a girl who 'was a deaf-mute who lost her memory …she never once opened her trap … She'd steal down … soon as she smelled me … and plaster her cunt all over me. It was an enormous cunt, too, when I think back on it. … When she pitched herself high, when she turned the juice on full, it made a violaceous purple, a deep mulberry stain like twilight… such as dwarfs and cretins enjoy when they menstruate. It made me think of cannibals chewing flowers, of Bantus running amuck … It was one cunt out of a million" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 120-21).

you'd swear she didn't own a cunt the way she carried herself in the street. Naturally

when he got her alone, he made her pay for her highfalutin' ways" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 118).

The scene ends with the unusual use of a root vegetable, "he pulled out for a second, as

though to cool his cock off and then very slowly and gently he shoved a big long carrot

up her twat … unhitched himself and yanked up his pants" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 118-19).[223]

Millett describes this scene as an example of "the pleasure of humiliating the sexual

object appear[ing] to be far more intoxicating than sex itself" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 118). But

Mailer disagrees, linking it to an unusual definition of "awe," part of his elaborate effort

to normalize the rough treatment of women at the hands of men in Miller's works and in

real life:

> His dread of her position one step closer to eternity (for in that were her
>
> powers) which made men detest women, revile them, humiliate them,
>
> defecate symbolically upon them, do everything to reduce them so one
>
> might dare to enter them and take pleasure of them … *[M]en look to*
>
> *destroy every quality in a woman which will give her the powers of a*
>
> *male*, for she is in their eyes already armed with the power that she
>
> brought them forth … That was what Miller saw, and it is what he brought
>
> back to us … in all of the indignities of position, the humiliation of
>
> situation, the endless revelations of women as pure artifacts of farce …
>
> still he screams his barbaric yawp of utter adoration for the power and the
>
> glory and the grandeur of the female in the universe, and it is his genius to

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[223] Mailer critiques Millett for eliding the use of the words "very slowly and gently"—stating that this proves that the protagonist was not behaving abusively. He does not answer how anything can be "shoved" in a way that is slow and gentle … not to mention the innocent carrot's experience of it all.

show us that this power can survive any context or any abuse. (116-118; emphasis added)[224]

This encomium locates the cause of aggressive acts toward women in the wonderment men feel at women's ability to conceive and give birth. Mailer claims that somewhere within what could be described as emotional and psychological pathology exists something he calls "awe."[225] Misogyny, then, is potentially women's or, perhaps, nature's fault and the abuse of women a natural impulse in men—a sign of the difference between men and women.

Mailer also (not surprisingly) allows for the possibility that "women might have some secret but fundamental accommodation to Miller's lust that brings them into just such absurd positions" (122-23). Mailer makes clear his agreement with this sense of antagonism as he quotes with approval Miller's charge that "the eternal battle with woman sharpens our resistance, develops our strength, enlarges the scope of our cultural achievements .... great men, great causes, great wars" (qtd. in *Prisoner* 125). Identifying a benefit to "[p]ut[ting] woman in her rightful place" suggests that a better word for "awe" might be "utility"—maintaining male ascendancy in the public sphere and privilege in all spheres requires the aggressive suppression of women that contaminates even the most intimate of acts. Indeed, Millett gives a very different description of the "eternal battle with women" (i.e., the maintenance of male potency and its connection to masculine power) in her analysis of Henry Miller (in which she echoes Mary Ellmann's critique of Mailer's "sexual disgust" with women): "What Miller did articulate [was] the

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[224] My thanks to Dr. Thomas Kinnahan who reminded me that Mailer is invoking (without attribution) the gay poet Walt Whitman in his use of the language "barbaric yawp."

[225] Mailer never defines "awe"—though given the inherent violence in the expression of it, it seems to be connected more to the sense of awe as dread and fear rather than respect and admiration.

contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically, its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality. And women too; for somehow it is women upon whom this onerous burden of sexuality falls" (*Sexual Politics* 413). Straight white men have the advantage and, in Mailer's worldview, too much is at stake for men for any change to be viable.

Mailer then turns to D.H. Lawrence to consider the question of "what is a man?" In doing so, he digs much more deeply into the trajectory of Lawrence's life than he did with Miller, no doubt because, on the page, Miller's notion of what it means to be a man is hard to miss. While (as Mailer and Millett both recognize) Lawrence's books contain many scenes of "patriarchal male-dominated sex" (148) and "unmistakable tendencies toward the absolute domination of women by men [and] mystical worship of the male will" (136), Mailer also sees (as Millett does not) a degree of complexity shaped by the trajectory of Lawrence's background that provides him with the opportunity to articulate two important aspects of his ideology of masculinity. The first of these is that, while Mailer is fully committed to the power and reality of an essential male identity, he also believes that an individual with a phallus must forcefully exert himself in order to qualify as a MAN.[226] Lawrence makes an important contribution to Mailer's eccentric and unsubstantiated theory. Raised by an overly indulgent mother and a father who loathed him (152),

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[226] Mailer notes that one of his (many) conflicts with women/feminists is that "he was never to encounter any comprehension among female writers that a firm erection on a delicate fellow was the adventurous juncture of ego and courage. One attitude in Women's Lib remained therefore repellent: precisely the dull assumption that the sexual force of a man was the luck of his birth, rather than his finest moral product" (45). This description prioritizes the penis in a way that suggests a well-performing penis is a sign of the hard work of living an ethical life—a concept that struggles in the face of the violence against women so prevalent in his work.

[Lawrence] was bone and blood of the classic family stuff out of which homosexuals are made, *he had lifted himself out of his natural destiny which was probably to have the sexual life of a woman, had diverted the virility of his brain down into some indispensable minimum of phallic force*—no wonder he worshiped the phallus, *he above all men knew what an achievement was its rise from the root, its assertion to stand proud on a delicate balance*. (154-55)

Thus, Lawrence illustrates Mailer's paradox that masculinity not only comes from the core of the self but also requires immense effort to achieve fully. Lawrence's relevance increases because not only was Lawrence "not much of a man himself … he was also a writer with the soul of a beautiful ... *imperious and passionate woman* … locked into the body of a middling male physique … a pleasant to somewhat seedy-looking man, no stud" (152; emphasis added). Lawrence, a biological man infiltrated by the sensibility of the feminine, was according to Mailer, "a momma's boy, spoiled rotten, and could not have commanded two infantrymen to follow him" (137). In his writing, however, as Millett describes (and Mailer concurs), "Lawrence strained after triumph in the 'man's world' of formal politics, war, priestcraft, art and finance" (140). Lawrence's ascent to manhood was "an act of will" (154), and in his efforts, Mailer finds that Lawrence "illumines the passion to be masculine as no other writer, he reminds of the beauty of desiring to be a man" (151).

"The Advocate" describes the women in Lawrence's life as deeply implicated in his gendered struggles, which provides further confirmation (though Mailer hardly needs it) that women have the capacity to dilute and deform men's power. In Mailer's

assessment, women fail Lawrence in two vital ways. Early in Lawrence's life his

mother's overly indulgent boundary violations created a boy/man with an "outsize [need

for] admiration" (154). According to Mailer, the unhealthy power dynamic within their

relationship (Lawrence was treated as his mother's equal from an early age) created his

sense later in life that "[d]ominance over women was not tyranny … but equality, for

dominance was the indispensable elevator which would raise his phallus to that height

from which it might seek transcendence" [orgasm] (155). The implications of this [focus

on the phallus] are found in Lawrence's relationship with his wife Frieda, in which his

compulsive need for dominance and adulation (according to Mailer) damaged his already

frail health because, though Frieda "loved him … she did not worship him … she was

literally killing him each time she failed to worship his most proud and delicate cock"

(156). Mailer (like Lawrence) reverenced the orgasm and both shared a concern with "the

pernicious effects of cultural repression on male potency" (Lennon 164).[227] Mailer asserts

that "[i]t is hopeless to read [Lawrence's] books and try to understand the quirky

changeable fury-ridden relationships of his men and women without comprehending that

Lawrence saw every serious love affair as fundamental do-or-die: he knew he literally

died a little more each time he missed transcendence in the act" (155). Thus, the

imperative for a man to achieve orgasm can be understood as connected to the drive for

survival. Though Lawrence officially died of tuberculosis, Mailer suggests"[h]e has been

a victim of love, and will die for lack of the full depth of a woman's love for him—what

a near to infinite love he had needed" (159). Uncaring of the final diagnosis, Mailer

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[227] In the 1950s, Mailer built his own version of William Reich's Orgone Box, "a telephone-booth-sized-chamber where one repaired to replenish or accumulate orgonic, or life energy, but also rumored to promote erections" (Lennon 164)—the experience in the Box took place with the subject naked. Millett asserts that Mailer was a follower of late Reich, when Reich promulgated "orgasm as panacea" (451 n.51).

indicates that it was the "imbalance" (153) in Lawrence's relationship with his mother, unmitigated by an appropriately worshipful relationship between his penis and his wife that ultimately killed him.[228]

Mailer ends "The Advocate" by promising a "journey through homosexuality itself" (162). While he does not deliver on this promise, Mailer uses the setting of the prison to continue to consider aspirational/situational manhood (with a few excerpts from the texts of Jean Genet added to lend credibility to the connection between male homosexual sex and life for men in prison). In this brief section, Mailer wraps up the chapter (to the extent that is possible, given its tangle of non sequiturs) by reinforcing the need for men to be ever-vigilant about shoring up their manhood, using as an example the assertion that men in prison are "forever in danger of losing their masculinity [because] they do not even have the modest buttresses to the masculine … not a family at dinner or the ability to bring in money, no exercise of something at which they are superior (if it is even a hobby)" (170-71). For Mailer, masculinity is both fragile and powerful, his Dream of the ideal world an alternative view of the nature of the productive, potent bodies of men, which includes "the base impulse to project their semen into the existential center of a woman" (170) because "men become more male and women more female by coming

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[228] And what of, what Mailer refers to as, Lawrence's "flirt[ation] with homosexuality" (157)? Mailer claims that Lawrence was "secretly … obsessed with it. For he is still in need of that restorative sex he can no longer find, and since his psyche was originally shaped to be homosexual, homosexuality could yet be his peace. Except it could not, not likely, for his mind could hardly give up the lust to dominate. Homosexuality becomes a double irony—he must now seek to dominate men physically more powerful than himself (157). And with that, Mailer finishes with this particular expression of Lawrence's masculinity. He claims that "homosexuality would have been the abdication of Lawrence as a philosopher-king" (159). Mailer goes on to say (in denial, I would suggest) that "[Lawrence] had burned too many holes in too many organs trying to reach into more manhood than the course of his nerves could carry, he was done … [he] sang of the wonders of creation and the glory of men and women in the rut and the lovely of a loving fuck" (160). No doubt others would disagree, perhaps vehemently, with Mailer's interpretation, but having placed himself within the lineage of Miller and Lawrence (and being famously homophobic), this seems the extent to which Mailer could manage the cognitive dissonance aroused by Lawrence's sexual attraction to and experience with men.

together in the full rigors of the fuck" (171). Mailer then sets up the focus of his next chapter (on the evils of contraception) by likening sex between men, because there is no possibility of conception, to a "transaction" in which "one is used"—where "no hint remains of the awe that a life in these circumstances could be conceived" (172, 173). He applies this same description to heterosexual sex in which conception is deliberately prevented, but in a larger sense his concern moves beyond utility or objectification to the dependence of male identity on the reproductive capacity of women as a stabilizing force.

Conclusion: "The Prisoner" or Defending the Virility Cult

New Journalism attained its popular status by expanding journalistic conventions that determined the ways fact could be portrayed—establishing a greater flexibility and permissiveness in establishing the writer's persona and participation in the narrative, as well as his treatment of the subject that goes well beyond the traditional norms of objectivity. Throughout *Prisoner*, but particularly in its final chapter, Mailer uses this new genre to do old work, to purvey a vision that exceeds even the mild constraints of New Journalism. As he steps fully into the role of "The Prophet," he moves from the literary embellishment of fact to unsupported claims that more appropriately fall within the context of narratives of faith. Ultimately, Mailer's engagement with Women's Liberation can be pushed only so far before the tension between his role as the journalist who reveals new knowledge about Second Wave Feminism and the role of prophet who pronounces the truth about the priority of men retaining power over women and women's submission to such a power arrangement can no longer be maintained. Within the autobiographical framework of New Journalism, the desperate nature of Mailer's assertions stand out, indicating not simply the desire to be proven correct (though that, of

course, is present) but even more so the fear of what would result should his precariously balanced reasoning begin to collapse. At this point, Mailer's writing transforms from journalism into manifesto—providing insight into what matters to him but not into the Women's Liberation Movement.

Mailer's inability to be confident and secure in a manhood not premised on the submission of women, in general, and their bodies, in particular, to men and men's needs comes through quite clearly. In "Prisoner," Mailer demonstrates that, in defense of maintaining the disparity within the power dynamic of straight white heterosexual relationships, no tactic is unacceptable. The resulting lack of coherence in Mailer's closing chapter results from his inclination to insert irrelevant digressions and, more troubling, to offer opinion and speculation as fact, which cause his argument to devolve into a wandering, and sometimes unsound and illogical series of observations and assertions that occasionally become bizarre and irrational.[229] Mailer never defines precisely what it means to be "The Prisoner of Sex," stating simply that, "if one gives meaning to sex, one becomes the prisoner of sex" (213). Given the trajectory of his argument, it may well have been more accurate for Mailer to use Kate Millet's words to describe his situation—*he* is, indeed, a prisoner, but not of sex per se. Rather, Mailer (along with his followers) is "prisoner of the virility cult" (Millett 314)—trapped within a definition of straight white masculinity that relies on a semi-mystical yet often brutal connection between men's identity and their use of women's bodies. At one point, he describes the male sexual experience as goaded by:

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[229] The bizarre twists of Mailer's argument are not unique to this chapter, but this chapter contains the most significant accumulation of untruths, partial-untruths, and absolutely outlandish statements.

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[a] lust that drives a man to scour his balls and his back until he is ready to die from the cannonading he has given his organs, the deaths through which he has dragged some futures of his soul, it is a clue which all but says that somewhere in the insane passions of all men is a huge desire to drive forward into the seat of creation, grab some part of that creation in the hands, sink the cock to the hilt, sink it into as many hilts as will hold it; for man is alienated from the nature which brought him forth, he is not like woman in possession of an inner space which gives her a link to the future, so he must drive to possess it, he must if necessary come close to blowing his head off that he may possess it. (111)

Thus, Mailer deconstructs straight white masculinity into the violent, compulsive, obsessive, and controlling, which appear to be linked to the emotional and/or physical abuse of women. Even setting aside contemporary attitudes about sexual violence, Mailer makes clear that the experience of women in meeting men's fierce need is not relevant to the expression of men's lust. At the same time, he reinforces his conviction that manhood requires an overt effort to maintain its essence and privilege, an effort that requires the domination of the feminine Other.

As a means of supporting his claim, Mailer opens his final chapter, "The Prisoner," by aligning himself with Adolf Hitler, specifically regarding Hitler's formal statement (1934) on gender complementarity:

The equal rights of women consist in the fact that in the realm of life determined for her by nature, she experiences the high esteem that is her due. Women and men represent two quite different types of being …. To

one belongs the power of feeling, the power of the soul … to the other

belongs the strength of vision, the strength of hardness… Reason is

dominant in man … [and because] woman [possesses] feeling … [she is]

therefore the stable element. (qtd. in *Prisoner* 180)

Mailer found much to like in this division, a balance which would offer men vision,

hardness, and reason as well as an inherent inclination toward the volatile, while women

possess of an entirely amorphous "power of the soul'" (181). Neither Hitler nor Mailer

define what this power of the soul might look like or accomplish other than obeying

nature's impulse and birthing children, and its ambiguity sets up expectations for

behavior that would make it difficult to resist gendered stereotypes. That a Jewish-

American writer would reach back to Hitler to speak to the validity of the innate

complementarity of sexes provides the reader with a "Wait? What?" moment that over

the course of seven pages of discussion, Mailer attempts to dispel. He initially indicates a

disinterested intellectual position, i.e., "if in the course of living with a thought, it might

appear to run parallel for a time to arguments Nazis had also been near, one should not

… close the inquiry" (182). He then moves on to dispute Kate Millett's use of quotations

from Nazi leaders as evidence of the evils of patriarchy. But other than challenging

Millett on her own turf (she, too had addressed Nazi stereotypes of the feminine), Mailer

leaves the reader flummoxed. A common attitude toward women's proper role is enough

to align Mailer with a murderous, anti-Semitic, tyrant, and, although Mailer piles on

words, he cannot make this reference mean something else.

Mailer then descends into a series of absurd and factually inaccurate assertions

connected with his revisionist American Dream, i.e., the imperative for straight white

men to resist constraints to their freedom and power. The premise of this divergent form

of the traditional Dream associates the productivity (in the home, workplace, and society)

rewarded in the Dream's mainstream mythology with the diminishment of straight white

men's domination—domination that must be recovered and maintained through men's

active resistance to the totalitarian forces of society with a particular emphasis on the

control of the bodies of women.[230] Although the tone of Mailer's American Dream is

sinister and menacing (noir pulp fiction rather than MGM musical), the outcomes

ordained for women are broadly similar in their prescriptions regarding women's power

and agency (wife, mother, located in the domestic sphere, accepting of male

domination—albeit in sunnier forms) from those within the mainstream Dream. To

unpack Mailer's logic/illogic is to gain insight into the powerful network of fantasy,

projection, and fear that work together to maintain the illusion of the way things should

be and which result in the domination of straight white men.[231] Literary theorist Stanley

Fish has observed that "autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however

mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not" (qtd. in *Reading

Autobiography* 15). Mailer's descent into fabrication within the autobiographical

framework of New Journalism lays bare both the weakness of his argument and his

desperation to make it work in order to legitimize a masculine identity dependent upon

the exclusion of women from full agency over their bodies and their lives.[232] Justifying

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[230] In an interview in 1962, Mailer stated "I hate contraception … it's an abomination. I'd rather have those fucking communists over here" ("An Impolite Interview 131). For Mailer, women's control of their own fertility was a threat to men's freedom as real, disempowering, and dangerous as the Communist threat.

[231] In making this claim, I am particularly influenced by Toni Morrison's work in *Beloved*—particularly the scene in which she describes the "jungle" that white people project onto and then see in the lives of slaves and free people of color, which justifies white exploitation and violent expression of Black people (234).

[232] Mailer describes his argument as "dealing with a comic perspective [and] … "the absurd" (193), yet when he states his primary premise, "the fuck either had a meaning which went to the root of existence, or

women's diminished personhood is essential for Mailer's epistemology to maintain coherence. In his attempt to rationalize this inequity, Mailer, descends into incoherence and irrationality—offering ways to consider other frameworks of oppression that he attempts to normalize, but which are equally invalid and unsound.

Applying the rhetorical postures of domination throughout the final pages of the text, Mailer begins, not surprisingly, with the penis, introducing an age-old truism that was only beginning to be rejected within the medical and psychiatric communities in the late 1960s-early 1970s. He contends that "the ultimate direction of masturbation [for men] always has to be insanity" because a man's failure to assert himself sexually, i.e., the failure to fight "the good fight or the evil fight [in order to] end up with a beautiful sexy dame … [which gives a man] something real to build on" (190), creates a deficiency or loss in the act.[233] Falling short of engaging in traditional coitus fails to prove the "nourish[ment]" a man needs to be "able to live a tougher, more heroic life" (189). He then argues that in a world in which masturbation is not a vice, the eventual end will be the elimination of sex completely with procreation accomplished by "semen banks and extra-uterine receptacles" and thus "coitus-free conception monitored by the state" (192). Because Mailer identifies the heterosexual sex act as what establishes and maintains a vigorous manhood, its loss would destabilize the forces that create and maintain straight white men's ascendancy.

Mailer then goes on to fashion an alternative truth, describing the extraordinary control women have over their bodies. Repurposing Millett's critique of the patriarchal

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it did not" (190), there is nothing amusing or light-hearted in his rhetoric or tone. Thus, I assert that aside from these "guides to interpretation," Mailer is serious, but also fears he is ridiculous.

[233] The entire discussion about masturbation places men at the center, e.g., "Anybody who spends his adolescence masturbating, generally enters his young manhood with no sense of being a man" (188).

suppression of women's creative powers, Mailer claims that one can think of "the ovum as a specialized production, as even an artistic creation" of/by women. By embracing this perspective, "even the stupidest and most demoralized of women [are] thereby capable of masterpieces of microscopic creation" as they deliberately "construct each ovum" (195). As such, the accumulation of women's "most desirable qualities or talents may take months or years of work in the ovaries" (195).[234] Therefore, it is certainly most appropriate, given their egg-focused energies, that women should mourn the monthly arrival of "the curse" (197) and not surprising that a woman may even "go mad out of the pain of coming too close to knowing how much she has left behind, and how much she has lost forever each month" (197). Rewriting history and science, Mailer's asserts that women have the "unconscious" power to choose whether or not to conceive, adding that the decision "was finally an expression of the character of the woman … a woman could know love was with her if the power not to conceive had been relinquished" (199). Mailer reframes an old prejudice that assumed women were at fault should they not be able to meet personal, familial, and social expectations regarding conception. He takes this claim even further by stating "it seemed reasonable to him that among the other biological protections, a woman would have the ability—or had once had the ability—to pick, to choose, to avoid, even to abort in the early minutes and first hours of conception her womb had not desired" (200).[235] However, the use of contraceptives had caused the loss of this special power, resulting in the paradox of rising use of contraception and a rising birthrate (202). This is, of course, complete malarkey. The number of children per

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[234] As Mailer describes one lovely egg, "the qualities of the ovum all the more fine and special because she had put more than a normal art into creating a future artist out of her lonely seed" (196). Taking this to its logical end, women should spend all of their time working on the quality of their eggs, and, should a child be less than splendid, the world knows who to blame.

[235] Thus assigning to the womb its own consciousness and intentionality.

woman in the United States was 2.91 in 1965 and by 1971 (as Mailer is writing), it was

2.27 ("Fertility").

He wraps up this fantastical tour de force with a gambit that 21st century America

has become very familiar with—denying the validity of inconvenient truths and inventing

new ones. In order to make most of his claims defensible, Mailer must undermine belief

in science, particularly the science of reproduction. He does this by claiming that

"America is dominated by a bunch of half-maniacal scientists, men who *don't know*

anything about the act of creation. If science comes along and says there are one million

spermatozoa in a discharge, you reason on that basis. *That may not be a real* basis. *We*

just don't know what the real is. *We just don't know*" (198; emphasis added). Mailer's

repeated subversion of the character and intentions of scientists and their findings

reinforces his ethos as the "Prophet." He then goes on to invoke the unknown, stating,

"[t]he meeting of the ovum and the sperm is too mysterious for the laboratory. Even the

electron microscope can't measure the striations of passion in a spermatozoon. Or the

force of its will" (199). In this case, Mailer not only discredits science, but he also

endows sperm with both intention and feeling—emphasizing the vigor and intensity of

the masculine drive while flouting settled fact without providing evidence for his claim

(other than his own pronouncement).

Mailer then reaches the end game of his argument, continuing his affinity for

uplifting what confounds. On the next-to-last page of *Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer appears to

concede that women *should* be liberated—but only because this will allow them to find a

husband.[236] In doing so Mailer redefines "liberation" in a way that goes against every

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[236] Mailer comes to this conclusion when pondering the difficulties women might have in living up to what
he saw as their primary task, "the prime responsibility of a woman probably is to be on earth long enough

premise supporting the Women's Liberation Movement's conception of "liberation." He begins benignly. According to Mailer, woman can be liberated so that she may "travel to the moon, write the great America novel, and allow her husband to send her off to work with her lunch pail and a cigar into the workplace … because women have the rights to a life that lets them look for a mate" (232). Mailer even allows for the fact that a woman might abort [her children] in the womb "if she thought they did not have it" (233), a suggestion ridiculous on its face due to every other statement about abortion that Mailer has made in the book. And, what is this "it" that the embryos/fetuses are lacking? The dissonance of this assertion suggests that Mailer is merely taking another opportunity to reinforce the tainted nature of women who have abortions, suggesting their selfishness and lack of character. In the book's final sentences, Mailer provides a kind of Hollywood/Divinely-inspired ending in which a woman is successful in finding that one man whose sperm would give "an egg back to nature and let the woman return with a babe who came from the root of God's desire to go all the way" (234). And so, *Prisoner* ends in sentimentality and fantasy.

Of course, Mailer makes no real concession. Women's right to enter the public sphere on an equal basis with men remains contingent on them continuing to be always open to conception. Mailer states, "he would agree with everything they asked [except] to quit the womb" (233). Thus, he positions women as being the prisoner of their biology, and conception (and what follows) continues as the central part of women's identity, leaving them (at least those having sex and not menopausal) unable to participate fully in

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to find the best mate for herself, an conceive a child who will improve the species" (231). Hence, "[w]omen must have their rights to a life which would allow them to look for a mate. And there would be no free search until they were liberated. So let woman be what she would, and what she could" (233). This statement runs contradictory to much of what he has argued and will continue argue throughout the conclusion.

the public sphere and access the social, economic, and political power found there. The status quo remains. Economist and writer George Gilder, writing in *Sexual Suicide* three years after Mailer states their shared concern more clearly. The impact of the changing role of women, what he calls the "sexual nullification of women … [i.e.,] separating intercourse from reproduction, leads to the destruction of female sexuality and *would also mean destruction of its male counterpart in all its significant dimensions*" (246; emphasis added). Women's control of their own bodies would emasculate men, destroy their sexuality, and Mailer, always the combatant, puts up the best defense he can (albeit one embracing chaos and deceit) to prevent that from happening. Mailer's biographer, J. Michael Lennon, stresses that "Mailer never argued that women should be homebound cooks and babysitters, but he did believe that they shared an immutable biological identity" (Lennon 433). What Lennon and others who espouse this opinion typically disregard (or wish to ignore) is that Mailer did not need to argue that women should be homebound because preventing women's control over their fertility would, in most cases, accomplish that particular outcome. Women's immutable biological destiny is what Second Wave Feminism sought to free them from, and Mailer was relentless in manning the barricade against their movement so as to buttress the power and control of men like himself. Mailer justifies inequality between the sexes by appealing to nature, religion, and mystery and, most importantly, women's place in ensuring the lineage of men. She was "nearer the creation of existence" and her subsequent role as men's "indispensable and only connection to the future" meant that women could not "compete" with men (60). In the tradition of the heroic narrative, Mailer seeks to restore order throughout the land, and, in the guise of exploring the cause of the disorder, i.e., the Women's Liberation

Movement, Mailer articulates a justification for making women prisoners of their bodies that is both familiar and strange.

Coda

The battle over the extent to which women can and should control their own bodies, a key component of the activism channeled by Second Wave Feminism, continues. Each year in February the national March for Life takes place, a rally of organizations seeking to overturn Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal. Pro-life socio-political/religious movements remain active in every state, attempting to limit or ban abortion through a variety of legislative efforts under a multitude of pretexts. In addition, new fronts continue to open up regarding the contested space of the female body. Recently, the #metoo movement brought long-minimized, excused, and ignored instances of sexual harassment and sexual violence into the spotlight, subsequently ending (at least for the moment) the careers of many famous and very powerful men, while igniting an international conversation about the exploitative connections between sex and power in the workplace.[237]

In Mailer's American Dream, the hidden but powerful forces of "ferocious … desires … of ecstasy and violence" require a submissive and cooperative female object, the opposite of the empowered and autonomous woman envisioned by the Women's Liberation Movement. In 2018, women seem motivated to resist assuming this role in ways and numbers not seen since the heyday of Second Wave Feminism. Because Norman Mailer died in November, 2007, he remains unavailable for comment; but, as a man who once said, "a little bit of rape is good for a man's soul" (Lennon 457), one can

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[237] Although the victims of this abuse have been people across the spectrum of gender and sexual identity, the abusers have been almost exclusively men.

hardly imagine him offering his support.[238] Perhaps the best-known kindred spirit to

Mailer's worldview is the nation's current president, Donald Trump, whose response to

the burgeoning #metoo movement was to assert his authority (with no actual knowledge)

by calling into question the integrity of the victims: "People's lives are being shattered

and destroyed by a mere allegation. Some are true and some are false" (qtd. in Bennett).

Trump admits (semi-privately) his own penchant for the unrestrained expression of

sexual desire in his infamous definition of stardom as being able to do "anything … Grab

'em by the pussy. You can do anything" ("Transcript"). That thirty-one days after the

Washington Post released a video (made in 2005) in which Trump makes this statement,

the majority of white men and white women who voted cast their vote for Trump

suggests that, decades after Mailer wrote *Prisoner of Sex,* women's bodies continue to be

a culturally accepted location for the performance of straight white masculinity[239]—

rendering them unequal, disempowered, and unable to access the social, political, and

economic benefits articulated within the mythology of the American Dream. Yet, the

millions of women who participated in Women's Marches across the nation and the

world in January 2017 and 2018, many wearing "pink pussy hats," bear witness to the

implicit threat Mailer sensed. As Eleanor Smeal, founder of the Fund for the Feminist

Majority stated in 1989, "The reason men 'overreact [to women's assertions of power] is

they get it … If women all got together on the same day, on the same hour, we could go

over the top" (Faludi 459). Such a possibility haunted Mailer; and the energy that straight

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[238] An excerpt from a talk Mailer gave at UC Berkeley in 1972. Mailer later complained that he was quoted out of context, but he did, in fact, say those exact words.
[239] Should such a revelation have been made toward the end of either of Barack Obama's presidential campaigns, a victorious outcome is unimaginable.

white men continue to channel into keeping women in their "place" demonstrates the

persistent existential threat of the feminine Other.

Chapter 3

The Demystification of American Exceptionalism:

Courage and Tim O'Brien's Acts of Witness in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*

> "Men must *know* what they do is courageous, they must *know* it is right,
> and that kind knowledge is wisdom and nothing else.
> Which is why I know few brave men.
> Either they are stupid and do not know what is right.
> Or they know what is right and cannot bring themselves to do it."[240]

Introduction:

In *Life Studies* (1950), Pulitzer Prize winning poet Robert Lowell surveilled the nuclear family of the early 20th century, depicting his younger self longing for a dominating masculine figure to guide him through his boyhood insecurities and solidify his status. As a public intellectual, Norman Mailer's encounter with Second Wave Feminism in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1969) gestured toward his previous iterations of literary pugilism, modeling a scrappy manhood frantically raising the alarm about the dangers Women's Liberation presented to the spermatic basis of men's power. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), Vietnam War veteran Tim O'Brien, at that time a neophyte writer and winner of no prestigious awards, takes up the very timely subject of gender, national identity, and the conduct of the war based upon his own experience as a grunt, humping the boonies of South Vietnam.[241] *Combat Zone* is

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[240] *Combat Zone*, pp. 140-41.

[241] Often described as "humping the boonies," which is GI slang for an infantryman carrying a heavy pack out in the rural (often swampy) areas of Vietnam. This language can be found in almost any representation of the infantry experience in Vietnam. Its ubiquity should not preclude the consideration of the sexual implications in this phrase. "Humping," which is an expression often used to describe sexual penetration of a vigorous nature, suggests a soldier entering with some force the "boonies," a rural, unsophisticated land. There is a sense of mastery, entitlement, and power in these words that conceals the paradoxical nature of power among infantrymen who were themselves were both objects and agents of a perverse exercise of power. For an excellent resource on GI "slang," see: http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Glossary/Sixties_Term_Gloss_A_C.html#Letter%20'B'. (Last accessed 8 Apr. 2017).

not a story of lost innocence.[242] Unlike many memoirists of the Vietnam War, O'Brien

submits to being drafted already skeptical about the war's purpose—"persuaded … that

the war was wrong. And since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it,

it was evil" (*Combat Zone* 18). Rather, through the lens of his own voluntary but morally

resistant immersion in the war machine, O'Brien witnesses to and demystifies the

relationship between American "virtue" and violence, assessing and documenting the

formative practices that shape the gendered exercise of militarized American power.

Resisting the allure of identifying either himself or the war as particularly decent

and virtuous, and indifferent to appeals to patriotism, manhood, and protecting Main

Street, U.S.A. from the dangers of Communism, O'Brien deliberately positions himself

as Other to these ideals of manhood and nation.[243] Unwilling to accept the cultural

proscriptions associated with America's post-1945 warrior culture—the questions that

cannot be asked and the assumptions that must not be challenged—O'Brien's rejection of

the notion of a beneficent America at work (via its military might) in Vietnam places him

directly at odds with the fundamental exceptionalist belief that the United States was "an

extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history … unique[ly] superior

among nations" (McCrisken 1). His rebuff also challenges the existence of a superior

straight white masculinity that "knows" not only what is best for America but for other

nations as well—even as it unleashes military force to serve its own interests. In writing

one of the first memoirs of the war, in *Combat Zone*, O'Brien offers his witness, a

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[242] Differentiating him from other Vietnam War memoirists, including, but not limited to Philip Caputo (*A Rumor of War*, 1977) and Ron Kovic (*Born on the Fourth of July*, 1976).

[243] O'Brien does not self-identify as a pacifist. In an interview with Toby Herzog O'Brien asserts "he was not then nor is he now a pacifist; instead he believes that certain wars are justified, such as World War II and possibly Korea. Citing political and humanistic grounds, he believes that legitimate war requires 'some sort of just cause,' not a war fought to impose one country's will on the 'legitimate aspirations and desires of another nation'" (12).

testimony legitimized by the constraints of the war memoir that "only the eyewitness on the battlefield is granted the authority to talk about war" (Hoffman 203) and providing (according to O'Brien scholar and literary critic Mark Heberle, who also served a year in Vietnam) one of "the most permanently valuable literary treatments of the war" (41).[244]

Genre: Witnessing, Understanding, Demystifying

O'Brien's framing of the tension between his clear opposition to the Vietnam War and his conduct in the war placed him in the vanguard of writers creating what ultimately became its own unique form of self-writing—the Vietnam War memoir. These memoirs provide complex and compelling testimony about what it meant for soldiers to have or not to have their "shit together" during that war (*Combat Zone* 52). They function as an interpretation of a closed system of men—distinguishing them from narratives about other comparable systems of social power dynamics like the family (Lowell) or the public sphere (Mailer). The genre of memoir gives writers the freedom to focus in depth on one particular aspect of their lives without the need to tell the "whole story," and the suppleness of the genre—with its acceptance of the use of imaginative techniques to get at the meaning of a life's "moments" (Anderson 19)—was conducive to representing the often bizarre and inconceivable realities of the conflict in Vietnam. O'Brien and others told stories that did not align with the master narrative of American superiority spun at the top of the political and military hierarchies, freeing these texts to participate in what Foucault describes as "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges against the officially sanctioned reality principle" (*Archeology* 89). The delimiting practice that reserved this

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[244] Hoffman also notes that one consequence of limiting the discussion to the men who serve as soldiers means that representations of the trauma inflicted upon women who have served as medical personnel in American wars dating back to the Revolutionary Wars, as well as the wives and family that experience the war through the various behavioral, psychological and physical impacts and damages sustained by their husbands, fathers, brothers, etc., have not been accepted as authentic narratives of war.

discursive space for "the fighting men themselves … to give names and faces and feelings to the anonymous armies and so to discover what it was really like to be there, where the actual killing was done" (Hynes xvi) provided a space for these subversive narratives. While the discursive practices of warrior institutions silenced the voices of its members, preventing them (through the pain of admonishment, shaming, or exile) from speaking of actions they or others had taken as instruments of state-sponsored violence or of their emotional response to what they had seen or done, memoir provided a place to have their say.

Because the figure of the warrior holds an indisputable place at the peak of the culture's hierarchy of masculinities, the particular details of a warrior's life for most readers exist primarily in the realm of fantasy and imagination. Thus the war memoirist invites his readers to enter a realm of obscure and mysterious knowledge as he shares the particular hellishness he endured operating outside the restraints of civil society. The various spine-tingling national rituals celebrating the warrior—the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier or the playing of taps at a military funeral—suggest there is no greater evidence of men's essential superiority than the willingness to take violent action to repel an aggressor, to be "man enough" to risk one's life to protect those who, because of some limitation or personal inadequacy, cannot protect themselves. Yet, at the heart of the genre of war memoir exists an interesting paradox. As Smith and Watson note, soldiers' "memoirs often involve submission and the soldier's acknowledgement of powerlessness" (*Reading Autobiography* 145). Although the soldier wields power in his ability to use forms of force far exceeding that available to most men, he is also constrained by an inflexible chain of command that limits his agency and

demands high levels of obedience and conformity. Compelled to submit to the power and

authority of those above him within the military hierarchy (regardless of their

competence), the experiences related by soldier-memoirists often show them to perceive

themselves as disempowered, i.e., in a feminized position.[245]

Veterans writing about their experience in the Vietnam War found themselves in a

particularly vexed situation. They had to create a new kind of "soldier's tale … different

from [those] of other modern wars—not simply because the United States lost, though

that had not happened before, but because in the loss there was humiliation and bitterness

and the burden of complicity in a nation's moral failure" (Hynes 177). Exploring their

time in Vietnam as both an agent and object of power—"the things men do in war and the

things war does to men" (Caputo vii)—required a new framework for the war memoir

that did not invoke the language/principles of superiority and entitlement articulated

within the discourse of American Exceptionalism. The most powerful nation in the world

had lost a war to a small, ill-equipped Third World nation and that outcome could not be

changed or wished away. Memoir provides an important avenue for Vietnam veterans to

write their way into history, resisting those forces, the powerful cultural impulses that

support and reinforce the mythology of American Exceptionalism that may have elided

their experience.[246]

The narratives of Tim O'Brien, Ron Kovic, Philip Caputo, and others provided

space for these writers and their fellow veterans to process and recalibrate their

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[245] Of course, there is a feminizing quality to any hierarchical power structure, i.e., corporations and other organizations, but because of the paradoxical nature of both being empowered to kill and the possibility of being killed while following orders raises the stakes in important ways.

[246] [B]y the time they were written, a myth of the war had already been constructed … the voices that said, "*This* is the way it *really* was, this is what that war meant." Those voices came early in the Vietnam War— from journalists, from the television screens in American living rooms, from protesters in American streets. The soldiers' tale of the war, when it took shape in the postwar years, would draw on that already existing myth, affirming or denying it, but acknowledging that it existed" (Hynes 212; emphasis in original).

experiences and, if nothing else, recognize the pain inherent in being enmeshed in a despair-inducing "double bind: the entrapment between the clear and present dangers from the enemy and the awareness, a painful mixture of rage and guilt, that the new lessons of history have disenfranchised them from the confident historiography of collective memory" (Myers 84). If they survived, they knew theirs was a story that would not want to be heard, a story that might be revised so that its bad ending became their fault. One can imagine a different present in which the cultural investment in American Exceptionalism has robbed these men of their opportunity to enter the nation's memory, reducing their war experience to, at best, a marginalized space, and more likely erasure from the national narrative. Using the genre of memoir to write against the grain of the victor's tale, O'Brien and his fellow memoirists gave testimony to the complicated position of the American soldier in new and unfamiliar ways—allowing them to speak openly of what it means to inflict suffering in order to survive a losing cause.

Published in 1973 before the fall of Vietnam and the American abandonment of Saigon, during a time when the country was in the midst of what many have called a national nervous breakdown brought on by the Vietnam War, the energy crisis, an economic downturn, and ongoing domestic discord, the critical reception for *Combat Zone* was positive though it did not attain quite the level of critical praise of O'Brien's later fiction.[247] Perhaps it was too soon for the reading public to appreciate what Annie Gottlieb of *The New York Times* described as a "personal document of aching clarity … [an attempt] to cope with the real distress the Vietnam War inflicted on America."[248]

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[247] That said, *Combat Zone* was named an Outstanding Book of 1973 by *The New York Times*.

[248] The Kirkus review suggests that some critics (and readers) were looking for a different type of story—more aggressive, manlier. The uncredited reviewer writes, "A group of very low-keyed autobiographical sketches about America's least-popular war, narrated by an intelligent, rather lonely PFC who knows he

There now exists a large canon of literature of the Vietnam War in which O'Brien figures prominently, both for *Combat Zone* and its fictional repurposing in *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *Going after Cacciato* (1978). Yet, the American affinity for idealizing and glamorizing aspects of the wars that have followed calls into question whether Americans have changed how they think about war (or how they want to think about war) based upon Vietnam and its impact. Samuel Hynes sums up the sticking point: "[Although] [c]ourage and heroism were possible in Vietnam narratives; the *ideal* of courage, the Heroic Man of the war tradition wasn't" (Hynes 216, 214).

Judith Walzer, in her summative assessment of the literature of the Vietnam War finds that even in 2010, these memoirs disturb and distress the reader:[249]

> They suffer from too much realism, stressing physical descriptions of battle and the details of horrible slaughter … Vietnam literature has no 'escape hatches'—few moments of romance … It also lacks reflection on the history the writers have witnessed and has little variety of subject or technique. They were there, and their primary goal is to make us feel we were there … [W]e crave a critical view. Exhausted by what they have experienced, these writers are unable to judge … They want their readers to be assaulted by a reality they cannot share, to be forced to acknowledge its authenticity and sense what soldiers know. But there is no catharsis.

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really should be somewhere else. Between rather off-handed descriptions of legs being blown off and gooks wasted is a running *apologia pro vita sua* that works just because it is so sincere in its rather adolescent Socratic ponderings" ("Review").

[249] Walzer's essay includes works written about men's experiences on both sides of the war, including the stories of, Philip Caputo, Michael Herr, Dennis Johnson, Jim Morris, Dang Thuy Tran, Bao Ninh, Tim O'Brien, Nathaniel Tripp, and Jim Webb.

The terrors go on until the end; desperation prohibits any resolution. We

are left suspended in no-man's land."

The Vietnam War remains distinctly troublesome and unsettling in memory and on the

page. Walzer's use of the descriptor popularized during World War I, "no-man's land,"

alludes to a cratered, often weaponized or otherwise contaminated space between two

contending entities--a space of fear, pain, and death. Walzer claims that it is in this bleak

space that memoirs of the Vietnam War leave their readers. Perhaps justly so. O'Brien

asks, "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been

there? I think not. He can tell war stories" (*Combat Zone* 23). Forty-five years after

O'Brien wrote those words, the conflict between the discourse of the triumphal American

Warrior and the discourse of dissent and alienation that resists exceptionalist mythology

remains unresolved, playing out in memoirs of America's most recent wars, such as

Jarhead (2003), *House to House* (2008), and *The Forever War* (2009).

American Exceptionalism

The narrative of American history and progress, which invigorates and is

invigorated by the mythology of American Exceptionalism, depicts a nation in which

straight white men through their intelligence, courage, and grit, tamed, defeated, and

transcended every obstacle in their path so as to deserve the bounty of what became the

United States of America. The traditional recounting of early American history reassures

citizens that stretching back to the days of the earliest settlers, their forefathers, though

surrounded by a vast population of hostile, nefarious, and uncivilized Others, not only

persevered, but rid the land of threats and transformed it into its productive and divine

purpose. Emphasizing an innate national goodness, "Manifest Destiny" (as it became

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known in the 19ᵗʰ century) codified a belief system that purified the violence, cruelty, and marginalization visited upon the indigenous people for centuries as the necessary and blessed actions of God's special people. Reinforcing this narrative of Divine favor, the good fortune of United States (with its abundance of natural resources and borders secured by oceans on each side) continued into the twentieth century, shaking off the effects of the Great Depression via war production and emerging from World War II as the most economically powerful, technologically advanced, and highly weaponized nation in the world.

The subsequent Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union aroused a new sense of national peril. Certainly the destructive capacity of the nuclear arsenals on both sides as well as the discourse of intimidation, e.g., Khrushchev's "We will bury you" ("Khrushchev"), were sufficient to arouse existential anxiety among the citizenry. Yet too often the complexity of the situation was reduced to political maneuvering with the "red scare," in which the Soviet Union and the spread of Communism now assumed the role of the demonic and dangerous "red Indian" armed with nuclear bombs rather than knives and tomahawks, providing the justification for the accrual and exercise of power.[250] Once again the dominant political and military structures led by straight white men called for resistance to the threat of incursion by the Other—putting American Cold Warriors in place in overt and covert capacities and operations around the world. Beginning with the implementation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947, resistance to Soviet influence and support in terms of money, weapons, and troops for any country threatened by Soviet expansion became the bedrock of American

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[250] Richard Slotkin discusses uses of the "Indian" narrative within American discourse during the Vietnam War era in *Gunfighter Nation* pp. 489-623.

foreign policy. The discourse of mid-twentieth century American Exceptionalism depicted the United States as stalwart and unwavering in the face of all threats and identified its enterprises as a force for good, an example to the world of what decency and virtue yoked to military power looked like—obscuring the uglier realities of its role as a superpower from public awareness.[251]

If one were to estimate the high water mark for the belief in the United States as a principled and honorable guardian of liberty throughout the world, January 20, 1961, the date of John Kennedy's inauguration would be a plausible and likely choice. In his inaugural address, JFK articulated America's unique role as a world power using inspiring language that resonated with purpose and moral righteousness:

> Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay
>
> any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose
>
> any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty … In the long history
>
> of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of
>
> defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. … The energy, the
>
> faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country
>
> and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the
>
> world.[252]

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[251] For example, carrying out (with Great Britain) the coup d'état in Iran that replaced the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, with the more malleable and U.S. friendly Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who became Iran's final Shah and whose brutal domestic policies brought about a revolution leaving the Islamic leadership of Iran ever-mistrustful of the motivations of the United States and creating an additional level of ongoing tension throughout the region.

[252] By the time John Kennedy spoke these words, America had been intervening in the lives and liberty of the people of Vietnam for fifteen years. Shortly before President Franklin Roosevelt's death in April 1945, he encouraged the French to resume colonial control of Vietnam operating under a long-standing racist belief that the Vietnamese were unable to rule themselves, an attitude experienced in America as both a sense of Asian inadequacy and the fear of a Yellow Peril. Since the 19th century, the nation's immigration policies had actively worked toward controlling and minimizing the presence people of Asian ancestry.

Unfortunately, it takes a profound exercise of the imagination to find an ethical center in the actions that followed these words. Soon after his inauguration, Kennedy sent advisors, i.e., soldiers, into Vietnam and approved the implementation of the coercive "strategic hamlet" program—which forcibly relocated South Vietnamese farmers and their families away from their ancestral lands to fortified camps—in the attempt to resist North Vietnam's indefatigable guerrilla insurgency (Herring, *America's Longest War* 113-14).[253] Despite having said that "[i]n the final analysis, it is [the Vietnamese people's] war" ("Kennedy Interview with Cronkite:),[254] Kennedy's government ultimately became "coconspirators" (McMaster 41) in the overthrow of South Vietnam's President Diem, which led two months later to Diem's assassination, leaving blood on America's hands and no significant change in the intensity or success of South Vietnam's participation in the war.

The subsequent record of the strategies, policy development, and decision-making that America's political and military leaders applied to the ever-deteriorating political and military situation in Vietnam shows a disturbing blend of ignorance, cynical self-interest, insecurity, and duplicity. The Cold War narrative of American Exceptionalism did not accept that the Vietnamese were "a people whose national experience was defined by resistance against foreign domination …whose overriding goal was independence and

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During the resulting resistance to French rule led by Ho Chi Minh, the Truman administration (first clandestinely and then openly) provided weapons and military advisors to the French to resist the communist Viet Minh Under the leadership of President Dwight Eisenhower, the United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords that ended the war between Vietnam and France because they also allowed for elections to be held in 1956, which the more populous (and communist) north would certainly have won (Hunt 465-67).

[253] It is interesting to note the timing of this decision. In June 1961, Kennedy had met with Khrushchev, who had given him rough treatment. Kennedy said shortly thereafter in an interview with *New York Times* reporter James Reston, "now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place" (Halberstam, 76-77).

[254] In an interview with Walter Cronkite on September 2, 1963.

unity" and who were willing to fight as long as it took to accomplish these ends (Pei 35).

Historian and political scientist George Kahin asserts that, "[t]hough calculations of national and strategic interest had influenced Eisenhower and Kennedy, they saw the value of [military involvement in] South Vietnam as *symbolic rather than material*; it offered an opportunity to demonstrate our will and ability to contain Communism and repel Maoist insurgencies" (qtd. in Slotkin 616; emphasis added).[255] Unaware of the "symbolic nature" of their mission, American soldiers were sent to South Vietnam having been prepared (physically and psychologically) to fight another World War II in order to "liberate" an oppressed people. Unfortunately for all, Vietnam was a very different war, and, in addition to the fact that the soldiers were not viewed as liberators, they were left completely unprepared by their leadership (military and civilian) to mount a counterinsurgency against a guerrilla campaign in a hostile (literally and figuratively) climate.

Within two years after the commitment of ground troops in Vietnam, the U.S. political leadership recognized that the "odds of a favorable outcome of the war" were not in America's favor. In 1965, McGeorge Bundy, NSA advisor under Kennedy and Johnson put them at "twenty-five percent," yet declared continued U.S. presence and action in the region essential in order to avoid damage to "the international prestige of the United States, and a substantial part of our influence …" (qtd. in McMaster 219; qtd. in Hybel 36). Also of great concern to America's political leadership was the possibility of

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[255] Assuming an understanding of the Third World and the intentions of Russia and China it did not possess:
"[a]n administration which flaunted its intellectual superiority and its superior academic credentials made the most critical of decisions with virtually no input from anyone who had any expertise on the recent history of that part of the world [ignoring] the entire experience of the French Indochina War… [T]he arrogant men of the Atlantic …did not need to know about such a distant and somewhat less worthy part of the world" (Halberstam xv).

the loss of personal power and status—a fear of diminished manhood and reputation for the leaders of a losing cause. Having hitched American Exceptionalism to the overwhelming capacity of America's military firepower, they would be unable to speak of themselves as superior leaders and their country as uniquely qualified for superpower status should their destructive capacity not be capable of compelling, as Henry Kissinger put it, "a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam [to the] breaking point" (Grandin 89).[256]

Ignoring the evidence provided by their own intelligence and national security personnel and continuing to believe the North Vietnamese could never demonstrate the kind of courage and resilience necessary to maintain its insurgency against U.S. forces and their superiority in resources, materiel, and manpower, American leadership doubled down on a strategy of attrition. Believing that the casualties its military forces would inflict on North Vietnamese soldiers (and Viet Cong insurgents) would ultimately necessitate a cessation of hostilities because North Vietnam would simply run out of men willing and able to fight, the critical measure of success became the body count. United States soldiers now fought a war in which "the goals were to kill Vietnamese in the largest possible numbers and to hold fortified positions against assault"—an uninspiring mission of "mass killings and defensive" operations" (Hynes 215-16) clearly in conflict with the nation's exceptionalist mythology.[257] Indeed, American Exceptionalism had been reduced to what historian David Hunt disparages as an inverted belief that somehow

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[256] The State Department's Intelligence Office released a study on the effect of the heavy bombing of North Vietnam that began in March (Operation Rolling Thunder) in which they found "no significantly harmful effects on popular morale. *In fact*, the regime has apparently been able to increase its control of the populace, perhaps even to break through the political apathy and indifference which have characterized the average North Vietnamese" (qtd. in Hybel 37; emphasis in the original).

[257] Though, oddly enough, evocative of the strategies used against Native Americans during the Indian Wars of the 19th century.

"[t]hrough a magical alchemy, futile killing would make its perpetrators appear more 'credible'" (471).

The "[l]et's get some kills" mentality,[258] exacerbated by American soldiers' lack of proper preparation and understanding of their mission and the challenges they would face, led to increasing (and, at that time, unprecedented) levels of violence against civilians. Richard Slotkin explains,

> The sacrifices demanded of the combat soldier in such a struggle are different from those demanded by ordinary combat … [W]hat counterinsurgency warfare demanded was not merely the willingness to 'throw yourself on a grenade' to save your buddies but to make a similar sacrifice for the sake of those hostile, alien, bad-smelling peasants in the *ville*. It was utterly unreasonable to expect that a conscript army, whose soldiers were trained for conventional combat, would be able to comprehend and accept such a mission. But in the absence of such comprehension it became impossible for the troops to respond appropriately, and usefully, to hostile villagers like those in Mylai [sic]. (620)

Conditions in Vietnam amid the fog of war provided multiple excuses cum justifications for employing violence against the civilian population, but certainly a policy that attached positive outcomes, including praise, commendations, promotion, and the wraithlike "light at the end of the tunnel," to increasing the numbers of Vietnamese killed by American soldiers provided a powerful impetus for America's most notorious atrocity, the My Lai

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[258] *Combat Zone* 86. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, references to *If I Die in a Combat Zone* will list the page number parenthetically.

massacre.[259] On March 16, 1968—eleven months before O'Brien began his time "in country," during four hellish hours of a "search and destroy" mission that went brutally awry—Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion, 23rd Infantry Division, U.S. Army murdered, gang-raped, and mutilated the bodies of 504 Vietnamese civilians, including women, children, and babies (Anderson, *Facing My Lai* 3-4). [260]

News of My Lai remained largely unknown for almost a year, covered up by its participants, their commanding officers, and others up the military and civilian chains of command, until November 1969, when reporter Seymour Hersh published a series of reports exposing the massacre. Although O'Brien had no direct role in the atrocity, *Combat Zone* repeatedly interrogates his connection to My Lai, worrying the memory of what happened there to consider the larger problem of the Vietnam War and what it reveals about America. O'Brien addresses the point early in the text as he writes, "To understand what happens among the mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America. You must understand Fort Lewis, Washington. You must understand a thing called basic training" (32). Fort Lewis was the location of O'Brien's basic training, and he finds nothing positive about his experience—appalled by "the … unimaginable … brutality of the place," finding it a "neat package of stupidity and arrogance" (33).

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[259] Using classified documents and first-person interviews, journalist Nick Turse asserts My Lai was not an aberration, but rather that atrocities like My Lai were part of a larger strategy. Based upon interviews, he claims, "Whether you achieved or exceeded what were essentially killing goals had a significant impact on what your tour of duty in Vietnam would be like. Insufficient body counts translated into less support in the form of airlifts—resulting in long, hot, dangerous hikes through treacherous terrain instead of helicopter rides to or from the base" (Turse 44).
[260] Although perhaps the best "known" incident, the unremitting assaults and atrocities committed by "Americans" from the earliest colonial days against the land's indigenous populations exceed My Lai's horror exponentially.

O'Brien is not shocked that the horrors of My Lai emerge from places like Fort Lewis, filled as they are with American boys and men succumbing to what the writer James Baldwin referred to as the "habits of thought [that] reinforce and sustain the habits of power" (qtd. in Wypijewski 3). The military's basic training taps into and promulgates the distorting powers of a belief system always already at work within all national institutions and systems (including straight white masculinity) that actions taken by the warrior arm of the American power structure are legitimate *per se* because of the inherent superiority of both the nation and its leadership, and the role of the soldier is to do what he is told without question. Thus, the "squad leader … [who] has been in the army for two weeks … [and who is] big and … strong … and in charge … loves the new power" he wields over the men who were his peers just days ago (38). He will obey the demands and expectations of his superiors to gain a foothold within the system of power (often narrated as the rise of the individual due to his merit and superiority). The seductive nature of maintaining and increasing that power over others provides an impetus toward conformity and willful ignorance, a fear of rocking the boat and susceptibility to groupthink that fosters obedience, and, as seen in My Lai, barbarism. Although O'Brien's text never mentions American Exceptionalism directly, he grapples with it in principle throughout *Combat Zone* as he highlights the coercive strategies and forces (from common sense to humiliation) at work that limit the ability of individuals to exercise their free will, wisdom, and the courage to do the right thing. As such, he calls into the question the fundamental nature of an inherently good and decent America pulsing at the core of American Exceptionalism.

Overview of *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*

Tim O'Brien arrived in Vietnam in February 1969, a year after CBS news anchor

Walter Cronkite, renowned then as "the most trusted man in America" had stated at the

close of the news report on February 27, 1968: "For it seems now more certain than ever,

that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. To say we are closer to

victory today is to believe in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong

in the past" (Ward and Burns 290-91).[261] Richard Nixon had attained the presidency in

January 1969 and began withdrawing American forces immediately, but he did so with

little thought toward avoiding U.S. casualties.[262] Nixon focused on protecting his own

reputation; [263] he had no intention of having his presidency tainted by the first loss of an

American war. In the infamous "Pentagon Papers," Daniel Ellsberg, a former State

Department analyst, labeled Nixon's policy "a bloody, hopeless, uncompelled, hence

surely immoral prolongation of US involvement in the war" (qtd. in McCrisken 32). The

flimsy nature of America's mission, the duplicity of its leadership, and the decision to

place soldiers at risk for what now was clearly a failing if not failed cause was readily

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[261] *Slate* magazine writer, Jack Slater notes that in the 1972 Oliver Quayle poll in which Cronkite attained this status by scoring 73% on a "trust index," Richard Nixon scored 57%. In light of Nixon's score, Slater offers the possibility that too much may have been made of Cronkite's gravitas (Slater).
[262] Between 1969 and 1973, the number of troops in Vietnam declined from 550,000 to 24,000, but within this timeframe, Nixon also significantly escalated the bombing of North Vietnam and approved the invasion of Cambodia (1970) and Laos (1971). As the president sought "peace with honor," "[o]ver a third of the total American casualties in the war occurred … [In addition to] 20,553 American [there were] 107,501 South Vietnamese and more than half a million North Vietnamese and NLF (Viet Cong) combat deaths" (McCrisken 33).
[263] The lengths to which he was willing to go to avoid that outcome are staggering. In a (taped) conversation in the Oval Office, Nixon and Henry Kissinger had the following exchange about strategy:
> President: I still think we ought to take the dikes [in North Vietnam] out now. Will that drown people?
> Kissinger: About two hundred thousand people.
> President: No, no, no, I'd rather use the nuclear bomb. Have you got that, Henry?
> Kissinger: That, I think, would just be too much.
> President: The nuclear bomb, does that bother you? ... I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christsake. (Ellsberg 418)

apparent to the men fighting the war. Increased fragging (the murder of officers by their own men, often using fragmentation grenades), failure to obey orders, and evasion of contact with the enemy led to what the Defense Department "perceived as a morale 'emergency' in Vietnam" (Slotkin 623). Many of O'Brien's fellow combatants were quite comfortable assuming the role of "malingerers" arguing that "the trick of being in the Nam is getting' *out* of the Nam" (141). Courage did not concern them; survival and retaining all their body parts in good working order did (and who could blame them?).

O'Brien was assigned to Third Platoon, Alpha Company, Fifth Battalion, whose area of operations included Quang Ngai Province, the host of a heavy presence of Viet Cong soldiers and the location of the My Lai massacre (Herzog 15, 17). While almost no one (including O'Brien's unit) was aware of that particular scene of carnage staining the land, they could not escape the rampant disgust, loathing, and violence aimed at them as American soldiers. O'Brien describes the area as hamlets of

> scarred and mangled villages resulting from American attacks; land dotted
> with Vietcong land mines and booby traps that took a heavy toll on
> American soldiers' bodies and psyches; and inhabitants' sorrow, grief, and
> outward hostility toward the American soldiers brought on by years of
> bombs, napalm attacks, artillery fire, physical dislocation and killing prior
> to and during the My Lai massacre." (Herzog 27)

This is the war O'Brien entered as an FNG ("Fucking New Guy" [80]) and fought in and survived to write about.

Using a lyric from a marching cadence song as his title, *If I die in a combat zone / Box me up and ship me home*, O'Brien begins the memoir already in country, trapped in

the circular pattern of marching, fighting, making camp, "snipers yesterday, snipers today" (1), a remorseless routine of fear, violence, and stagnation over which he and the other members of Alpha Company have no control—fighting a formless war with no fronts and an enemy who was mostly impossible to identify. The goal is to "find the Viet Cong … [so] [w]e just walked. That was the order, the plan, and we tried to do it silently and safely" (150). The memoir ends with O'Brien's return to the United States, having survived his thirteen month tour of duty, hoping for an authentic sense of some positive emotion to mark the occasion. Instead, "[t]here is no joy in leaving, nothing to savor with your eyes or heart" (205). Having been discharged, O'Brien returns home to Minnesota, wearing civilian clothes but, because he has no civilian shoes, still wearing his Army boots, a reminder of all of the fruitless miles he marched and that, "in return for all [his] terror" (208), little had changed. In between these two moments, O'Brien tells stories of that war, crafting a series of vignettes that plunge the reader into short but richly textured episodes that emphasize the sense of dread, antipathy, and fear that characterized this period in his life—from just prior to his enlistment in August 1968 through his return to the United States in March 1970.

O'Brien divides the text into twenty-three individually titled chapters, organizing the narrative roughly around three thematic areas that offer a life/time progression of sorts: Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6 focus on formation, considering the process of becoming a soldier; Chapters 1, 4, 7-15 concentrate on O'Brien's experience in country, observing the conduct of the war; and, chapters 16-23 reflect on manliness and courage, exploring the corrosive relationship between hypermasculinity and the lack of integrity of purpose in Vietnam. Throughout *Combat Zone*, O'Brien rejects a didactic narrative tone, unable

to muster a "plea for everlasting peace … [or] confirm the old [traditional] beliefs about war." His war now over, O'Brien finds he is "left with simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery *is*" (23). In sharing these "scraps of truth," O'Brien offers a thoughtful critique of American society, and in particular the cost of "unknowing" —the price paid by the soldiers and civilians in Vietnam for the Americans who chose not to think deeply about what it means to fight a war in Vietnam, individuals like "the people on the town's draft board … smiling so nicely," "lethargic[ally] accept[ing]" (20) the necessity of war without really knowing anything about it, who promised, "It won't be bad at all … Stop in and see us when it's over" (17).

It was, however, "bad" (1 and passim)—a word O'Brien uses frequently. In addition to the overwhelming sense of futility created by daily firefights, in which "[t]hings happened, things came to an end … [t]here was no sense of developing drama … [a]ll that remained was debris" (8), was the danger associated with being a "leg man" (52) in a war in which the enemy's weapon of choice was the landmine. O'Brien's unit was located in Pinkville, an area the Viet Cong had mined heavily.[264] O'Brien notes that in the "three days he spent writing [a description of the types of mines used], mines and men came together three more times. Seven more legs, one more arm" (126).[265] Preoccupied with the possibility of standing, sitting, or walking on the complex assortment of mines used by the Viet Cong in a landscape that made detection almost

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[264] This area was called Pinkville because it was colored pink on Army maps, this area includes the hamlets of My Lai, of which My Lai 4 was the setting for the infamous 1968 massacre.
[265] This chapter was originally a short story, published in *Playboy* in July 1970, a year after he had been in the field, thus making this representation very close to real-time inscription (Heberle 41).

impossible, soldiers spent a tremendous amount of time and energy managing their fear by vilifying "Charlie" whose presence and strategy place them all at risk.

As *Combat Zone* winds back and forth from one village to the next, to the next, and back again, O'Brien depicts the demoralizing impact of America's strategy of attrition on those soldiers required to implement it. Without a narrative of mission and accomplishment, the sole focus of American soldiers became killing the enemy, thus denying soldiers of any sense of accomplishment and motivation to justify their risk of dismemberment or death. O'Brien describes the psychic weight of soldiers' pointless routine:

> We slay one of them, hit a mine, kill another, hit another mine … We walk through the mines, trying to catch the Viet Cong Forty-eighth Battalion like inexperienced hunters after a hummingbird. But Charlie finds us more than we find him. He is hidden among the mass of civilians, or in tunnels, or in jungles. So we walk to find him … from here to there to here to there. And each piece of ground left behind is his from the moment we are gone on our next hunt … If land is not won and if hearts are at best left indifferent; if the only obvious criterion of military success is body count and if the enemy absorbs losses as he has, still able to lure us amid his crop of mines … if any of this is truth, a soldier can only do his walking. (128)

The tedium of soldiers' lives (with occasional bursts of terror thrown in) is well-documented in the stories and memoirs from many wars. What O'Brien depicts, however, moves beyond tedium into an absence of meaning that delegitimizes the mission.

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Chronicling idle interactions among soldiers, firefights, artillery barrages, the destruction of villages, the loss of friends and men's reactions to these losses, as well as the bizarre and often cruel ways men respond to the contingencies of life in the infantry within the inexorably dangerous and stressful circumstances of Pinkville—violence for no purpose except to do it—O'Brien produces an account of a soldier's daily life so foreign to the lives of its readers that even those accustomed to the discourse of war stories may at times find themselves overwhelmed and infuriated by the futility and the suffering he witnessed, participated in, and experienced.

Analysis of *Combat Zone*

Introduction: What is Courage? What is Terrible?

In asserting his alterity within the national narrative of superior manhood and patriotic duty, O'Brien pits himself against patriarchal/cultural expectations but ultimately finds he does not possess the courage of his convictions. Despite his deep distaste for the war, O'Brien accepts his status as a draftee because he is afraid he might not be able to endure the emotional exile from family, home, and community that would result should he follow his conscience. Castigating himself for submitting to the militarism of the state rather than standing up for his principles, O'Brien labels himself a "coward", repurposing the epithet typically applied to a man who <u>refuses</u> military duty (68). In doing so, O'Brien emphasizes his Otherness by willingly adopting a label rich with negative connotations, including weakness, impotence, femininity, and homosexuality and using it repeatedly in judgment of his own behavior.

O'Brien's peculiar use of the pejorative term "coward" under circumstances that would characteristically call for positively inflected language such as "honorable" or

"worthy" draws attention to the paradoxical nature of the warrior's role in a "wrong" war (18 and passim). The mythology of American Exceptionalism asserts that the nation's cause is *always* right, and, therefore, its citizens have no basis to question whether or not the premise for war is valid. As an American undertaking, the war is inherently necessary and ethically good. Subsequently, the generally accepted conception of a coward involves a soldier in wartime who places self before country, refusing to confront the enemy by running away and failing to do his part to share in the risks and burdens required to protect the nation. O'Brien, by claiming the freedom and authority to judge whether the nation's martial efforts are legitimate, places himself outside the psycho-social protections of deniability offered by national mythology.[266] By claiming the war is morally wrong, i.e., not only unnecessary but also "evil," (18 and passim) and yet, because of personal insecurities and needs, choosing to conform rather than refuse to participate, O'Brien leaves himself no option (if he is to claim any moral authenticity and consistency) but to accept the role of coward.

Through his witness to his own flawed humanity, O'Brien highlights a central preoccupation of *Combat Zone*, the matter of courage. O'Brien draws his definition of courage from Plato's *Republic* and *Laches*, "[C]ourage is a certain kind of preserving of the opinion … about what and what sort of thing is terrible" (cited in *Combat Zone* 190-91); it is "a sort of endurance of the soul … [a]"wise endurance." O'Brien understands this type of courage as "acting wisely … when fear would have a man act otherwise" (136); to be "able to speak the truth … in the worst of circumstances (144-145). No matter the situation, however difficult the conditions, a man possessing courage will not

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[266] Perhaps the best known case of these protections are claims made by soldiers of the Third Reich, who when charged with war crimes for atrocities committed throughout Europe, and particularly in the death and concentration camps, claimed, "I was just following orders."

take action that the common good understands as "terrible," nor will he deceive— two aspects of courage in short supply in America's execution of the war in Vietnam.[267]

Wisdom, then, is to know the right thing to do, and courage is the will to do the right thing with "endurance" and commitment, even at great cost to the individual and the community. Plato's dialogue asks the reader also to bear in mind that "endurance" in and of itself is not good (or bad). However, perseverance in service to what is "foolish," i.e., that which is irrational, reckless, or stupid is *not* courage because it results in what is "evil and hurtful" (136). Lacking moral clarity, "foolish endurance," creates an environment conducive to acts that are "terrible." Examining the Vietnam War through this lens reveals the entire enterprise to be one of foolish endurance. Within Plato's framework, an act of courage would require resistance, a refusal to participate in the workings of the system/institution engaged in foolish endurance.

O'Brien enters the war in a spirit of alienation and resistance toward the intentions, actions, people, and institutions he will serve. Heberle describes his stance as actively maintaining a "separation between the imposed external role of soldier and a more authentic identity, which is internalized" (43-44).[268] Compared to his fellow soldiers/trainees, O'Brien upholds the role of Other in a way [most of] his cohort does not and would not want to do. As part of this stance of dissent, he "tr[ies] to keep a certain perspective … as a watcher of things … [t]he observer, the peeping Tom of this army" (186)." Through his surveilling action, O'Brien notices things others may have missed;

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[267] For the remainder of this chapter, the definition of courage articulated by O'Brien (via Plato) will be used as a parameter of analysis. To be clear, to act with courage requires the discipline and wisdom to refuse to engage in the Terrible—regardless of the circumstances (including, especially, those that might bring benefit to the actor).

[268] Heberle's interest in O'Brien's separateness rests primarily with O'Brien's use of the imagination, i.e., day-dreaming. I am looking at in a larger sense, as not simply escape but rejection.

his use of the descriptor "peeping Tom" expresses his awareness that such close observation of what is typically meant to be shielded from public view breaks with the rules of propriety and may result in some form of rebuke or chastisement. At the time, he chides himself for "[d]oing nothing" (186), but his post-war act of articulating his witness in *Combat Zone* remains an impressive act of defiance,[269] particularly given his role as one of the first veterans to "speak eloquently for the soldiers whose sense of a failed tradition was often merely despairing, intuitive, and silently endured" (Myers 80).

The discussion that follows examines how O'Brien's text illuminates the ways the mythology of American Exceptionalism operates within social systems and institutions to ordain, enforce, and promulgate a warrior culture—an orthodoxy that forms and maintains social cohesiveness, rewards compliance (whether active or passive), and punishes those who resist or dissent. Further exploring O'Brien's interest in courage, I will also consider his representations of American soldiers in the war and their relationship with the definitions of "courage," "wise endurance," and "foolish endurance" articulated in *Combat Zone*. Specifically, I will analyze O'Brien's witness to the multiple forces at work within a framework of "patriotic obligation and duty" that call for unquestioning acceptance of and submission to the actions and demands of warrior culture, as well as his witness to the intersection between power and toxic manhood, in which a compromised masculinity asserts its power to inflict some version of the "terrible" in order to assert or regain a sense of its own status, stability, and purpose.

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[269] Heberle notes that O'Brien's roles as "writer and moral reflector … complicate and ultimately displace the ostensible and conventional memoir identity as soldier … [W]e are aware of his subject position as witness, observer, and recorder rather than initiator or participant" (48-49).

Orthodoxy and Warrior Culture

Worthington, Minnesota

The literal translation of the Greek word "orthodox" is "right glory." In the early Christian Church, this term was used to circumscribe how God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit should be extolled and honored liturgically and in prayer. But to praise properly, one must believe properly, and thus orthodoxy becomes a well-defined and formalized series of definitions, constraints, and admonitions about the appropriate way to think about and express one's faith. Defying this system places the individual outside the community of faith and, across the centuries, a variety of methods have been used to punish offenders, including burning at the stake, stoning, and decapitation. Although many Americans deeply revere the exceptional nature of their nation and its people, they rarely react so harshly to the rejection of those beliefs. But, they do, indeed, react. In *Combat Zone*, O'Brien experiences and observes the gendered cultivation and delivery methods for the inculcation of the appropriate conventions and behaviors associated with patriotism, duty, and manhood operating within American culture—the means and motivations used to shape boys into instruments of war—as well as the responses provoked when the implicit and explicit expectations for these behaviors are not met.

O'Brien highlights the similarity of this belief system to religious orthodoxy when he describes his response to the wave of fury he experiences the night before he leaves for basic training. Unable to contain himself, he finds pieces of cardboard on which he "print[s] obscene words … declar[ing] [his] intention to have no part of Vietnam. With delightful viciousness … declar[ing] the war evil, the draft board evil, the town evil."

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Having labeled his work "obscene"—abhorrent and repugnant—O'Brien feels "outside the law," imagining the town's frantic response should he take these signs to the bus depot the next day and make his private mutiny public. As he reads the "bright and ferocious" looking words, they "burn with a hard, defiant, criminal, blasphemous sound" (20). The mythology of American Exceptionalism makes it an offense against what is sacred (God) to defame the nation and the war that nation has ordained. In asserting his judgment/curse over the town and its beliefs in the validity of the war and the demand that he submit to participating in it, O'Brien disrupts the naturalness of the unifying values and principles of patriotism and duty. Were he to act upon his conscience, he knows he runs the risk of disrupting his connection to the people in his community. Thus, O'Brien sees himself irrevocably trapped by the Vietnam War's presence in his life, helpless because "the war and my person seemed like twins … grafted together and forever together, as if a separation would kill them/[us] both" (20). If he were to make the choice not to serve, he would be rejected by and exiled from the community, and, for O'Brien, this experience would be untenable—the "end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all" (22). Consequently, O'Brien tears up his signs, places them in the household garbage, and reports to the bus depot the next afternoon, where his act of submission (rather than resistance) makes the news as he is photographed by the local paper along with four other draftees obediently answering their nation's call.

O'Brien's memoir establishes how deeply war is enmeshed within American culture and how far-reaching are the historically inflected sociological forces that shape the identity of men like him from their earliest days. O'Brien describes himself as "[growing] from one war into another" (11), with both his father and mother serving in

the Navy during World War II and his childhood shaped by memories of that particular war and war's formative power and mystique. War's presence is ubiquitous, the subject of games, fantasies, and stories as O'Brien and his friends frequent the Army Surplus store to purchase "dented relics of our fathers' history, rusted canteens … scarred helmet liners," using them to reenact their fathers' battles with enemy Others, the "Japs and Krauts," so that, as part of their play, they become soldiers like their fathers (12). As a child, O'Brien seeks connection with his father's militarized male identity, fetishizing his father's war decorations, secretly stroking them and pilfering "a tiny battle star … and carry[ing] it in [his] pocket" (12).

The avatars of manhood in his youth, the men of his town who were veterans of World War II would frequently gather on the steps of the courthouse (a pulpit of sorts associated with men, like themselves, who judge what is in the best interests of the community and its citizens) sharing "tough talk … [about] bellies filled with German lead, about the long hike from Normandy to Berlin, about close calls and about the origins of scars just visible on hairy arms" (13). These men did not question or obsess about how or when they served their country: "Nothing to do with causes or reasons; the war was right … and it had to be fought" (13). As men, war presented them with a duty, a responsibility, and an obligation to be fulfilled—not a moral choice to be pondered. These men do not speak of love of country or a desire to liberate oppressed peoples. The war was "right" because their country was fighting it, becoming a soldier was a natural expression and extension of manly identity that did not require perseveration or effort.

Accordingly, "the expectations of the town … family … teachers" (18) serve as a goad inducing compliance, while the members of the community, deliberately or not,

become agents of social control. O'Brien perceives that he must acquiesce to the form if not the spirit of American Exceptionalism, because "I could not bear the prospect of rejection: by my family, my country, my friends, my hometown. I would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love." Absent any conviction in a right purpose for the war and experiencing strong feelings of "self-hatred and self-betrayal," O'Brien chooses to place himself within a rigid institutional structure in which he will be required to risk his life in order to gain the acceptance and respect of people he has scorned as "lethargic in their acceptance of the war" and "not very spirited … not very thoughtful" (O'Brien "The Vietnam in Me"). Years after the war, he continues to carry resentment, condemning his community, and by extension, those just like it, for sending boys off to Vietnam without "know[ing] the first damn thing about the war. It was my country right or wrong, a kind of pride in ignorance" (qtd. in Herzog 8). Yet, the people of Worthington are similar to people across the United States during this period (and likely today as well). They watch the news, including footage of the war on television, they see its horrors, but they also believe in the mythology of American Exceptionalism—the inherent rightness of America and its causes.[270]

Basic Training: Resistance and Submission

The desire for connection to the people and space of Worthington, MN that overpowers O'Brien's moral repugnance at the action he must take to maintain it is conspicuously absent during O'Brien's time in basic training. His experiences there and in advanced infantry training prove to him that has entered a system of thinking and being designed to quash individual initiative. He gives little space in the text to what he actually does or learns during his military training, suggesting boredom perhaps and,

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[270] Never since Vietnam has a war been covered with such free and uncontrolled access by the news media.

given his previously expressed attitudes, disgust. Instead O'Brien focuses his attention on the ways in which the camp leadership seeks to shape the trainees minds and hearts, to "catechize trainees" (Bates 270), finding this far more compelling than the activities that shape the trainees' bodies and skills. O'Brien's lack of enthusiasm or respect for the various incentives benefits offered those who conform within the boot camp experience leaves him on the margins of his cohort—a space to which he is happily banished. His reasoning is uncomplicated:

> I did not like them, and there was no reason to like them. For the other trainees, it came too easy. They did more than adjust well; they thrived on basic training, thinking they were becoming men. … I held my own, not a whisper more. I hated the trainees even more than the captors. But I hated them *all* …I gaped at the neat package of stupidity and arrogance at Fort Lewis. I was superior. I made no apologies for believing it … I instructed my intellect and eyes: Ignore the horde … I shunned the herd. (33).

O'Brien makes only one friend in basic training, Erik, a like-minded man who loves literature and joins with O'Brien in their "coalition against the army … a war of resistance … to save our souls" (35). The resistance itself is indirect and much more about maintaining an intellectual and emotional distance from the other trainees and the training exercises designed to prepare them to be part of a unit of fighting men. O'Brien resists bonding with his cohort, which requires "joking at the bullyism, getting the drill sergeants to joke along with them" (33) in order to build a relationship of sorts with these powerful (at least in that environment) authority figures. But O'Brien and Erik cannot remain completely isolated from the group, and at times they join in, "hiding the

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remnants of conscience and consciousness behind battle cries, pretended servility, bare, clench-fisted obedience" (35).

The war of resistance pursued by O'Brien and Erik is not one-sided. Refusing to be excited about assuming the warrior's identity and power and not at all interested in gaining the admiration of peers or the all–powerful Drill Instructor, Erik and O'Brien become targets for enforcement methods that rely on misogyny and homophobia to compel rogue elements to conform. As O'Brien describes basic training, much of the discourse, whether singing marching cadence songs or receiving instruction or correction, focused on emphasizing the common theme of the dangers of the Other—who, even in wartime, is primarily the predatory, treacherous, sexually wanton woman (often conflated with "Charlie" the enemy). "Contempt for women" (Bates 270) defines the all-male confines of Fort Washington; "there is no thing [sic] named love in the world. Women are dinks. Women are villains. They are creatures akin to Communists and yellow-skinned people and hippies" (45). Thus, to cement the outcast status of those who obey orders, but refuse to conform to unstated but readily apparent standards of attitude as well as behavior regarding the mundane tasks of cleaning the barracks, participating in bayonet practice, etc., O'Brien and Erik are subject to taunts of "coward," "pansy," and "college pussies" (36, 47). Found sitting behind the barracks talking and polishing their boots together, isolated from the rest of the unit, DI Blyton dresses them down in a thirteen-sentence tirade that uses the word "pussy" not less than a dozen times with "lezzie" thrown in for good measure (47-48). Unfortunately for Blyton, they care so little about advancing within the social hierarchy of real and perceived power within the world of basic training that his abuse does not result in any change in their attitude—though

they do develop a deep and, at least in O'Brien's case, long-lasting, hatred for him.

Shortly thereafter, O'Brien and Erik part ways, as O'Brien stays behind to receive

Advanced Infantry Training (AIF), learning more ways to kill to prepare him to be

deployed to Vietnam in eight weeks.

Why We Fight[271]

O'Brien's sense of his own difference ("you don't *belong* here" 55; emphasis in

original provides an emotional and psychological shield that gets him through basic

training. His mind and heart protected by a combination of disdain and rage, O'Brien

endures the conditioning designed to prepare him to kill for his country. Having resisted

the forces at work in basic training that sought to make him a gung-ho soldier,

nevertheless, O'Brien now faces the certainty of deployment to Vietnam as an

infantryman, and he cannot resign himself to taking this final step. Thus, O'Brien enters

Advanced Infantry Training with an agenda, the intention of finding a way to escape his

situation, to desert.[272] During AIF, O'Brien puts together a plan to escape the Army—a

"two-hour bus ride to Vancouver, a flight to Ireland, and then a day or two by boat to

Sweden" (54). But before taking the final step, O'Brien requests a meeting with the

battalion commander, itself an act of resistance given the closely monitored and restricted

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[271] I use this title ironically as a reference to a series of films made during World War II to explain the need for the war in Europe and Asia by examining in some depth the methods and motivations of the enemy and the courage and resistance of our allies, e.g., in the Battle of Britain. These films were shown to military troops and civilians, and while they contained a fair amount of drama, they were based on real events and actual threats.

[272] To get a sense of what O'Brien was resisting, psychologist Chaim R. Shatan speaks to one view of what basic training accomplishes: "The completion of basic training socialization as the recruit's acceptance of military reality. By this point, the recruits have come to embody the 'siege mentality and the paranoid position of combat: permanent hypervigilance, reflex obedience, and instant tactical response—to any threat, real or imagined" (Karner 215).

access to all senior levels of military leadership.[273] Although not directly stated, O'Brien's interest in the dialogues of Plato, specifically, and this classical mode of learning and engagement in general, suggest that his motivation is an interest in hearing what this authority figure might say when confronted with O'Brien's existential dilemma.

The military's hierarchal standards of submission by subordinates cast O'Brien's request as questionable, and the first sergeant, arranging the meeting "grudgingly" (52), asserts control over this legally required right by stipulating that O'Brien must meet first with the chaplain, whose task it was to "weed out the pussies from men with real problems … the poor chaplain … is busy as hell trying to weed out all you pussies. Good Lord ought to take pity on the chaplain, ought to stop manufacturing so damn many pussies up here" (55).[274] Having survived the torrent of misogyny that characterized his time in basic training, O'Brien is not dissuaded by the implication that only feminized soldiers have problems or, even worse, bother the commander with those problems. With his escape plan already in place, O'Brien gives the "Masters of War" a final chance to make their case. In his final encounter with the military establishment stateside, O'Brien frames his overarching concern around these existential questions: "[A]ssuming … that I truly believe the war is wrong … [i]s it also wrong to go off and kill people? If I do that, what happens to my soul? And if I don't fight, if I refuse, then I've betrayed my country, right?" (60).

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[273] Trainees are coached to respond with a rousing "No, sir!" if leadership "asks if they we have any problems or any complaints or any needs" (*Combat Zone* 45).

[274] The sergeant's accusation against God implies a displacement of blame. It was not the Army's fault so many men were failing to fall in line with the expectations of the military leadership. Indeed, even the Army cannot repair the errors made by the Divine. In his role as cheerleader for the effort and immersed in the pro-war discourse, the chaplain seems unable to comprehend men's resistance to fighting in the Vietnam War. In a spirit of confusion and resignation he states, "I guess the men are taking war more seriously than they used to" (61).

The response of the military exemplars disappoints but does not surprise. The chaplain talks a lot but can only instruct O'Brien to have faith in the precepts of American Exceptionalism. The commander interrupts O'Brien, ignoring his real concern and reframes it as a fear of battle. In response to O'Brien's measured rationality, these leaders offer drivel and pro forma arguments indistinguishable from those made by the unknowing people in Worthington, Minnesota. The elements of their argument fall within the expected discursive framework of duty ("[Y]ou're a soldier now, and you'll sure as hell act like one!); honor ("Where the hell do you fit guts and bravery into your scheme?"); and country ("[T]his is a good country. It's built on armies … [that] do what the country says … America is one helluva great country … She says fight, then you go out and do your damndest") (57, 58).

Both officers fail to speak honestly and thus with courage in response to O'Brien's well-considered idealism, illustrating the moribund condition of the nation's military leadership. In a state of panic, the chaplain accuses O'Brien of reading "too many books, the wrong ones, I think there's no doubt, the wrong ones" (57)[275] and looks for confirmation of his wobbly position to a series of irrelevant sources, historical novelists (Norah Lofts and Thomas Costain), Peter the Hermit and the Christian Crusades, President William McKinley's directive from God to invade the Philippines, and, unbelievably, Jesus Christ (who, the chaplain claims, "originated" the "principle of faith") (58).The battalion commander fails to look O'Brien in the eye during their brief interview, seeming almost asleep, he "wore dark green sunglasses, and his eyes may have been closed" (62). The commander literally gives him the brush-off, far more invested in

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[275] The chaplain's need to repeat "wrong books" and the fear of books distorting the minds and actions of those who should be pliable and obedient cannot help bring to mind the ubiquitous Louisa May Alcott quote from her novel *Work*: "She is too fond of books, and it has turned her brain."

removing the dandruff on O'Brien's collar and shoulders and correcting the sloppiness of

his battle dress to make sure he looks like a "strack trooper" (62), i.e., proper soldier, than

in engaging in any meaningful discussion about O'Brien's reservations about the ethics

of his role in the war. Spouting nostalgia about World War II and misinformation about

the current conflict, he winds down his monologue by admitting that "we all get scared"

but that "Christ it's exhilarating sometimes. Man against man, only one wins" (62-63).

Refusing to directly and seriously engage with O'Brien's questions, the commander and

the chaplain participate in a strategy of evasion and denial that explicitly denies the

validity of his concerns and implicitly suggests they have no basis from which to honestly

refute O'Brien's position.

Having received no epistemological relief in his encounter with military

leadership, O'Brien again attempts to align his actions with his principles by embarking

on the first steps to deserting from the Army. Already sick with bronchitis, he takes the

bus into Seattle and checks into a hotel to "think the whole thing through for one final

night" (66). He becomes increasingly ill, whether from a sickness of the body or the soul

is unclear. Despite the appalling weakness and ignorance of the leaders he has just

encountered and the unpleasant likelihood that their ineptitude represents that of the

officers who will decide his fate in Vietnam, O'Brien remains unable to break free—

"[f]amily, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not

run" (68). He returns to Fort Lewis, and, in just a few days, he arrives in Vietnam, where

one of the first things he hears is a pitch to reenlist in the Army for three years in order to

gain the benefit of a rear echelon job. Although a man would "lose some time to Uncle

Sam. Big deal. You save your ass" (72)—hardly a message aligned with exceptionalist thinking.

O'Brien's text to this point focuses primarily on grappling with matters relevant to making the decision to enter the war, observing and resisting those forces that pull him one way or the other. Having made the decision to go, to take "the final midnight walk over the tarred runway at Fort Lewis and up into the plane" (138) that will deliver him to Vietnam, the subject of his surveillance becomes the soldiers with whom he fights the war and the people of Vietnam whom he fears and pities. He remains largely Other throughout, admitting later that "[t]he soldiers never knew [him] … and [h]e never knew the Vietnamese people" (207). In country, O'Brien witnesses the fruits of the blind faith of the American people in their exceptional nation and leaders—the toxic effects of national ideals of manhood applied to no purpose.

In Country: Three Profiles in "Courage"

The mythology of American Exceptionalism gives a particular notion of war an honored place in the nation's history as an integral purpose for America's existence—war is one of the means by which it achieves the good. Within this conception of war, America fights to protect liberty and its citizens and to expand the reach of freedom around the globe. Hence the warrior is an important cultural signifier in a belief system that invests war with constructive rather than destructive meaning both for the well being of the nation and its men, for whom braving the trials of war leads to productive manhood and national security. Under the assumption that the unique and superior qualities of the nation guide its military interventions, the expectation is that the victorious outcome will confirm the worthiness and inevitability of its dominance.

O'Brien's recounting of his days and nights as a grunt in Vietnam reveals how much the war exposed about the roots of American Exceptionalism, the belief that might makes right[276]—a principle that in this case encouraged the exercise of toxic forms of masculinity along a continuum of abuses of power ranging from impulsive grassroots brutality by soldiers in the field to the organized use of cruelty as a strategy by those in military leadership positions. This dissertation asserts that these actions occurred in response to external constraints, both gendered social expectations, which demanded victory, and the hierarchy of military leadership, which had brought young men into an environment in which "nothing [was] clear, not the nature or identity of the enemy, not the mission, not where they should be shooting or who was shooting at them, and certainly not the meaning of victory" (Faludi, *Stiffed* 29).

That this masculinity proved toxic speaks to what was at stake. Although locked into a failing military strategy that put the survival of individual soldiers in the field and the reputation of the institution (the military complex) at risk, the standards set for the institution and its agents had not changed. The assumption that the nation's inherent superiority and that of its men—"You're American soldiers. You're stronger than the

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[276] For example, O'Brien has from his birth been literally grounded in the land, the lust for which generated the codification of Manifest Destiny as divinely ordained rather than the plunder of indigenous people's land. The prairie upon which "doctors, lawyers, CPA's, dentists, drugstore owners, and proprietors of department stores" built their "middle-class houses" (15) and O'Brien played Little League Baseball has been imprinted with war, genocide, and the kinds of atrocities O'Brien will see again in his own war. In framing the land with what would have been locations of contestation between white Europeans and indigenous Americans, O'Brien provides a necessary context for recognizing this first iteration of American Exceptionalism. His hometown is "along the route used to settle South Dakota … and Nebraska and northern Iowa … [where] the Norwegians and Swedes and Germans had taken the plains from the Sioux" (12-13). The cities in the general area of Worthington are named for white usurpation—it is located 90 miles from Sioux City, 60 miles from Sioux Falls, and 80 miles from Cherokee. Forty miles from Worthington lies Spirit Lake, the site of a massacre of Native Americans. O'Brien describes it as "celebrated massacre" (12), and indeed, it was (and remains) a tourist destination. Pipestone (named for the quarries from which Native Americans have for centuries obtained material to make pipes) just north of Worthington was the site of the annual "Song of Hiawatha Pageant"—honoring Longfellow's long-cherished (within white culture) and appropriative poem.

dink. You're bigger. You're faster. You're better educated. You're better supplied, better

trained, better supported" (107)—would cause it to prevail in Vietnam meant that

anything less than a victory would be considered a failure. Because America's military

strategy made victory impossible to achieve, the inevitable result unmans not only the

soldiers involved but, given the complex integration of straight white masculinity into the

nation's identity, the general category of straight white men as well.[277] Without a

meaningful mission, what matters is survival—individual vs. the system. Reaching for an

appropriately masculine response to their forced ineffectiveness [w/c] within the

externally constrained role of warrior supporting the flawed strategy of a largely

indifferent hierarchy, these purveyors of violence often respond with the one option open

to them, inflicting superfluous violence. Although O'Brien's text makes clear that bad

things happen in war through ignorance and unintended error,[278] *Combat Zone* also

reveals eruptions of toxic masculinity that serve no strategic purpose aimed at vulnerable

individuals and populations—actions that fall under the category of Plato's "the terrible"

(191).

This section of the dissertation will focus on three officers to whom O'Brien pays

particular attention in *Combat Zone*: Mad Mark, Green Beret and 1st Lieutenant of Alpha

Company (O'Brien's unit); Major Callicles, the battalion executive officer (second in

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[277] The exclusion of men of color is deliberate. Certainly those who participated in the war shared a general sense of "shame" at the loss of the war—a well-documented feeling among not only men who served but, no doubt in a somewhat different sense, Americans in general. However, the overarching view of the prototypical "American" as a straight white middle-class man (however inaccurate) suggests there was less or at least something different at stake for men of color. This matter is no doubt multi-layered and complex and, at least for this dissertation, out of reach of further discussion (though certainly worthy of further study).

[278] Examples of this include the following: An arrogant and inexperienced officer mishandles an ambush resulting in the death and wounding of seventeen American soldiers; his replacement having been "in command for only an hour … marched the men into a minefield" (171), killing one man, seriously wounding another; thirty-three Vietnamese villagers are wounded and thirteen killed (including eight children) when the incorrect coordinates are called in for the nightly mortaring of NVA positions.

command) of O'Brien's rear echelon assignment; and Captain Johansen, the commanding officer of Alpha Company. O'Brien's portrayal of these officers reflects not only their own personal habits and attitudes but, also in a more important sense, their exercise of power toward the men under their leadership and care, the civilians with whom they come in contact, and the enemy. In other words, O'Brien's characterizations of these officers explore the way courage may (or may not) be defined.

Mad Mark: The Hunter

In his study of frontier mythology, historian Richard Slotkin called the war in Vietnam, "our last great Indian War" (562), having in common with the Plains Indian Wars a strategy of "attrition" (that sometimes segued into actions aligned more with extermination) in which there is an officially ordained attempt to ensure that "most or all of the enemy's military age males are killed or wounded" (545). The language of the soldiers in country reflects this mindset, with "Indian country" serving as one of the most common references to the space beyond their fortified bases.[279] O'Brien does not use this specific language in *Combat Zone*, but he does recognize the same dehumanizing rationale at work within military culture in the chapter "Alpha Company," which focuses on his entry into the war. In this chapter, O'Brien pays particular attention to Mad Mark, the leader and 1st lieutenant of Alpha Company, peeling back the layers of his performance of hypermasculinity to interrogate what it means to be, as O'Brien states it, "an ideal leader of men in the field" (81) in a war in which the ill-defined mission to "seek out the Viet Cong and disrupt their infrastructure by whatever means possible …

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[279] As Slotkin notes in his analysis of the representations of the Vietnam War in the media as well as popular and political culture in *Gunfighter Nation*, "Tropes and symbols derived from Western movies had been one of the interpretive grids through which Americans tried to understand and control their unprecedented and dismaying experience Vietnam" (546).

[creates] brutal realities for a largely innocent native population" (Griffin 4).[280] Mad

Mark, as the platoon leader, is the midwife, so to speak, in O'Brien's initiation into the

war—guiding him into his new Vietnam reality. Initially, there seems to be plenty to

respect about Mark because he "did not take the mission to excess … was not gung-ho,

not a man in search of a fight" (82), an intentionality very much appreciated because it

reduced the risk of death or disability for the men in Alpha Company. An avatar of

hypermasculinity, Mad Mark possesses qualities/strengths one would expect (and desire)

in a warrior [in this particular war]:

> He was insanely calm. He never showed fear … His attitude and manner
>
> were those of a CIA operative. A lover of stealth. A pro … He walked
>
> with a lanky, easy, silent, fearless stride. He wore tiger fatigues, not for
>
> their camouflage but for their look. He carried a shotgun … and the
>
> shotgun itself was a measure of his professionalism, for to use it
>
> effectively requires an exact blend of courage and skill and self-
>
> confidence … a man must work his way close enough to the prey to make
>
> a shot, close enough to see the enemy's eyes … you must hit once, on the
>
> first shot, and it must kill. (82)

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[280] This was not the preferred view of the people of South Vietnam within the American military's
narrative. Even South Vietnamese babies were seen as the enemy. What follows is testimony during the
prosecutorial cross-examination of PFC Paul Meadlo during the court martial of Lt. William Calley:
Q (Prosecutor): What were the children in the ditch doing?
A (Meadlo): I don't know.
Q: Were the babies in their mother's arms?
A: I guess so.
Q: And the babies moved to attack?
A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance.
Q: Had they made any move to attack?
A: No.
("My Lai Transcript")

However, there is a malevolence in his "Aristotelian ethic, in the practice of war as "a necessary and natural profession," which O'Brien also conveys. For all there is to admire about Mad Mark in terms of aesthetics and competence, his practice of the "art" of war is shaped by his belief that war should be practiced against those "human beings who are intended by nature to be ruled by others and refuse to obey that intention" (82).[281] Within Mad Mark's "ethic," the Vietnamese people are innately inferior, thus requiring domination by Western powers; their resistance to that domination necessitates his actions in particular and the war in general.

This belief, combined with the observation that "after the war and in the absence of other U.S. wars he might try the mercenary's life in Africa" (82), places Mad Mark well within the category of racist imperialism. His willingness to apply his talents to armed intervention in Africa raises the memory of the blood-rich imperial past in which the Great European Powers carved up the continent of Africa for their own benefit, aided by an ideology of racial superiority and entitlement, the effects of which were still being felt in the violent conflicts/proxy wars Mad Mark would be joining (post-Vietnam) as a mercenary. Concluding his introduction of Mad Mark, O'Brien compares him to Aristotle, again placing him within the pantheon of white Western greatness, stating, "Like Aristotle, Mad Mark believed in and practiced the virtue of moderation; he did what was necessary in war, necessary for an officer and platoon leader in war; he did not do more or less" (82). O'Brien then further complicates the notion of "ideal leadership" in the American Army by juxtaposing this claim for Mad Mark's virtue with a series of

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[281] Mad Mark also uses noncombatant civilians for target practice, "peer[ing] through the sniper scope mounted on his new M-14 rifle … [h]e squeezes off a bullet at one of the farmers [working in a rice paddy]. The fellow fell. Mark was elated: a bull's eye at three hundred meters." Mad Mark has O'Brien radio into command that "we got a one Victor Charlie, male, military-aged. Engaged with small-arms fire while trying to evade" (120).

scenes of increasing violence. Having had an unremarkable first few weeks in country, O'Brien then describes how the war becomes "bad" as a result of the leadership of Mad Mark (83).[282] One night, Mad Mark leads a patrol into the village of Tri Binh 4 initiating a series of events that show just how "bad" the Vietnam war could be, as O'Brien, who is not part of the patrol, witnesses an escalating display of the terrible that redefines not only redefines leadership but also any claim to exceptionalism.

In Tri Binh 4, Mad Mark's patrol surprises a group of ten Viet Cong soldiers socializing beside the village well, opening fire and killing one of the ten. Given that the strategy of attrition called for killing as many of the enemy as possible, this outcome hardly seems worth getting all worked up about. However, when they return from the patrol, a young member of the unit who had been there, Kid, "was grinning himself out of his skin … Jesus, we gave 'em hell. Damn, we gave it to 'em!" (83). His joy is multiplied by the trophy Mad Mark acquired, the ear of the dead man. Like a child with a new toy, Kid insists, "Show 'em the ear we got! Let's see the ear!" (83). Assuming a posture likening them to gangsters, the patrol gathers together to share "a roll of greasy piasters" they had stripped from the pockets of the dead man (84). Ritualizing the violent mutilation, the men of the patrol then "pass the ear around for everyone to fondle" (84). Mad Mark's actions have made possible this bonding event—a "ghoulish sharing among thieves" (Heberle 45).[283] But the evening events have not yet concluded. Although the nine Viet Cong are long gone (as are the residents of Tri Binh 4), Mad Mark calls in gunships who "strafe and rocket Tri Binh 4," burning down most of the village and

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[282] O'Brien has an interesting relationship with the word "bad." A casual and undramatic word, he uses it more than thirty times in *Combat Zone*, suggesting that language had lost its power to convey the magnitude of what he was seeing on a regular basis.
[283] This point is made by Thomas Myers in *Walking Point* and Mark Heberle in *A Trauma Artist*.

killing the livestock. The unit listens to "cattle and chickens and dogs dying" and then goes to sleep with the "smoke billow[ing]" around them (84).[284]

O'Brien's witness exposes the toxic mix of elements necessary to carry out an atrocity: a hypermasculine leader who feels entitled to express dominance through violence against others perceived to be inferior; admiring, dependent and/or intimidated subordinates;[285] and a population unable to defend itself. The use of the word "fondle" in the ritualized sharing of the ear, suggests a sexual component to the sharing ritual—something akin to a communal assault, a gang rape. The question remains, however, how one is to square the wreckage of Tri Binh 4 with the notion of Mad Mark "practic[ing] the virtue of moderation" and his status as "an ideal leader of men in the field"? One could label O'Brien's representation of this scene as the use of irony and/or even dark humor and leave it there, i.e., things are never what they seem, and in war they are usually worse. However, a larger connection can be made regarding the nation's violent past relationship with Native Americans. Mad Mark's behavior suggests that of Army Major Edward Ord fighting an insurgency by the Apache in Arizona in 1869 about which he reports:

> I have encouraged the troops to capture and root out the apache by every
>
> means, and to hunt them as they would wild animals. This they have done
>
> with unrelenting vigor. ("The Military")

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[284] Did O'Brien touch the ear? This chapter avoids the use of the word "I"—distancing O'Brien from the events. My sense is that he did. He claims that it was "passed around for everyone to fondle," and he was part of "everyone." In addition, his sleep is disturbed that night; he wakes "every hour" and the smell of the smoke "remind [ed] [him] of the ear" (84). It seems clear that his participation would have been much less enthused than Kid's was.

[285] As to the virtue of young American soldiers, in Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, a record of his experience as a young lieutenant in Vietnam, an experienced sergeant gives him this advice, "Before you leave here … you're going to learn that one of the most brutal things in the world is your average American 19-year-old boy" (137).

The fact that O'Brien used this passage in his novel about My Lai (*In the Lake of the Woods*) strongly implies that, in singling out Mad Mark's leadership as "ideal," a term associated with the exceptional and what is worthy of emulation *and* by categorizing it as moderate, O'Brien testifies to the profoundly debased environment in which the Army has placed them all. O'Brien's rendering of distorted leadership, flawed mission, and easily-led troops contradicts a national narrative asserting an inherent rationality in its assertions of power/ superiority at the national and the individual gendered level. In doing so, he alludes to the historical eliding of genocidal violence, a process that his witness in *Combat Zone* resists.

Major Callicles: The Apologist

After a disastrous July and August in which Alpha Company suffers serious casualties under the command of two incompetent commanding officers in a row, O'Brien finally obtains a rear echelon job. Not surprisingly, these jobs are prized because "[u]nlike the dreamy, faraway thoughts about returning alive to the world, the GI's thinking about a rear job is not dominated by any distant, unreachable, unrealistic passion. It's right there, within grasp" (172) (primarily for white soldiers). [286] O'Brien explains that [i]f an officer takes a fancy to you—if he thinks you're one of his own

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[286] Within the text, racial tensions around this issue are high. So high, in fact, that O'Brien witnesses a fragging incident in which a white 1st sergeant whose (perceived) preferential support (letters of recommendation) for white soldiers applying for safe rear echelon positions so infuriated black soldiers in the unit that it got him killed—a grenade explodes directly underneath him when the unit is in the field. That night, O'Brien talks with a black friend in the unit about the incident and learns that "[a]lthough the shot was meant only to scare the top sergeant, the blacks weren't crying … he said [putting his arm around O'Brien] that's how to treat whitey when it comes down to it" (174). It is relevant to note that while O'Brien seems well-intentioned here, from my perspective as a white woman, there are a few problems with his representation of this situation. The first is that he calls into question whether the black members of the platoon are correct in their perception. In addition, he, to some extent, blames their response to their sense of exclusion for the discrimination they are experiencing: "They sulk. They talk back, get angry, loaf, play sick, smoke dope. They group together and say shit to the system. And this feeds the problem" (173). And, finally, in his representation, he lumps "the blacks" under one umbrella as though they respond to the world identically.

breed—then you're a candidate for salvation" (172).[287] O'Brien finds such an officer,

whom he dubs Major Callicles—referencing a character in Plato's the *Gorgias*, who

contends with Socrates (unsuccessfully) in a dialogue and whose principles are

reminiscent of Mad Mark: there exists a natural hierarchy in which the superior and the

strong should rule over the inferior and weak, allowing the superior to benefit from the

advantages to which they are entitled by nature ("Callicles"). If Mad Mark channels the

malevolent energies unleashed by a war of attrition, Major Callicles exhibits the rigidity,

defensiveness, and self-aggrandizement that buttresses and endorses those energies and

that characterize the Army itself.[288] Callicles, as the executive officer of the battalion (of

which Alpha Company is a small part), is the second in command, and, in addition to

being the assistant commander, he serves as the logistics coordinator for the battalion,

with extensive administrative responsibilities centered on maintaining the operational and

fighting readiness of several hundred men. O'Brien in his new, rear echelon role is one of

his assistants.

The title of the chapter featuring Major Callicles is "Courage is a Certain Kind of

Preserving," and it opens with a portion of Plato's *Republic*, a dialogue between Socrates

and the guardians of the city about courage, which one of the guardians defines as "a

certain kind of preserving … the preserving of the opinion … about what—and what sort

of thing is terrible" (cited in *Combat Zone* 190-91). In his portrayal of Callicles, O'Brien

suggests that the "old order" (197) represented by Callicles has lost its ability to identify

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[287] The use of "breed" to convey similarity, evokes the racial and class issues in play in the passing out of these assignments.
[288] Bates argues that both Callicles and the Chaplain "stand for the army as a whole" (270) but, though both are grossly incompetent and unthinking, their responsibilities are different in focus as well as magnitude, i.e., Callicles possesses real power over the lives of men and, in his role of liaison with the media, the perceptions of the public, while the Chaplain plays a much lesser, more tangential role.

the "terrible" and, consequently, the facility for discerning the proper path forward—a loss which undermines its ability to perform authentic acts of courage. O'Brien makes this case by focusing on three ways in which Callicles exercises his power. Though very different from the deadly charisma of Mad Mark, Callicles, in his reckless authoritarianism, also provides a troubling view of toxic masculinity at work in America's prosecution of the Vietnam War.

As the second in command, Callicles has the freedom (and the responsibility) to focus his attention on any number of issues important for the battalion's war readiness. But he does not. Instead, he narrows his priorities to issues completely unrelated to the war: "moustaches, prostitution, pot, and sideburns … all four [of which] were either tacitly or explicitly permitted" by military institutions, because he believed they were connected to "the new, insidious, liberality infecting his army" that undermined "the hard-boiled militarism" (191) through which he affirmed his identity and power. Callicles' obsession with the superficial brings to mind the unnamed battalion commander in Fort Lewis, whose preoccupation with O'Brien's dandruff concealed his inability or lack of interest (or both) to address the moral and ethical issues that plagued O'Brien as a trainee. Having established Callicles as a petty despot, carrying (it was believed) "a bloody razor" to be used on hirsute offenders, policing marijuana use and sideburns, and "prosecut[ing] violators with inquisitorial zeal" (191), O'Brien reinforces Callicles' lack of wisdom, the quality that is of paramount importance in manifesting "proper courage" (136).

Given Callicles' worldview of will to power, the fact that the focus of his outrage at the revelations about the My Lai massacre that became public three months into his

tenure as executive officer was not the army itself, nor the perpetrators of the atrocity, but

rather the demand that he explain why it had happened holds no surprise. To do so, he

normalizes the event, putting it in the past, "it happened over a year ago, it's dead …

Christ … there's a billion stinking My Lai 4s, and they put the finger on us" (192-93).[289]

Certainly Callicles is not alone in being unable to speak honestly about the realities of the

massacre because to do so would require the admission that American troops expecting to

encounter a Viet Cong stronghold instead found themselves in the midst of a village of

unarmed civilians—old men, women, and children—sitting down to breakfast and, under

the orders of American officers to "kill anything that moves," attempted to do just that

(Turse 2-4). To tell the truth about the bloody viciousness involved in executing this war

of attrition would reveal the highly unexceptional quality of the nation's methods, and no

one within the military hierarchy was prepared to do that. Instead, Callicles, as the

spokesman to the press adopts "the burden of defending, justifying, and denying —all in

one broad, contradictory stroke" (192), portraying the military as a victim and those who

question its actions as ignorant. Putting forward a multi-pronged defense, he asserts that

everyone hates the military and that the press (and its advertisers) seek to make money in

a 20th-century iteration of "yellow journalism"[290]; explains that civilian deaths are part of

the reality of war; blames the Vietnamese civilians for not running fast enough to get out

of the way of American munitions; and, finally, accuses the civilian population of

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[289] Sadly, he is correct about the frequency with which American military activity degenerated into brutal violence against civilians. Journalist Nick Turse's award-winning (Ridenhour Prize) research into "Operation Speedy Express," which operated in the Mekong Delta from December 1968 until May 1969, uncovered evidence of civilian deaths that equated to a My Lai massacre per month. His book, *Kill Anything that Moves* (2013) reports on many additional atrocities and the military initiatives and mindset that encouraged them. Note: Some of his claims are disputed; see Kulik and Zinoman's "Misrepresenting Atrocities" (*Cross-Currents*, 2014, pp. 162-98).

[290] This assertion is not generally true. A *Time*-Louis Harris poll that took place after the massacre was revealed indicated that "the public excused My Lai as an unfortunate part of war by a margin of 65 percent to 22 percent" (Allison 88).

colluding with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army and thus getting what they deserve.[291]

Having made the claim that "people like me are lifers because we've got to show that there are still people … [with the] guts to stand up for what's right" (200), Callicles refuses to make a distinction between killing during battle and the "willful shooting of individual human beings—one by one, person to person, five yards away, taking *aim* at a ditch full of unarmed, desperate people" (194) or to entertain the legal implications of taking such actions against civilians. He shuts down discussion citing, "[t]his is a war, and My Lai is where the enemy lives" (195). Callicles continues to act as "an agent of order" (Myers 87), going so far as to claim that there are no noncombatants in Vietnam, arguing that "those so-called civilians are killers" (196)—thus none are protected by the laws that govern the prosecution of war. In essence, then, Callicles makes the argument not just for a war of attrition, but for one of extinction.

In the wake of My Lai, Callicles returns to his autocratic enforcement of his own private measures of "professionalism" that are meaningless within the context of the war, "… [standing] in the rain, spending hours peering into gas tanks and under seat cushions" looking for marijuana (197-98). Mistaking "guts" (200)—"going out and being tough … and making things happen"—for courage, Callicles provides, perhaps, the ultimate analogy for America's use of power in Vietnam. Failing to think logically about "what is right," Callicles in a drunken stupor acts out his obsession with proving his relevance ("Ol Major C goes out and gets Charles … the ol' soldier's out there messing up Charles. We'll have people shittin' in their pants tomorrow, let's go"), Callicles challenges and

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[291] This, too (see FN 51), is correct. Slotkin states, "In Vietnam … the population of the countryside was in fact deeply enmeshed in the Viet Minh/Vietcong network, and … hosti[le] to and suspici[ous] of the Americans" (*Gunfighter Nation* 547).

finally compels O'Brien to join him on a bizarre midnight mission to Tri Binh 4, the village that Mad Mark's trophy-hunting raid had mostly burned just a few months before. Warned not to proceed to the village by a "squad from Delta Company … [who advised] that the VC liked the place." Callicles remains unperturbed and committed to completing his "patrol"—convinced he will emerge heroic for having gotten "some kills" (202). After a thirty-minute hike into Tri Binh 4, this four-man patrol (Callicles, O'Brien, a Vietnamese scout, and a soldier from Delta Company) bogs down. The major, in attempting to plant a Claymore mine, falls asleep. One hour later, Callicles wakes up, walks into the village, and, having determined that "there ain't no goddamn VC in Tri Binh 4," asserts that he may just have "a goddamn party here tomorrow night" (204).

In the morning, Callicles is banished from LZ Gator permanently. Although in the critical literature this scene is often understood as comedic, with Callicles reduced to a drunken buffoon that further highlights the general stupidity and ineffectiveness of military leadership, this dissertation asserts that, through Callicles' impetuous desire to demonstrate his courage without the use of wisdom, O'Brien demonstrates the risk to soldiers from those charged with their care. This perspective is not unique to O'Brien; many memoirs of Vietnam claim either explicitly or implicitly that "the officer corps represented a greater threat to soldiers' immediate safety than any Vietnamese enemy ... willing to trade lives for the possibility of medals" (Griffin 5). The result of Callicles' midnight ramble might have been the deaths of four men, for no other reason than the yearning of an insecure man to be relevant in an era that had no use for him. In his portrayal of Callicles, O'Brien offers his readers an example of what having "guts" actually looks like.

Major Johansen: Our Hector[292]

O'Brien explores what happens to a good man in a bad war through his characterization of Captain Johansen, the man in command of Alpha Company. On the surface he seems the opposite of Callicles, and O'Brien features him in a chapter named for the quality O'Brien wants to admire about him, "Wise Endurance"—wisdom married to courage. Horner notes in his analysis of the new definitions of courage found in *Combat Zone* that, for O'Brien, courage comes not from the heart or the testicles but from "the clear thinking cortex of the brain" (258). As O'Brien reflects on courage throughout *Combat Zone*, he considers classic heroes of literature and film, men who are "hard and realistic … removed from other men … wise … and each was courageous … *thought* about courage, *cared* about being brave, at least enough to talk about it" (143-44). Johansen falls within this category, clear of mind, calm in temperament; he cares about courage and talks about it with O'Brien, who, perhaps signaling the vexed position of Johansen when it comes to courage, notes his captain's wistful comment, "I'd rather be brave than almost anything" (134). Throughout *Combat Zone*, O'Brien casts a sharp and unforgiving eye on the officers who cross his path; in casting Johansen in the role of hero, O'Brien provides a welcome, though problematic, counterpoint to the exquisitely

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[292] In basic training, O'Brien and his friend Erik discuss literary works concerning war including Ezra Pound "who has written the truest poems," according to Erik, who then goes on to recite "Some quick to arm, / some for adventure, / some from fear of weakness, / some from fear of censure" (37) from Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly." Erik goes on to claim a common motivation for joining a war effort, "[N]ot because of conviction … [rather] [w]e come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes" (38). Given Achilles standing as "the bravest, handsomest, and greatest warrior of the army of Agamemnon in the Trojan War" ("Achilles"), O'Brien's introduction of Achilles as the archetype of the hero in the pre-Vietnam setting and then making the claim concerning the one character he identifies as a hero, Captain Johansen (he was "our Hector") speaks to the Vietnam War as a conflict in which no Achilles type heroes could emerge. Farron describes Hector as "defending a cause which he knows is doomed, that his death always hands over him, and that his greatest heroic achievements" are merely the work of the gods seeking to continue the battle that his side cannot win (39-40). If one replaces "gods" with generals and political leaders, then Johansen (and men like him) were very much in the same position—at best, hamstrung by their situation and second-rate heroes.

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awful figures of authority that touch the military lives of O'Brien and Alpha Company. In "a war fought for uncertain reasons" (138), Johansen provides O'Brien and others in the unit evidence that "human beings sometimes embody valor" (144).

Critic Marilyn Wesley chides O'Brien's characterization of Johansen and his interest in courage, claiming, "While … [the text] clearly intends a criticism of the war, that effect is discounted by its reliance on representational codes which annul subversive analysis—especially its characterization of the noble officer, and its preoccupation with the theme of courage—traditional devices which repress the disturbing impact of violence in Vietnam." This dissertation will take up this critique in more detail below. However, concerning the charge that O'Brien's "preoccupation with the theme of courage" softens his disparagement of the conduct of the war, it seems more likely that O'Brien's interest in courage stems from his witness to the effects of the astonishing lack of courage in the field and the need to highlight that failing. His memoir serves to emphasize just how much of the disorder and violence he sees all around him results from leadership that either operationally or strategically fails the men on the ground— officers who do not appear to know the right thing to do or, knowing it, lack the courage to take that action. O'Brien's commitment to pursuing this theme strengthens rather than mitigates his criticism of the war, placing his text within the larger context of a cultural conversation about a gendered national exceptionalism.

To Wesley's point, however, it is important to unpack O'Brien's representation of Captain Johansen, which is dramatic and romantic and often makes him seem like one of the movie stars that people O'Brien's imagination: Bogie in *Casablanca*, Alan Ladd in *Shane* and the literary heroics of Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*. From O'Brien's

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perspective, Johansen's "courage was a model … [he was] a living hero (145); "he has medals … [including] a Silver Star … [he is] companionless among herds of other men, men lesser than he, but still sad and haunted that he was not perfect" (144); he "was one of the nation's pride. He was blond, meticulously fair, brave, tall, blue-eyed, and an officer" (148). Wesley claims that this "characterization of the noble officer … [acts] to repress the disturbing impact of violence in Vietnam." This dissertation rejects her claim. Although alluring at some level, O'Brien's fervid affirmation feels over the top, particularly in a pragmatic text that has resisted the tropes and stereotypes of the romance of war. To jump forward in (publication) time to "A True War Story" (*The Things They Carried*), O'Brien reminds his readers that

> A true war story is never moral … If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie … As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (99)

Certainly O'Brien's characterization of Johansen seems to work against such a nihilistic attitude toward truth in war stories. However, across the narrative about his time in country, O'Brien allows for tension to develop between the longing for a hero and the recognition of his inevitable absence. O'Brien's encomium serves as only one small part of a much longer narrative of his life in Alpha Company, during which he has looked upon the infliction of the "terrible" in a succession of small and large disasters (if not for the unit then certainly for the civilians they have met), most of which happen on Captain

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Johansen's watch. To name but a few, Mad Mark engages in a criminal act of mutilation and devastates the village of Trin Binh 4 to no purpose. Alpha Company engages in a series of ambushes, the "most successful" (98) of which results in the deaths of two members of the unit and one dead Vietnamese man who may (or may not) be VC. Having sustained heavy casualties from mines and then walked into an ambush in Pinkville, the unit engages in a series of atrocities, burning down several villages in the area: "[I]t took little provocation for [Alpha Company] to flick the flint [their] Zippo lighters. Thatched roofs take the flame quickly, and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking [their] revenge in fire" (122). When two popular soldiers are killed by a booby-trapped artillery round, soldiers in the unit beat "two frightened women … [and then] hack off chunks of thick black hair" (119).

In "The Centurion," O'Brien gives more sustained attention to the senseless violence in which Johansen's men engage. On the march, the unit discovers a VC weapon (an AK-47) in a village. After an intense search, nothing else surfaces. In the meantime, night has arrived and, to prevent the Viet Cong from attacking the soldiers while they are in the village, three old men are taken from a hut, placed in the center of the square, gagged, and tied to three small trees where they are left to stand all night:

> In the morning one of the lieutenants beat on the old men. Alpha's Vietnamese scout shouted at them, whipping them in the legs with a long stick, whipping them across their thin bony shins, screaming at them, trying to get them to say where the rifle came from, whipping the old men and making long cuts into their ankles. One of the old men, not the oldest,

whimpered; none of them talked. Then we released them and went on our

way. (131-32)

Johansen and every person in that village knew the old men would not reveal any

information to the Americans; the VC would have killed anyone who did. Still, the abuse

went forward; no one in authority stepped in to prevent this exercise in futility because

"[t]his is a war … You don't find a weapon and just walk away" (131).

O'Brien gives Johansen the status of a courageous hero, but, importantly, the

reader never sees him earn this accolade.[293] Under Johansen's command, his soldiers

engage in "terrible" actions, and they represent less than a dozen of potentially hundreds

of episodes of cruelty, often augmented by casually malicious actions—a soldier striking

an old blind Vietnamese man in the face, the fouling of village wells, soldiers shooting at

cattle that have wandered into free-fire zone and smiling as they kill them. In contrasting

these vignettes of harm and cruelty with O'Brien's bromantic adoration, the reader sees

that Johansen fails to meet O'Brien's criteria of the "special man" (141) who both knows

what is right and has the courage to do it. O'Brien denies Johansen any recognition of

operational excellence, disclosing that, despite the disastrous ineptitude of the two

officers that followed Johansen, both of whom got men killed, "on the outside, things did

not change much after Captain Johansen. We lost about the same number of men. We

fought about the same number of battles, always small skirmishes" (145).

Yet there was something about Johansen that answered an unspoken but keenly

felt need among the men because "losing him was like the Trojans losing Hector. He

gave some amount of reason to fight … The war, like Hector's own war was silly and

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[293] Johansen does charge across a battleground and kill an enemy face-to-face, but, overall, O'Brien
discounts "the charge," finding it insufficient (because not emerging from wisdom) to warrant the
characterization of "courage" (141).

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stupid … So Captain Johansen helped to mitigate and melt the silliness, showing the grace and poise a man can have under the worst of circumstances, a wrong war. We clung to him" (145). In the absence of "any political reasons" to fight a war," (145), charged with implementing a strategy of attrition in which dead Vietnamese bodies were the only evidence of accomplishment, the mythology of American Exceptionalism fails. What O'Brien and the members of Alpha Company were left with was the veneration of "manliness, crudely idealized" (146). In his relationship with Captain Johansen within the nihilistic surround of Vietnam, O'Brien demonstrates both that the ideals of courage and heroism are unattainable *and* that even the flawed execution of these ideals remains essential. O'Brien does not attempt to square what he witnesses as part of Alpha Company under Johansen's command with Johansen as hero. He simply admits that, "when the time in my life came to replace fictional heroes with real ones, the candidates were sparse, and it was to be the captain or no one" (144).

Conclusion: Reconstituting the Myth of American Exceptionalism

O'Brien left Vietnam in March, 1970. The Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, and in March 1975, the North Vietnamese army, having spent the two years after the Accords rebuilding its military strength, invaded the South and on April 30th Saigon fell. The political machinations that birthed and nurtured the Vietnam War continued up through its bitter end and beyond. Journalist Ken Hughes, who specializes in the analysis of the secret presidential recordings of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon, summarizes events based on those tapes:

> Nixon's tapes reveal … that … Nixon and National Security Adviser
>
> Henry Kissinger devised a brilliant, if ruthless, strategy to win the

election. As Nixon and Kissinger saw it, victory in the [1972] presidential election did not depend on victory in Vietnam; they merely had to postpone— not prevent — the Communist takeover of South Vietnam until sometime after November 1972. To accomplish this end, Nixon kept American soldiers in Vietnam into the fourth year of his presidency, at the cost of thousands of American lives … [In secret negotiations, Nixon] did not require the North to abandon its goal of military conquest of the South. Instead, he settled for a "decent interval"— a period of a year or two — between his final withdrawal of American troops and the Communists' final takeover of South Vietnam.

In slightly more than eighteen months, the United States suffered its first ever military defeat. The Vietnamese were left with a shattered infrastructure; millions dead, wounded and traumatized; "more than one-third of the land" in some provinces contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance ("Vietnam Land Mines"); and an ecosystem devastated by American technologies. Americans were left with vivid images of the final acts of America in South Vietnam—helicopters rescuing embassy staff, while desperate South Vietnamese who had aided them and feared retribution struggled frantically to get into the embassy compound and onto an aircraft, signifiers of the risks of trusting American power. In the cultural moment immediately after the fall of Saigon, sociologist Daniel Bell wrote "The End of American Exceptionalism," in which he described "the hubris, the 'egoistic corruption' which expressed itself in the belief that America was now the guardian of world order … [with a] 'rightful' position as the leader of the free world" and which the nation's actions in Vietnam had "broken. There is no

longer a Manifest Destiny or mission. We have not been immune to the corruption of power. We have not been the exception" (204-05).

So deep was this loss of confidence in the entitlement and ability of the U.S. to intervene militarily in international affairs that in 1978 it received its own designation, "The Vietnam Syndrome"—a broad concept that included both lessons and legacy.[294] Relative to foreign affairs and military action, new criteria would be brought to bear in determining whether the nation should take up arms: "just cause can be demonstrated, the objectives are compelling and attainable, and sufficient force is employed to assure a swift victory with a minimum of casualties" (McCrisken 38).[295] The legacy is more complex. As historian Richard Slotkin argues,

> the ultimate consequence" of using national mythology to support America's involvement in the [Vietnam] war is "the discrediting of the myth itself—a trauma not immediately reflected in the realm of electoral politics but registered over the next decade and a half in the underlying structures of value and belief, the 'morale' of Americans as expressed in the forms of their national culture" (623).

The one-two punch of Vietnam and the Watergate scandal that resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon left many in the nation skeptical of America's leadership and

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[294] Although the term is often credited to Ronald Reagan, who popularized it in a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars during his presidential campaign in 1980 (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu /ws /?pid=85202), it was first used in 1978 by Senator Sam Nunn, "who proposed legislation permitting the president to mobilize 50,000 reserves for ninety days … [because] the Cold War was reheating. Such legislation was needed, Nunn insisted, to 'counter a post-Vietnam syndrome' that might otherwise paralyze Congress in time of crisis" (Herring, "Vietnam Syndrome" 410).
[295] I would lift up Colin Powell's "Pottery Barn" warning, given to George W. Bush in the build-up to the Iraq invasion, "You break it; you own it," as evidence that though these principles remain in place, as we see from Bush's decision to ignore them, they are not inviolable.

its institutions, unsettling their belief in America as an inherently special and morally-grounded nation.[296]

Reclaiming this identity involved the (re)validation of America as a unique country with an important mission as well as the creation of a narrative that redefined the outcome of the Vietnam War. In Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign against incumbent Jimmy Carter and throughout his presidency, Reagan made it a point to do both of these things. The tag line on his campaign poster was "Let's Make America Great Again,"[297] and his vision of the United States as "shining city on a hill" hearkened back to the centuries-old theme that America was God's agent on earth, lending a moral purpose to America's actions that the war had blighted. Reagan also recast the war's outcome in a way that many found healing as he placed the blame for the "loss" not on the inferiority of American men but on institutions and culture that failed. Just weeks after his inauguration, Reagan presented the Medal of Honor to a veteran of the Vietnam War, saying:

> Several years ago we brought home a group of fighting men who had obeyed their country's call and who fought as bravely and as well as any Americans in our history. They came home without a victory not because they'd been defeated, but because they were denied permission to win. They were greeted by no parades, no bands, no waving of the flag they

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[296] "In 1974, opinion polls showed that Americans believed they were facing problems worse than they could remember at any other time in their lives [many of whom had experienced the Great Depression and World War II] … 71% believed that 'things are going badly in the country' while 68% thought' the country is in deep and serious trouble today.' Loss of faith in institutions of government had almost doubled between 1968 and 1973, and 88% of Americans in 1974 mistrusted 'the people in power in this country.'" (McCrisken 37).

[297] Donald Trump claims he invented the expression himself and had no knowledge that Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign had used the phrase when Trump trademarked it. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-donald-trump-came-up-with-make-america-great-again/2017/01/17/fb6acf5e-dbf7-11e6-ad42-f3375f271c9c_story.html?utm_term=.62d434bd83be .

had so nobly served. There's been no "thank you" for their sacrifice. (qtd.

in Bacevich 107)

George H. W. Bush, who succeeded Reagan as president, continued the restorative process by intervening in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, leading a coalition of thirty-five countries and demonstrating that America's power had returned to full strength and potency. While the media coverage of the Vietnam War had often resulted in consternation and opposition, the 1991 televised footage from the cameras located in American bombers highlighted the effectiveness of the nation's destructive technologies much to the pleasure of its audience. After five weeks of aerial bombardment and five days of ground assault, the Iraqi army was vanquished. The day after victory had been declared and almost thirty years to the day John Kennedy had given his call to action concerning the role of the United States in world affairs, Bush, appearing before the American Legislative Council, expressed his delight in reporting the victory of the United States (and its coalition) over Iraq in Operation Desert Storm. Bush framed this victory against the nation's defeat in Vietnam—attributing important meaning to regaining confidence in America's use of power. It was, he said, "a proud day for America. And, by God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" (Bush).

Perhaps Bush 41 was a bit too optimistic, at least in terms of the ongoing impact of the Vietnam War on the American people. In recognition of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon (April 30, 1995), *Time* magazine allocated one-third of its pages to considering "Vietnam: Twenty years later, it haunts us still"— its cover shot, a heavy grey and black digitally enhanced reproduction of a famous Henri Huet photograph showing a wounded medic caring for an even more badly wounded (apparently blinded)

soldier. The aim of *Time's* Special Report was to "shed some light on a place where memory burns, but darkness still prevails" ("A Lost War" 22). This image of suffering and the attempt to mitigate it by someone who is also suffering echoes the painful emotions experienced by Americans during and after the war—a kind of sundering of identity not only for the soldiers who endured various forms of physical and emotional trauma in prosecuting the war, but also, in ways more subtle, for those who had confidence in the optimistic mythology of American Exceptionalism and its assumptions about their country, its purposes, and themselves as its citizens. The Vietnam War marked American consciousness—both veteran and civilian—and Tim O'Brien in *Combat Zone* and in its fictionalized repurposing *Going After Cacciato* helps explain why:

> They did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice …No sense of order or momentum … No Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration …They did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite … They did not know how to feel. Whether, when seeing a dead Vietnamese, to be happy or sad or relieved …They did not know how to feel when they saw villages burning. Revenge? Loss? Peace of mind or anguish? They did not know … Magic, mystery, ghosts and incense, whispers in the dark, strange tongues and strange smells, uncertainties never articulated in war stories, emotion squandered on ignorance. They did not know good from evil.

Barthes asserts that "[m]yth is a type of speech defined by its intention" (124), and, in the case of American Exceptionalism, mythology functioned not only to tidy up a blood-stained, genocidal past, but also, and more importantly, to reinforce to its own citizens and the world that the future (just like the present) would inevitably be shaped by the indomitable power of the United States, and more specifically, the elite straight white men at the top of the American hegemonic hierarchy. The war in Vietnam exploded this narrative and revealed the shocking and painful reality of the very unexceptional nature of the "men behind the curtain" who staged the war—a process of understanding so unpleasant that a variety of counter-myths quickly gained currency as a way to explain away America's defeat. In *Combat Zone*, O'Brien creates a narrative of witness to the consequences of the ill-suited purposes of the American mission in Vietnam and the impact these intentions had on the men required to fulfill them. Four years after *Combat Zone* was published, American writer and war correspondent Michael Herr wrote about the obligations placed on those who were in country during the war in a way that resonates with O'Brien's approach to his text: "[Y]ou were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did" (19). In his memoir, O'Brien witnesses to what he had seen and done in the Vietnam War, and, in doing so, he prods the national memory with stories that disturb the smooth reconstitution of American Exceptionalism. He cannot control the impulse toward forgetting inherent in the nation's mythology, but he can and does provide testimony of the tragic results of the overreach that mythology perpetuated.

Epilogue

This project was motivated by interest in the power of national mythology, specifically the lustres aroused by the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan—creating with his words a "shining city on hill" and "morning in America." Having now spent more than the equivalent of Reagan's first term studying the uses of mythology and its interaction with ideologies of straight white masculinity, I remain fascinated by the intricate and often invisible linkages that reinforce the status and power of the dominant power structure, i.e., straight white men. Barthes tells us that mythology "springs from contingency" and "seeks to establish" that which it claims (124, 125). American Individualism, the American Dream, and American Exceptionalism all make the claim for self-determination—offering a golden glow of possibility that emphasize autonomy, agency, and control. They whisper, "If you can dream it, you can do it." Yet in my extended engagement with the self-representations of Robert Lowell, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien, I have become extremely sensitized to just how much the idealized self-determination enshrined within these mythologies is a fantasy that the ideologies of straight white masculinity refuse to recognize. Within the death grip of this paradoxical relationship, the policing of gender, the willful blindness of entitlement, and the hallowing of domination and violence against threats posed by an array of Others continue to thrive in the attempt to stabilize an always already shaky identity. This dynamic offers the possibility of continued critical exploration of this cohort's self-writings, but emphasizes the difficulties of deep socio-cultural transformation.

When I began this dissertation Barack Obama was president of the United States, and I, like so many, could not have imagined the direction the national discourse would

take. But during that period, the status quo was badly shaken: the nation faced an economic crisis, an increasingly dangerous and unpredictable world continued to unfold, and A BLACK MAN held the most powerful office in the world. Perhaps one way to think of the appeal of Donald Trump is to see him as the sinister echo of Ronald Reagan, calling on the national mythologies once again to restore order as he returns dominant (and domineering) straight white masculinity to its proper place, waging war against subversive calls for change.

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